The First Baltimore Scholars

Early decision applicants are first city students accepted to JHU program

By Greg Rienzi
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The first Baltimore City high school students selected to a new Johns Hopkins scholarship program have much in common. In addition to the four being seniors at Baltimore Polytechnic Institute, three are enrolled in the same city-based advanced math and science project, two already have a research connection to the university, and now all four are planning to live and study at the Homewood campus.

Ryan Harrison, Jasmine Jones, Tam Nguyen and Kim Smith constitute the inaugural group of Baltimore Scholars, a JHU program that provides full-tuition awards to graduates of Baltimore City public schools accepted to the university's undergraduate programs. The initiative intends to give the city schools' best and brightest students the opportunity to stay near home and study at one of the nation's premier universities.

All four students applied early decision and learned of their acceptances on Dec. 15.

Nguyen, who moved with her family from Vietnam to the United States when she was a toddler, will be the first of her family to attend college. A dedicated self-starter, Nguyen has tutored 10th-grade students as part of the National Honor Society and currently tutors math at Roland Park Middle School. Since summer, she has also worked on drugs targeted at cancer-related genes in the lab of Chi Dang, professor of hematology at the School of Medicine.

Nguyen, who aspires to attend medical school, says the opportunity to attend Johns Hopkins on full scholarship is something she could scarcely imagine even a few months ago.

"Johns Hopkins has always been my dream school," she says. "Hopkins has a reputation for academic rigor, so I'm looking forward to a school that will be able to challenge me. I know this will be a challenge, but I feel like I'm up to it, and I'm looking forward to doing research as an undergrad."
Dang says he has no doubts that Nguyen — a semifinalist in the prestigious Siemens Westinghouse Competition in Math, Science and Technology who earlier had her sights on UMBC — is bound for success.

"Tam has been absolutely terrific, and I'm delighted that she was chosen for this program. She is a wonderful person, and hers is a great story," Dang says. "She has been able to participate meaningfully in our research, working with our postdoctoral fellows on a major part of our project. She has been using complex software to analyze which of the many tens of thousands of genes change by using an anticancer drug. She has such a bright, young mind, and she just ran through the use of this software. She even taught me how to use parts of it."

Nguyen, Harrison and Smith all participate in the Ingenuity Project, whose mission is to prepare highly capable and motivated Baltimore students to achieve at nationally competitive levels in mathematics and science. One Baltimore City elementary school, three middle schools and one high school, Baltimore Polytechnic, serve as the project sites.

It was through the Ingenuity Project that Harrison came to work in the lab of Jeffrey Gray, assistant professor in the Whiting School's Chemical and Biomolecular Engineering Department. Gray contacted Ingenuity to see if it had a student who could participate in his research. For the past two years, Harrison has helped Gray with computer simulations and modeling proteins. As a direct result of his work at Johns Hopkins, Harrison was recently named one of the top 300 science students in the country in the Intel Science Talent Search. Last summer, Harrison gave a brief talk at an academic conference in Washington State and so impressed those gathered that many in the audience believed he was a graduate student. Harrison turned down an acceptance to MIT to attend Johns Hopkins.

"He has voraciously gone after the research topic here — just went after it," Gray says. "Ryan comes in with a keen, independent mind. He's a person who wants to do something different. He will do great things with the research scene here, and I hope he sticks around with us in this lab."

Jasmine Jones first learned of the Baltimore Scholars Program through her cousin, an engineer. Johns Hopkins was her first choice, she says, with Harvard, Drexel and Morgan State also on her list.

Jones, who will study electrical engineering, says she understands the challenge that lies ahead.

"Hopkins is one of the best schools, and I'm sure it's going to be hard. I'm trying to brace myself for it," she says. "I realize the three hours a day I spend studying here might turn into six hours a day there."

An A-level student and a versatile athlete, Jones says her family was ecstatic to hear the news of her acceptance and they have since thrown her not one, but two, surprise parties.

"I think they felt like it was them getting in," she says. "I now have to live up to the expectations and do well, not slack off. But I have a lot of people on my side to help me relax."

Kim Smith, another member of the Ingenuity Project, plans to study biology and philosophy at Johns Hopkins, as she is interested in evolution and genetics. She found out about the Baltimore Scholars Program through her mother, who had heard about it on a local news broadcast.

Smith says that when she first started to look for schools, she was focused on Cedar Crest College in Pennsylvania and wasn't sure Johns Hopkins was right for her. However, that feeling changed when she visited Homewood.
"I actually fell in love with Johns Hopkins on the tour," says Smith, who has since been back to the campus twice, most recently with Harrison and Nguyen at an Ingenuity Project luncheon held at the Johns Hopkins Club.

What was it about the tour specifically that impressed her?

"When I found out you had a rock-climbing wall!" she says.

The Baltimore Scholars Program is open to applicants who have resided in Baltimore City and attended public schools there for at least the three last years of high school, and are accepted as first-year, full-time undergraduates in the School of Arts and Sciences, School of Engineering or Peabody Conservatory.

Scholars receive an award that covers tuition and required fees for four academic years of study leading to a bachelor's degree. Depending on financial need, applicants may also be eligible for additional financial support to cover other educational and living expenses. Support continues as long as a student maintains at least a 2.0 GPA, completes at least 12 credits per semester and remains in good standing.

Eligible students who cannot or do not wish to pursue full-time undergraduate study may still qualify as Baltimore Scholars. Up to three Baltimore Scholars annually will be selected from applicants for the part-time undergraduate programs in business or information systems at the School of Professional Studies in Business and Education. Baltimore Scholars in SPSBE will typically begin study at Johns Hopkins after completing the equivalent of 60 undergraduate credits elsewhere, often by earning an associate's degree at a community college. In addition, the School of Nursing honors the scholarships for students who begin at another JHU school and transfer into its program their junior year.

Matthew Crenson, chair of the Political Science Department and a graduate of both Baltimore public schools and Johns Hopkins, is the lead faculty adviser for the Baltimore Scholars Program, heading a team of faculty and administrators who will support it.

Crenson says that this first group of Baltimore Scholars "is quite an exceptional bunch" and, judging from the way applications are shooting up, that there will likely be quite a few more Baltimore Scholars when regular acceptances go out in April.

"We had an open house for interested Baltimore City students and families in December, and I was amazed to find out how many city students, 80 of whom attended the meeting, are interested in applying. It shows us there is a big pool out there," Crenson says. "We hope through this program to establish closer ties to the city and city schools. This is a way to make sure that talented students in Baltimore City schools have open access, without any financial barriers, to a Johns Hopkins education. We want to encourage and inspire these students, let them know that upon graduation there is something waiting for them."

For more information on the program, go to www.jhu.edu/news/home04/jun04/pdf/scholars.pdf.