Evans graduate’s drive earns ride to Harvard

BY KATE SANTICH

Nobody had to tell Evon Thompson to dream big. He was barely potty-trained when he first attended school and only 4 when he took a notebook from his mother’s hands and began writing in it. At 6, he began poking around the dismembered organs of a chicken to study its anatomy.

And at 13 he landed in Orlando — a shy, skinny, well-mannered kid with no academic transcripts; a kid who had never been on an airplane before and never lived anywhere but the rural hills of Jamaica. “It was kind of surreal,” he remembers. “After so much time dreaming about it, I couldn’t believe I was actually here.”

Four years later, Evon will graduate from Evans High School on June 5 not only as valedictorian, but also with a diploma from the demanding International Baccalaureate program, a prestigious Gates Scholarship and a full, four-year scholarship to Harvard University — the first Evans graduate in at least a quarter-century, administrators say, to be accepted there.

The 17-year-old from Pine Hills plans to become a neurosurgeon. “He is pretty much at the mountaintop,” says Chris King, a Winter Park businessman and 2008 candidate for Florida’s lieutenant governor.

In Evon’s freshman year, he applied to join King’s Elevating Scholars program, launched in 2014 to help high-achieving students from low-income families gain acceptance into the nation’s most elite universities. The program’s staffers provide coaching, mentoring and trips to prospective colleges. They helped Evon boost his test scores and build an extracurricular resume.

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““He’s humble. He’s quiet. His work ethic is beyond compare,” King says. “But really what makes him most extraordinary is that he is the story of a mother’s love for her son — and the love of the son for his mother.”

Yvonne Burrell is a single mom of two, Evon and his older sister, now a teacher in Jamaica. She works at a hospital in environmental services — the department charged with cleaning and disinfecting to control the spread of disease. The pay is just enough to cover rent, food and utilities.

Burrell has always wanted more for her children. She lectured Evon so often on the importance of education — “it is the only way out of poverty,” she would say — that eventually there was a shorthand between them. “All I had to do was give him the look,” she says. “And he knew what I meant: Do your homework. Keep your focus. Reach higher.”

Burrell herself never had the opportunity to attend college. Her mother, who raised 12 children largely on her own, couldn’t afford higher education for all of them. At 52, Burrell still chokes up when she talks about it.

“I was one of those who got left behind,” she says. “So I was determined about two things: I’m not going to have as many children as my mom, and, two, for my children to get a good education.”

In her native Jamaica, she first sent Evon to a small church school that would later be 2½. When he reached grade school, she took a job in the school’s cafeteria, in part so she could keep an eye on him — though, really, she needed it. When Evon wasn’t reading textbooks, he was writing poetry or taking in educational programs on TV. On Sunday evenings, mother and son would watch “Profile,” a half-hour TV interview with some successful Jamaican who had persevered against the odds, often with no father.

“See,” Burrell would say, “you can’t let that stop you.”

In 2015, she moved to Orlando with her husband, Evon’s stepfather. Her motive, in large part, was to give her son opportunities she knew he would never have on the island. It took Evon a year to get his U.S. immigrant visa to join her.

But six months later, just as her son seemed to be settling in, Burrell was diagnosed with breast cancer. Over the next year and a half, she underwent surgery, chemotherapy and radiation, all as her marriage began to disintegrate.

“He kind of became my caregiver,” she says of her son. “I remember, I broke down; I started to cry. I was so worried for him. The cancer — it just rips your whole world from underneath you. But he told me, ‘Just remember, you are a strong woman.’”

On nights when she couldn’t sleep, Burrell prayed. “God, please let me live long enough to see him go to college.”

Evon would rise by 3:30 or 4 a.m. on school days and finish the studies he had been too tired to do the night before. He would look after his mom, remind her to take her medication, make some tea and breakfast, and be at school by 7.

His classes were over by 2 most afternoons, but there were extracurricular activities — the poetry and neuroscience club he was asked to start, meetings with his Elevator mentors, community service projects.

“I remember my first conversation with him; he reached out to me about joining Zeta Club — a national organization that focuses on service and leadership — and his drive was not to just do it because every other student was doing it, but this very genuine interest in helping,” says Jennifer Bohn, a 25-year-old educator at Evans. “The deadline to join had passed, but he was so genuine and so passionate that I couldn’t stop him from being a part of it.”

“Hey kid,” Burrell would say, “you can’t let that stop you.”

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“Dr. Thompson.”

Though he was making an A in honors English, he asked for tutoring, insisting he could do better. When he struggled with public speaking, he built a platform in his backyard to practice before an imaginary audience. He served twice as a page in the Florida Senate and earned the chance to spend a summer at Princeton. And he was elected two years in a row to go to California for a national board on community schools, such as Evans, that mix academics with a social safety net.

“Every door we helped him open, he just ran through,” Bohn says.

In the Elevating Scholars program, Thompson didn’t just embrace the coaching that helped him boost his college-assessment test scores to Harvard level. There were also introductions to business leaders and guidance through the etiquette and social networking expected in professional circles.

“I don’t care whether it was a roundtable discussion with a homebuilder CEO or a guy from the Winter Park Racquet Club, Evon not only shows up, he prepares,” says Scott Lee, the program’s president. “There was one meeting with the whole executive team of the Hanover Land Company, and I meant it was an intimidating situation. But they open it up at the end, and Evon says politely, ‘Well, I have a question.’ And I see him open his notebook, and he has his 15 bullet points ready on things like gentrification and the need for affordable housing. And you think, ‘You’re a high school sophomore?”’

Looking back, as Evon finally has time to do some of these classes, his daily offices, he finished, he acknowledges there were rough spots. He often felt out of place, especially in that first year, when his quiet humility and distinctive accent made him a curiosity to his classmates.

In the beginning, his classes were too easy. Later, his teachers questioned whether he was working hard, not only on his studies but on all the college and scholarship applications he had to get him the full ride he needed. The Gates Scholarship, awarded to only 300 top minority students each year from across the nation, would cover any gaps in the package of support from Harvard itself — where attendance, books, room and board would run close to $80,000 a year.

Sometimes, Thompson says, he feels like he missed celebrating the moment because he always focused on the future. But when he found out in December that Harvard had accepted him, he wept with joy. Then he hugged his mom, and the two of them cried together.

“It is definitely a very long path to becoming a neurosurgeon. It takes usually 14 years,” he says. “But my mom never wanted me to take the path of least resistance ... and this time I plan to enjoy the journey.”

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