

***Richmond Times-Dispatch***

**The budding doctor is in -- with a full ride  
*Foster child who wants to be neurosurgeon gets full W&M aid package***

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Armstrong High School senior Darryl Stephens -- a foster child who aspires to become a pediatric neurosurgeon -- has finalized his plans for college. They don't include financial worries.

He was surprised yesterday morning with a full aid package covering tuition, textbooks, fees, room and board and worth up to \$50,000 over four years -- from the College of William and Mary, presented by the college's president, Gene R. Nichol.

Stephens, 17, had been called out of class at the Richmond high school for what he thought was an interview with someone from the college's admissions office.

When he entered Armstrong's conference room, he was greeted by a team of supporters, including state Sen. Benjamin J. Lambert III, D-Richmond, and Louis W. Sullivan, a former U.S. secretary of health and human services. Sullivan traveled from Atlanta for the announcement.

Others who have backed Stephens were there -- from an assistant principal who shared her home with him before he moved into the group home last year, to a director from Owens & Minor, where Stephens has worked for three summers.

"I just thought it was a regular admissions interview," Stephens said later. His first clue that he was in for something more came as he approached the conference room, and heard several voices coming from within.

Then he opened the door.

"After I saw Senator Lambert, my heart just went doot-doot, doot-doot, doot-doot," he said, slapping his chest to indicate the fast, syncopated beat.

Lambert is vice chairman and Sullivan chairman of the Virginia-Nebraska Alliance, a group that works to increase the ranks of minorities in the health-care professions.

The alliance traditionally works with undergraduate college students but has followed Stephens for about two years. The alliance helped him secure an after-school internship assisting with research at VCU Medical Center. It worked to leverage some donations and college savings from Stephens' summer work at Owens & Minor.

That job came through Partnership for the Future, which matches students with summer jobs and encourages them to stow their earnings in college-savings accounts.

The partnership also organized a visit to William and Mary that triggered Stephens' interest in the college.

As Nichol presented the aid package yesterday, Lambert sat beside the college president, making a thumbs-up sign to Stephens.

Upon accepting the offer, Stephens said, "I would like to thank all of you who have helped me," and began shaking hands with the dozen or so well-wishers.

In addition to the group gathered at Armstrong yesterday, Stephens has a close relationship with his grandmother in Portsmouth. He said she had expressed hope that he would attend William and Mary. She likes the school's academic reputation, he said, and the fact that the Williamsburg campus is not far from her home.

In an earlier interview, Stephens said he is eager to graduate from high school and go to college. Life in the group home has been good, "but you still got to remember . . ." he said, his voice trailing off.

Stephens does not maintain contact with his parents. His stepmother, Denise Ferguson, has described him as disrespectful.

Yesterday, a roomful of politicians, educators, officials and friends had only good things to say about him.

Terone Green, executive director of the Virginia-Nebraska Alliance, said to Stephens, "You represent something that folks say can't happen. They always say African-American men can't achieve."

In a William and Mary freshman class of 1,350 students, about 45 will enter with assistance packages similar to Stephens'. The combination of merit and need-based grants is valued at about \$45,000 to \$50,000, depending on potential changes in tuition.

"This is a very generous package from us," Nichol said. "We're investing in this young man." Though Stephens is an impressive student, Nichol said, it was also his ability to face adversity that attracted the college.

Stephens clutched his acceptance letter and grinned broadly.

"It's a dream come true," he said.

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