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HOT CENTERPIECE

Opportunity Scholars, a new nonprofit, aims to prepare young people for success

By BRIAN BREHM The Winchester Star
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Four students who attended this week's Career Camp offered by Opportunity Scholars at Shenandoah University — Znyah Johnson (front row, from left), Amy Martinez, Tihany Martinez and Ezekiel Martinez — pose for a photo Wednesday evening with former Washington Football Team linebacker Ken Harvey (back row, from left) and Opportunity Scholars board member Lorna Magill and President and CEO John Knox Singleton.

BRIAN BREHM/The Winchester Star

WINCHESTER — A new nonprofit has launched in Winchester to serve the 45% of young people who will not go to college or seek professional training after high school.

Opportunity Scholars provides these students with resources to make sure they don't spend the rest of their lives with low-paying jobs.

"The only qualifications are that they be lower to middle income, their families support them being in the program and they be interested in staying here after they graduate," said John Knox Singleton, the nonprofit's president and CEO. "If they meet those three criteria, they can be in Opportunity Scholars."

The nonprofit will cover the cost of any tuition, fees, materials and tools required for a student to learn a job skill. With one exception, clients will ultimately be asked to pay back Opportunity Scholars, Singleton said, but installments will be affordable and won't kick in until graduates have landed jobs that pay at least \$35,000 a year. He said payments will generally amount to 5% or 6% of a client's annual income and be paid in installments over five or six years. The exception to the rule is for any program graduate who becomes a teacher with Winchester Public Schools, which has agreed to repay a client's Opportunity Scholars debt in full after five years of employment.

On average, Singleton said, only 55% of Virginia students continue their academic or professional education after leaving high school. As for the remaining 45%, "if they didn't get an apprenticeship, go into the military to learn a skill, or go to community college or university, they're going to be making minimum or low wages pretty much their whole lives."

In many cases, young people don't pursue continued education because they and their families can't afford it. That's where Opportunity Scholars steps in. The nonprofit has partnered with local school systems, Lord Fairfax Community College, Shenandoah University and area employers to provide the education and training people need to find jobs that won't leave them struggling from paycheck to paycheck.

Singleton said Opportunity Scholars only provides training and education for jobs that have the potential of paying at least \$40,000 a year.

"If you're a welder, you can look forward to \$80,000, \$90,000 a year," he said. "You can be a teacher, you can be a nurse, you can be a public safety officer, a plumber, an electrician, an HVAC technician, a brick mason — all of those trades pay great money."

Singleton said those fields are also struggling to find qualified employees in the Winchester area.

While some trades recommended by Opportunity Scholars require a college degree, others do not. For example, an aspiring plumber may be able to learn everything they need to know by taking a trade program offered through Winchester Public Schools, but a registered nurse would need to earn a minimum of a bachelor's degree. Either way, Opportunity Scholars will foot the bill with its own resources or through agreements with financial aid programs.

"The core principle is local kids going to school locally and then staying to work in this region," Singleton said. "The data shows that half of all the kids that go away to school never come back to Winchester. They end up in Northern Virginia, Richmond, Tidewater."

Keeping those skilled workers in the Winchester area will not only help existing businesses find qualified employees, but will also create a skilled labor pool that could entice other companies to locate in the Northern Shenandoah Valley, he said.

This week, Opportunity Scholars held its first three-day Career Camp at Shenandoah University. Fifty attendees — the first ever to enroll in the Opportunity Scholars program — received career advice from several local employers and educators, as well as two former Washington Football Team members — Charles Mann and Ken Harvey.

Harvey, who spoke on the camp's last day on Wednesday, said he hoped his words would inspire at least one of the students.

"My biggest thrill in life would be if somebody came back four or five years later and said, 'You know, I remember what you said,'" he said. "It would be worth more than anything ever."

Three Winchester siblings who attended the camp said they're already dreaming of the careers they could have thanks to Opportunity Scholars.

"I would like to be a welder," said Ezekiel Martinez, 16.

"I'm planning to be an ESL [English as a Second Language] teacher," said Tihany Martinez, 20.

Thirteen-year-old Amy Martinez said she hasn't decided what she wants to do for a living, but thanks to Opportunity Welders, "I have the potential to be something good and great in life."

For more information, visit opportunityscholars.org.

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More Information

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Reporter