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HOT CENTERPIECE

'We will touch generations': Opportunity Scholars opens first office

By BRIAN BREHM The Winchester Star
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U.S. Sen. Mark Warner, D-Va. (right), speaks to about 30 people who gathered Monday to dedicate the South Braddock Street headquarters of Opportunity Scholars, a nonprofit that prepares local high school students for good-paying jobs in the Winchester area. Standing next to Warner is John Knox Singleton, CEO and founder of Opportunity Scholars.

BRIAN BREHM/The Winchester Star

WINCHESTER — A Winchester-based nonprofit committed to opening career paths for local high school students opened its first office Monday with a little help from U.S. Sen. Mark Warner.

"We're going to make sure young people that may not have the same opportunities that we had are not going to get left behind," Warner, a Democrat, told about 30 people attending the dedication ceremony for Opportunity Scholars' new headquarters at 918 S. Braddock St. in Winchester, directly across the street from Handley High School's front lawn.

Opportunity Scholars was formed in 2019 by Winchester resident John Knox Singleton, who retired in 2018 as Inova Health System's CEO, to put area teens on a course toward high-paying professions. High school students from lower- or middle-income families who are accepted into the program receive guidance and financial assistance for

college or vocational training in exchange for agreeing to work in the Winchester area until they have reimbursed the nonprofit for tuition, fees, materials and tools.

Program participants shouldn't have too much trouble paying off their debts. Opportunity Scholars only trains people for professions with the potential of paying at least \$40,000 a year, and graduates don't need to start reimbursements until they've landed a job with a minimum annual salary of \$35,000.

Debt payments generally amount to 6% or less of a participant's annual income and can be paid off in five or six years. An exception is made 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.

Opportunity Scholars participants can choose from several careers including teaching, plumbing, electrical work, public safety, welding, nursing, masonry and more. Clients prepare for those professions by enrolling at Shenandoah University or Lord Fairfax Community College — both of which have partnerships with Opportunity Scholars — or completing a trade program offered by the city school system or another accredited agency.

"The truth is, the jobs that we're looking at right now don't all require a four-year degree but they're going to require something that goes beyond high school," Warner said.

Singleton said Opportunity Scholars opened its office on South Braddock Street in January so people associated with the nonprofit could have a private space to meet with, mentor and support program participants and their families. He held off on a ribbon-cutting ceremony until Warner could participate.

Since the launch of Opportunity Scholars three years ago, Singleton said, "We've enrolled over a hundred kids and built our program. Now we have kids that are starting to get report cards and some are doing better than others. We needed a private place where we could actually bring the kids in to do their homework, meet with counselors. ... Connecting with the families and kids is really critical for our success."

Among the first students to enroll in the Opportunity Scholars program was Paula Dominguez, who has since graduated from Millbrook High School and is currently a sophomore at Shenandoah University. She is also the first person in her family to attend college.

"I've been taking every opportunity, things like being a part of our student government at Shenandoah or joining Estudiantes Unidos, which is a Hispanic life club," said Dominguez, who is studying business at the university.

"She's exactly the model of what Opportunity Scholars does," said the nonprofit's director of counseling, Bibianna Vazquez. "We're looking at students who have acute abilities, which she does, and have intellect — she fits that as well — but don't have a network of people who can help guide them."

Dominguez has become a major advocate for Opportunity Scholars. Vazquez said she has already referred more than half a dozen Millbrook students to the program who otherwise would not have been able to afford college or professional training.

Warner said Opportunity Scholars represents all that is good about America and the potential for its citizens to prosper.

"There would never be an Opportunity Scholars program in Russia. There would never be an Opportunity Scholars program in China," he said.

"With what we're doing today, we will touch generations," said Opportunity Scholars board member Lorna Martinez Magill.

To learn more about Opportunity Scholars, visit opportunitiescholars.org.

— Contact Brian Brehm at bbrehm@winchesterstar.com

Brian Brehm

Reporter