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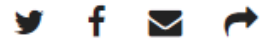
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EDUCATION

Wilson Scholars vow to go to college and shatter stereotypes at '5000 Role Model' ceremony

BY OMAR RODRÍGUEZ ORTIZ

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Terrain Small, a Freedom Writer at Miami Norland Senior High School, left, gets praise for his performance of a spoken word poem he wrote called "Hoodlum's Deception" during the scholarship ceremony for the Wilson Scholars of the 5000 Role Models of Excellence Program on Sunday, June 5,

2022 at the Adrienne Arsht Center in downtown Miami. ALIE SKOWRONSKI
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Over 100 young men of color from South Florida pledged Sunday afternoon at the Adrienne Arsht Center for the Performing Arts that they will transcend disadvantaged circumstances growing up by going to college — using higher education as a vehicle to greater social mobility and attaining economic prosperity. The teens donned black suits, white shirts and bright red ties, making their vows on stage as family members and community leaders cheered. Among the people present were U.S. Congresswoman Frederica S. Wilson, Miami-Dade County Commissioner Vice Chairman Oliver Gilbert and Miami-Dade County Public Schools board Vice Chair Steve Gallon. The pledge is the last step of the 5,000 Role Models of Excellence Project, a program in which male mentors provide boys with alternatives that could lead them away from a life of crime and violence. The project was founded in 1993 by Wilson, then a Miami-Dade County School Board member.

The joyous event also included an induction ceremony for new mentors, a musical performance of the song “Believe in Yourself” by jazz, R&B and soul singer Rochelle Lightfoot and a recitation of the spoken word poem “Hoodlum’s Deception” by Terrain Small, a Freedom Writer at Miami Norland Senior High School.



Congresswoman Frederica Wilson, founder of the program, center, speaks during the scholarship ceremony for the 5000 Role Models of Excellence Program on Sunday, June 5, 2022 at the Adrienne Arsht Center in downtown Miami. Wilson started the program in 1993. Alie Skowronski askowronski@miamiherald.com

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By signing the pledge in front of their families and mentors, the 17 and 18-year-old high school graduates promised to get a post-secondary education, the next step in their path toward a promising future. In 2020, only about 18 percent of Black residents in Miami-Dade had at least a Bachelor's degree while more than 50 percent of white, non-Hispanic residents had one.

Wilson said she was very proud of the teens but also fearful because they are being "released" to a world full of gun violence, crime and racism.

"But we have poured everything in them to make them good men in society," she said. "They will always be a part of us and we will always be a part of them."



DeAnthony Solomon, 18, senior at Miami Central Senior High School, gives the 5000 Role Models prayer during the scholarship ceremony for the Wilson Scholars of the 5000 Role Models of Excellence Program on Sunday, June 5, 2022 at the Adrienne Arsht Center in downtown Miami. The program gives young Black men mentorship. Alie Skowronski askowronski@miamiherald.com



Medals hang on the Wilson Scholars before their scholarship ceremony for the 5000 Role Models of Excellence Program on Sunday, June 5, 2022 at the Adrienne Arsht Center in downtown Miami. The program pairs young men with mentors and, at the end of the program, the young men receive full tuition scholarships to the university of their choosing. Some of the mentors were mentees in the past. Alie Skowronski askowronski@miamiherald.com

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These days, Solomon is no longer hanging with the wrong crowd. He instead led a prayer in which he touched on issues that are impacting the youth such as crime and consumerism.

“For we stand at the crossroads, trying to become a good man to society, instead of becoming a menace to society,” he said. “We pray that we will not be blinded by the desires of Nike Air, cellphones and BMWs, desperate to make money anyway we can.”

Living conditions for Miami-Dade’s Black residents have improved as the local economy grows, yet they are falling further behind as income and other measures of prosperity increase even more for the county’s white and Hispanic majority. Scholars like Solomon are betting on higher education to abridge this racial wealth gap.

Shalin Williams, 18, will major in mechanical engineering after graduating from Coral Reef Senior High School. Thanks to the mentorship program, they’ve fostered a brotherhood in which each member looks out for each other’s academic progress.

“Without the program, I would not be interested in engineering,” he added.



Some of the 42 young men receiving full rides to Tennessee State University stand during the scholarship ceremony for the Wilson Scholars of the 5000 Role Models of Excellence Program on Sunday, June 5, 2022 at the Adrienne Arsht Center in downtown Miami. Alie Skowronski
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Williams, like Solomon and 40 others, received a full-ride scholarship at Tennessee State University. All graduates also got hooked up with free laptops donated by the Miami Dolphins football team.

Jonathan Villalta will major in criminal justice at Miami Dade College thanks to the mentorship program. Without it, the 18-year-old noted, he wouldn't be getting his high school diploma.

“This program showed me that when you put the effort a lot of good things can happen to you,” he said.

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