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Present Scholars, Future Leaders

For Select Group Chosen By Truman Foundation, A Path to Public Service

By Anushka Asthana
Washington Post Staff Writer
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"I can easily see tomorrow's Cabinet members, elected representatives, nonprofit directors -- even presidents," the former secretary of state said.

Madeleine K. Albright is talking about the 2006 Truman scholars -- a group of 75 young men and women she believes are destined for success.

Each has been nominated by his or her university, and each passed a tough selection process to be chosen by the Harry S. Truman Scholarship Foundation, a government agency of which Albright is the president. But this is an agency like no other. Its sole aim is to pick out people with potential to become leaders -- then provide support to help them realize their aspirations.

Next year the agency will mark 30 years of choosing talent, and its earliest alumni are reaching positions of power. Among them are governors, judges, U.S. attorneys and renowned academics.

Albright said the foundation "serves as a gateway for America's public service leaders" and "does a remarkable job of identifying future change agents."

Saul Garlick, one of this year's scholars, is working toward a master's degree in American foreign policy and international economics at the Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) at Johns Hopkins University in the District. At 22, he has already founded a nonprofit organization, the Student Movement for Real Change, which has raised money for schools in South Africa and for a water pipeline in Kenya. It was the kind of initiative that got him noticed by the foundation. As a scholar, he was given funding for graduate school and placed in an internship that he just completed in the State Department's Bureau of African Affairs.

Like Albright, Garlick thinks his peers are going to achieve great things. "All the scholars think they would like to change the world," he said. "They will each try to do it in different ways. I see some becoming secretaries of state, an ambassador or two, someone in the top echelons of academia, others will write a book."

Garlick said there is a joke among scholars that when you are asked in the interview if you would like to be an elected official, you should always say yes. "They are not looking for someone who wants to change lives through being a teacher. They want someone who wants to change education policy," he said.

Two of the alumni have become leaders in the agency itself. Fred Slabach describes his role as executive secretary as a "dream job," while his deputy, Tara Yglesias, is also a past scholar.

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"Congress created the foundation as the sole memorial to the 33rd president," Slabach said. "They were thinking of Harry Truman. He never received a college degree, and his family and associates say he lamented that and spent a lot of time after the White House encouraging people to go into public service."

After Truman's death in 1972, friends merged the two ideas -- aiding education and helping people into public service -- and the foundation was born. To ensure the program had the very best, it had to "become a highly selective process," Slabach said.

The foundation was established with a \$30 million initial endowment from Congress. Through investing in government securities and gaining particularly high interest in the 1980s (when the interest exceeded the costs), the endowment has grown to \$55 million. Interest revenue is about \$3 million a year, and expenses are also about \$3 million a year.

Scholars are eligible for up to \$30,000 for graduate school, are placed in internships in the federal government or nonprofit organizations for up to one year, and are given support on how to move into leadership positions.

Some are already reaching those heights. Among the alumni are Arizona Gov. Janet Napolitano (D), who was in the first class of Truman scholars in 1977, George Stephanopoulos, the ABC journalist who was a top adviser to President Bill Clinton, and Bill Mercer, U.S. attorney for the district of Montana.

Napolitano said the program provided her "tangible encouragement to enter public service."

Slabach said he hopes today's scholars will go even further. "We have a chief executive officer of a state. Why not one day a chief executive officer of the nation?"

Garlick and his peers certainly have the ambition. He says he wants to be a senator and eventually "lead this nation from the highest offices in the country."

Being chosen by the agency, he added, "changed every Truman scholar's life."

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