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CELEBRATION OF ACHIEVEMENTS

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Raised in public housing in Venice, India Smith was on her own at the age of 16 and doing her pre-calculus homework in a homeless shelter in Sarasota while she attended high school.

Through grit and perseverance, Smith graduated from Sarasota High School in 2003. Now, thanks to scholarships paid for in part by Microsoft Chairman Bill Gates, Smith, 19, is a junior at the University of Florida where she's deciding between pursuing a master's degree in math or theology. "I knew nobody else was going to be able to do the work but me," Smith said. "I wasn't going to let anything stop me from being successful."

Chanell **Newell**, 19, is also the recipient of scholarship money from the Gates Millennium Scholars Program, funded by Gates and his wife, Melinda. The program provides \$1 billion in financial support for high-performing minority students who would not otherwise be able to attend college because of the cost.

A graduate of King High School in Tampa and currently a sophomore at Bethune-Cookman College in Daytona Beach, **Newell** hopes to attain a doctorate in education.

"I'm a first-generation college student," **Newell** said. "I would love to be Dr. **Newell** some day, and the Gates scholarship is helping me do that."

Sunday evening, Smith and **Newell** spoke to a gathering of minority students from Manatee County at Mount Raymond Missionary Baptist Church in Palmetto. Both girls wanted the youth to know that going to college was a goal that was within their grasp.

"I told them 'I'm just a little girl from a project area in Venice and if I can do it, so can you,' " Smith said. "It was exciting to try and inspire other kids and to plant a seed of motivation in them."

Newell said you don't have to be a nerd to be smart.

"I wanted them to know it's possible and it's OK to make good grades and to be a good student," **Newell** said. "If they aspire to go to college and they don't have the finances for it, they can find a way to do it, and the Bill Gates scholarship is one way."

Newell said the 25-page application for the Gates scholarship was an endurance test in itself.

"They wanted to know about your goals, your community service and what you wanted to accomplish," **Newell** said. "You had to write a lot of essays on the application."

Both girls said they were inspired by the more than 1,000 students, parents and community members who attended Sunday's scholastic celebration. **Cynthia Newell**, Chanell's grandaunt, helped organize the event.

U.S. Rep. Jim Davis, D-Tampa, county Commissioner Gwen Brown, Bradenton city Councilwoman Marianne Barnebey and school board member Barbara Harvey were among area officials in attendance

who praised the students.

"In a world where we spend so much time recognizing improper behavior and bad academics from students, it was refreshing to see so many students, parents and families come together to celebrate good academics and proper behavior," Harvey said.

The event was designed to honor any local minority students who had grade point averages of 3.0 or higher. However, the door was open for any students and families who wanted to attend, Harvey said.

Harvey said she was moved by the sight of so many young people and their families excited about education.

"In that room sat our future," Harvey said. "There were future lawyers, doctors, educators and maybe even a future president. What's really great is they know they have the community cheering them on."

Margaret Tyler, executive director of the Gates Millennium Scholars Program, also attended the event.

"It was tremendous," Tyler said. "We spend so little time celebrating the accomplishments of our young people. This gave us an opportunity to recognize their achievements and hard work."

PHOTO/PAUL GONZALEZ VIDELA/The Herald

Chanell **Newell**, 19, left, and India Smith, 19, are both participants in the Gates Millennium Scholars Program.