

# CUNY Newswire

LaGuardia Community College

## **Four LaGuardia Community College Students Receive Prestigious Kaplan Educational Foundation Scholarships**

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Four LaGuardia Community College students who have excelled in their academic pursuits and displayed exemplary leadership skills have been selected as Kaplan Educational Foundation Scholars.

Luis Feliz, Anastasia Morton, Don Patterson and Cristina Rodriguez were among 10 community college students in New York City to receive this highly competitive scholarship. The scholarship attracted over 100 applicants.

The program, which was established three years ago, focuses on students enrolled in associate degree programs who have high academic and leadership potential but who might not realize their potential due to limited resources, support and guidance. To ensure the students' academic success, the scholarship will not only provide them with financial support throughout their college experience, but also with academic assistance in the form of individual and group tutoring through the completion of his bachelor's degree, leadership development training and cultural enrichment.

### Student Profiles:

#### Luis Feliz

Luis, a native of the Dominican Republic, immigrated to the United States with his mother and sister when he was seven. His mother was looking for steady employment and a better life for her children but life proved to be difficult. Although she was working two jobs, she realized that she could not adequately care for Luis so she had him live with his grandmother in the Dominican Republic. As a result of the constant moves, Luis's education was sorely affected. "The comings and goings had held me back academically," he said.

He returned to the United States in 2000 but his schooling was still off track. Through eighth grade he worked forty hours a week at a bakery and in the tenth grade he was working in the airport in lieu of attending classes. At the age of 20 he was still in high school when a guidance counselor suggested he drop out and enroll in a GED program. Her suggestion motivated him to reverse his academic fate, and by the end of his senior year he was taking honor classes.

His goal was now to attend college, but despite his improved grades they were not high enough for him to gain acceptance to a four year college so he decided to enroll at LaGuardia. "I was shooting for a four-year school," he said, "but I realized that the only chance for a better life was to begin my college experience at a community college."

The 22-year old enrolled in the spring of 2007 as liberal arts major and he said he soon realized he made the right college choice. "What I discovered is that community colleges are truly communities," he said. "Here at LaGuardia I met faculty who motivated me and students who reached out to me. If not for the professors and friends who believed in me and encouraged me, the Kaplan scholarship would not have been possible."

In this community, Luis is an honor student who has been maintaining a 3.77 G.P.A.

Luis has also established himself as a student leader. He joined the Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society where he serves as publications officer. His love for literature prompted him to found the Renaissance Reading Circle where he and other students meet once a week to discuss such works as Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis* and Jose Saramago's *Blindness*.

Off campus he volunteers his services at the New Immigrant Community Empowerment organization where he teaches ESL classes to working class immigrants.

With Kaplan's academic and financial support, Luis said that he will be better prepared to succeed at a senior college. "I am excited about the scholarship but I know I will have to work harder than I ever worked before," said Luis. "I am looking forward to the tutoring and the other assistance the program provides. I want to work with them to become a better student."

With the help of the Kaplan scholarship, Luis envisions pursuing a baccalaureate in the classics at Cornell, Swarthmore or the University of Pennsylvania. "My dream is to go to an Ivy League school," he said. "I hope the Kaplan Leadership Program will help put that within my grasp."

Ultimately, he would like to obtain a Ph.D. in English and teach the subject at the college level. "I would like to bring the enriching experience I have found in books to community college students," he said.

Anastasia Morton

To say that Anastasia has a busy schedule would be an understatement. She is a single mother, a full-time student in LaGuardia's tuition-free Accelerated Study in Associate Program and a full-time school aide at a middle school in Harlem. "On Tuesdays and Thursdays I drop off my son at day care, go to work, pick him up in the evening, then drop him off at LaGuardia's child care center and attend class," said Anastasia. "On Saturdays, I attend class all day while Brenden is at the child care center."

She said she will still continue her tiring routine, but with the Kaplan scholarship, she is confident she will be able to obtain her bachelor's degree. "Without barriers I will be able to focus on school, and work on completing my degree sooner," she said. "I am eager to get into the program that will give me time for learning."

