

Gens de coeur

Trying to “multiply the goodness”

When Horace Alexis arrived in Canada from Trinidad in 1958, he had a university scholarship and \$200 in his pocket. With a wife and small children to support money was tight, so he worked the midnight shift at the post office and picked up odd jobs. “A friend and I used to chase [movers’] trucks on weekends so we could get some work for a buck an hour,” he says. And while his fellow students at the University of Ottawa were out partying on weekends, Alexis’ idea of “big fun was a glass of beer and a movie with his wife.”

About 5 years ago, the Ottawa family physician decided to do something to help other black university students struggling to juggle their studies with their finances — the Ottawa family physician started the Black Canadian Scholarship Fund.

Administered by the Ottawa Community Foundation, the fund awards a \$40 000 scholarship every 4 years to a black undergraduate student who has good marks but is in financial need. A bursary of \$5000 is also granted each year.

Starting the fund was Alexis’ way of returning the generosity Canadians have shown him and his family during tough times. “I’m trying to multiply the goodness,” he explains.

Alexis contributed the first \$5000 in seed money. Fundraising events, such as dances and “A Night at the Races,” have helped boost the fund’s capital base.

Alexis is a firm believer that education is the best vehicle for transporting people out of poverty. “It’s been a complete solution in my family — I know it works.”

Indeed he does. Alexis’ brother, Carleton, is a physician in the US who once served as president of Howard University in Washington, DC. His other brother, Kenneth, is a lawyer in Trinidad, and many of Alexis’ nieces and nephews have pursued careers in medicine, law, pharmacy and academia.

The same goes for his own children. His daughter, Michele, is a family physician in Cornwall, Ont., while Thecla is a dentist and Denise is a career counselor. His son, Andre, is the author of a critically acclaimed book, *Childhood*. The 3 children from his second marriage are still in secondary school.

Growing up poor affected Alexis deeply — “we slept 4 in a

bed,” he recalls — but through scholarships he was able to attend high school in Trinidad and university in Ottawa.

After graduating from the University of Ottawa in 1966, Alexis interned at the Toronto Western Hospital. In 1967 he set up his first practice in Petrolia, Ont., a small community near Sarnia. “When I first arrived, a petition was circulated to prevent me from staying because I was black.”

He describes his work there as “frontier medicine,” with family physicians handling everything from giving anesthesia to assisting in surgery to delivering babies.

When he finally left Petrolia for Ottawa, the local high school students circulated another petition. This time, they asked him to stay. “I still have that petition in a desk drawer at home,” he says.

Alexis is even prouder of Maggie Fondong, the first recipient of the scholarship, who is studying biochemistry at Trent University in Peterborough, Ont. “She has made the dean’s list every year,” he says.

“When I found out I’d won [the scholarship], I ran around the block screaming,” recalls Fondong, who hopes to study

medicine after graduating this spring. The Black Canadian Scholarship Fund is currently supporting 3 young women, all from the Ottawa area. As part of the scholarship criteria, an applicant must show strong community involvement.

For Fondong, meanwhile, Alexis has become a role model. “He’s a visionary and he’s far-sighted — he looked beyond his lifetime [in establishing the scholarship].”

While Alexis describes the scholarship fund as “the source of my greatest joy,” he has another love — horses. In Petrolia, a local farmer introduced him to harness racing and he has been hooked ever since. “Horse racing is my passion,” he explains. “For me it’s a big, big stress reliever.”

Alexis currently owns a 3-year-old standardbred horse named Daddy Long Legs, whom he hopes to race this season. “I think that is my last horse, but I’ve said that many times.”

Now that the 60-something Alexis has cut back on his working hours, he has more time to spend with his favourite trinity: family, horses and the scholarship fund.

His dream is that the scholarship recipients will carry on the fund’s work in the future. “I told Maggie that I expected her to help others when she is done.” — *Janis Hass*, Ottawa



Dr. Horace Alexis: setting an example