

By Gwendolyn Glenn

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Lonnie Moore, a Morgan State University graduate, is a sales team leader for IBM. Tiwana Smith, a graduate of Maryland Eastern Shore University, is a probation officer in Raleigh, N.C.

Tiara Matthews and Alonzo Washington are graduates of the University of Maryland. Matthews works at a juvenile detention center in Prince George's County and Washington is chief of staff for District 2 County Council member Will Campos.

All of these Laurel natives, who achieved their college degrees with financial assistance from the federal Pell Grant Program, participated in a round-table discussion on the program with House Minority Whip Steny Hoyer at the Laurel Library Sept. 26. The needs-based Pell program provides up to \$5,500 per a student a year to college students.

Some Republican House members wanted to reduce the amount by nearly \$1,000 this year, but that effort was unsuccessful. Although the funding amount for Pell Grants will increase to a maximum of \$6,000 per student next year, the future of the program is not guaranteed in these uncertain economic times.

"I'm very concerned that the value of the Pell Grant Program be recognized because ... with students and families struggling under rising tuition costs, Pell Grants help make college and job training possible for millions of Americans," Hoyer said.

According to federal statistics, 5.4 million college students receive Pell Grants annually, and although most recipients need to secure additional financing, the Laurel Pell Grant recipients told Hoyer that the money made a major difference in their lives.

"I come from a poor family, and my mother only made \$24,000 a year," Tiwana Smith said. "If not for this program, I wouldn't have been able to go to college or graduate."

Alonzo Washington, who grew up in a single-parent household on public assistance, told Hoyer that many high school students don't see college as an option because they are unaware that financial assistance, such as a Pell Grant, exists.

"This program changed my life, and I don't know where I'd be and others would be without it," Washington said.

### **Leading students to college**

Washington and the other former Pell Grant recipients told Hoyer that they learned of the Pell Grant Program through their participation in the Laurel-based First Generation College Bound, a nonprofit organization that provides support and mentoring to high school students who normally might not attend college.

First Generation's founder and director is Laurel resident Joseph Fisher, who received the Closing the Gap Award from the Maryland State Teacher's Association this year for his work.

Fisher arranged for the First Generation alumni to speak with Hoyer, whose district includes Laurel, about the Pell program's benefits to them and the need for it to continue. Fisher's latest figures show that the FGCB students who graduated in 2011 received nearly \$235,000 in Pell Grant funds to attend college.

"Most of our kids are low to moderate income and 98 percent depend on Pell Grants, so we're very dependent on Pell Grants," said Fisher. "Without Pell Grants, many of our students wouldn't have been able to go to college. If not for Pell Grants, I wouldn't have been able to leave Southeast (Washington) to go to college."

"It's important that the public understand that we're getting a good return on this public money."

Hoyer agreed and said, "Investing (up to) \$6,000 in a student's college tuition and getting them to a place four years later where they're not into drugs or crime, but taxpayers, is a benefit and a big difference in just spending money. You are an investment in America's future."

Fisher pointed to Lonnie Moore as an example of how Pell Grants can have a domino effect in helping entire families. But in addition to crediting the Pell Grant Program, Moore attributed his successful career at IBM also to Fisher.

He said when he was a student at Laurel High, he had no plans to attend college and did not think his family could afford it. According to Moore, his mother abandoned him, his father was not involved in his life and he lived with his grandmother in a three-bedroom apartment with 10 other family members.

"I was not inspired to go to college and had planned on just going to work after high school, but Joe (Fisher) would show up at our playgrounds, my front door, and he encouraged me and told me about the Pell Grant Program," Moore said. "The Pell Grant was the key to me attending college and helped me cover expenses my grandmother couldn't afford. It helped me become the first member of my family to get a four-year degree.

"And now, my cousin and other relatives have gotten degrees, masters and doctorates, through Pell Grants."

The students were frank in telling Hoyer that the Pell Grants alone did not guarantee their academic success in college. But they said it did help that the Pell Grants are not academically based: When they stumbled, the Pell Grants were still available to them.

"I flunked out my first year when I was in school in West Virginia at Potomac State College," Moore said. "I didn't like what I saw in the mirror at that time, so I went to Morgan State and graduated with a 3.8."

Hoyer told the group that he had many things in common with them — such as his parents not being college educated and that he flunked out of college his freshman year — but that when he graduated after six years, he did so with honors. In terms of knowing what it means to not have money to pay for a college education without programs such as Pell, he said he could relate on that level as well.

"I wanted to go to Princeton and got \$1,800 in scholarships, but I needed \$1,400 more to go and I couldn't come up with the rest, so I went to the University of Maryland," Hoyer told the group. "I went to law school on the National Defense Education Act," the 1958 law that provided federal financial assistance and loans to college students.

Hoyer told the group he intends to work hard for the continued funding of the Pell Grant Program and thanked the former recipients for their candid discussion of how the program had helped them.

"Pell is a powerful resource that I hope continues because we need to make sure we don't price people out of education," Hoyer said. "This is not a free program because each of you paid back in effort and achievement."