The 27-year old explained that the reason she decided to go back to school after a 10-year hiatus was her four-year old son, Brendon. "I want to be able to establish a stable home environment for him," said Anastasia who lives with her son in the Queensbridge housing project. "I want a better paying job and have more time to devote to him."

Despite the insurmountable challenges, the liberal arts major maintains a 3.79 G.P.A. ASAP eases the financial burdens tied to a college education by paying for tuition and books and providing a Metrocard. Its flexible structure also allows her to take evening classes so that she can continue working in the day.

During the day, Anastasia is a teacher's school aide at the Wadleigh Secondary School in Harlem. Along with helping out in the classroom and the school office, Anastasia has developed a number of leadership workshops designed to help the black male students. "Many of these kids have leadership qualities but they do not see it in themselves," she said.

Her work with these students has helped her to define her academic and career goals: pursue a bachelor's degree in political science or urban studies and continue serving that specific population.

"Now with the Kaplan scholarship, I will be able to get a bachelor's degree," she said.

Don Patterson

At the end of eighth grade Don felt that school had nothing to offer him so he dropped out and spent the next six years gaining what he described as "life experiences" on the streets of Bedford Stuyvesant in Brooklyn. "I was a hooligan," he said, admitting that his role models were the neighborhood's thugs, drug dealers and ex-convicts. "I had developed a distorted sense of ethics, morality and logic throughout my childhood and adolescence."

But when he saw many of his role models and family members end up in jail and observed his neighborhood going through gentrification, he realized that he, too, had to change. So at the age of 19 he enrolled in a GED program where he went on to receive his high school equivalency diploma, and one year later, in the fall of 2006, enrolled in LaGuardia.

Leaving his past behind, Don began his career at LaGuardia and immediately distinguished himself as an outstanding scholar and consummate student leader. The liberal arts: math and science major maintains a 3.5 G.P.A. while serving in many student organizations. He serves as the Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society's liaison to the Student Advisory Council, an executive student senator and a student governor of public relations. In the community, he is a volunteer for the Black Male Empowerment Cooperative where he works with young black youth. "My background has allowed me to help others like me," he said.

With the help of the Kaplan scholarship, Don said his academic goal is to major in economics. "Seeing professionals of different ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds buying and renting random properties in the area helped in my decision to study economics," he said. "And the scholarship can help make it happen. I am no longer limited to city or state universities. I have the ability to attend universities such as the London School of Economics, NYU Stern, Morehouse or Clark Atlanta University where I get a chance to show just how studious I am."

Cristina Rodriguez

After graduating from high school in 2004, Cristina said she did not have the financial means to enroll in college. "I could not afford tuition on my own," she said, "and my parents would not support me because they thought I would fail."

For the next three years, Cristina worked at various odd jobs until she saved enough money to secure a loan, and in the spring of 2007 enrolled in LaGuardia's business administration program. After she completed the spring semester she learned about the college's tuition-free Accelerated Study in Associate Program. She applied and was accepted.

Cristina was excelling in her classes, maintaining a 3.4 G.P.A., but she explained that troubles at home affected her grades and led her to doubt whether she should continue her studies. "But with the support of ASAP faculty I decided to push on," she said.

She said she is now back on track taking honors courses and striving to get her G.P.A. up to a 3.5 so that she can join the Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society. She is also a student technology mentor who works with students who need help with computer programs. "I really like helping students," she said. "And by helping them they are pushing me to keep on going."

For the student scholar, the Kaplan program holds great importance. "The Kaplan Scholarship is not only important because it will pay for school and books but the staff actually dedicates their time and effort," she said. "It is almost like ASAP but now it is for a four year college. It is like family. They care about you and are interested in the things you are doing in school and in your life."

Before receiving the scholarship, Cristina had planned on applying to Baruch, Columbia or NYU, but she said Kaplan has encouraged her to keep her options open. Wherever she ends up she plans on majoring in business administration but she has a long list of possible career options.

"I would like to get a Ph.D. in business and teach," she said, "but I also would like to start up a non-profit organization that helps kids prepare for the outside world."