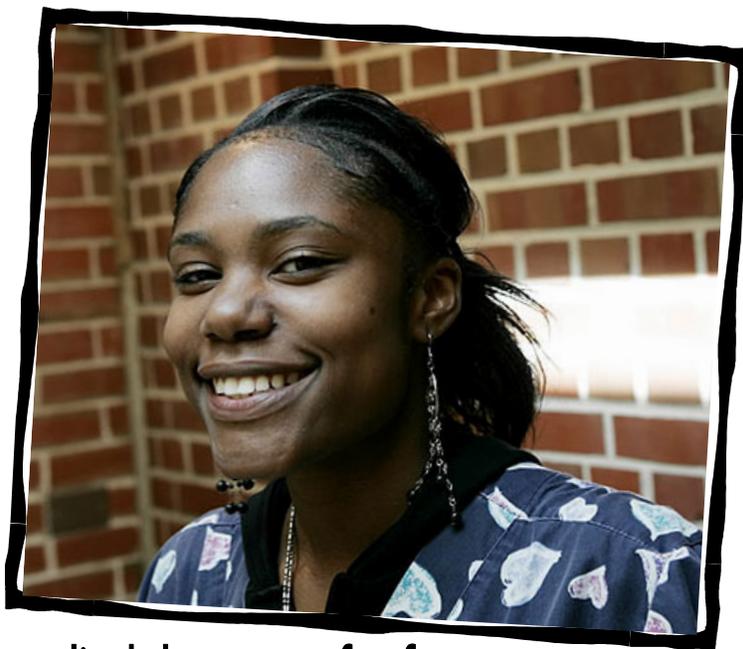


Her
dream
leads her
to Cuba-



Program will help her earn medical degree — for free

Aug. 17, 2006 *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* By JOEL DRESANG

Joya Mosley sees Cuba as a land of opportunity.

As the world scrutinizes the health of Fidel Castro and speculates on Cuba's future, Mosley packs her bags, preparing to return to Havana next month to pursue her dream of becoming a doctor. "I am not worried," Mosley said on the porch swing of her mother's house on Milwaukee's north side.

Mosley plans to join about 95 U.S. citizens already studying at the Latin American School of Medical Sciences, which has been educating doctors from undeveloped countries and, more recently, from the United States. Tuition, housing, meals and books are free. Students have to be economically disadvantaged and committed to practicing medicine in underserved U.S. communities.

That commitment is part of the appeal to Mosley, who at 23 has a history of community service. She also welcomes being trained in Spanish. And then there's the price tag.

The average yearly cost of medical school in the U.S. ranges from more than \$36,000 at state schools to about \$52,000 for private schools, and the average graduate has debts exceeding \$120,000, according to the Association of American Medical Colleges. "I was like, how am I going to pay for this?" Mosley said.

A 2001 graduate of Riverside University High School, Mosley has dreamed of being a doctor. She volunteered as a hospital candy striper and became a certified nursing assistant as a teenager to get hospital experience. Knowing about Mosley's dream, a friend of her mother's told Mosley about the medical school in Cuba.

"She's very studious, very serious about wanting to be a doctor. We think she'll do well," said the Rev. Lucius Walker, a founder of the Interreligious Foundation for Community Organization, a 39-year-old non-profit group that coordinates the Cuba medical scholarships.

Castro himself has promoted the six-year medical scholarship program, which began enrolling U.S. students in 2001. The schooling has the backing of the Congressional Black Caucus, which has intervened to protect the U.S. students so that their participation isn't a violation of the 44-year-old U.S. embargo against Cuba.

As with other foreign-trained doctors, graduates of the Cuba medical school must pass licensing exams and complete U.S. medical residencies.

International cooperation

Art Heitzer, a Milwaukee attorney who has visited the medical school, called the scholarship program "a fine example of international cooperation" that lets Mosley interact with medical scholars from Cuba and other countries.

"It's a fantastic goodwill mission in all directions, just for her to be able to share her experiences with other dedicated people from all over the world," said Heitzer, who's on the steering committee of the Wisconsin Coalition to Normalize Relations with Cuba.

Detractors of Castro, who has ruled in Cuba since 1959, have characterized the free medical training for U.S. citizens as an attempt to embarrass the U.S. government.

For her part, Mosley won't talk about politics.

"I'm more into natural sciences, not political science," Mosley told Heitzer's group two years ago at a presentation on her experience in Cuba. "I just went for my goal."

But even with free tuition, room and board, Mosley has expenses in Cuba that have delayed her progress. When she came home from Havana in late 2003, after completing two semesters of Spanish immersion and pre-medical training, Mosley lacked the airfare to return. She already depleted her savings, and she wasn't able to get student loans for Cuba.

So for the past two years, Mosley has been studying biology and chemistry at Alverno College - using scholarships, student loans and savings from her work as a part-time patient care assistant at Columbia St. Mary's.

Following her dream. But she hasn't surrendered her dream. Mosley is ready to return to Cuba to begin six years of medical training. Classes start Sept. 4.

Mosley figures she has enough savings set aside for the next year, with the proceeds from the sale of her mother's Jeep covering airfare - which, because of U.S. travel restrictions, she is arranging through the Bahamas.

Walker, who used to live in Mosley's neighborhood, where he began his civil rights ministry in the 1960s, said Mosley's drive impresses him.

"Her family can't lay down the money like some wealthy families, but she hasn't lost her dream," Walker said. "She's still pursuing her dream, and I think that's very positive. You know, sometimes we don't see our young people striving. They come out of tough circumstances, and they let those circumstances determine and shape their lives. She doesn't want to do that. She wants to realize her dream."

About one in five of the scholarship recipients drops out, but none has done so for financial reasons, Walker said. "But we have had some, like Joya, who had to come back home and work and raise money somehow so they could continue."

Mosley said she'd like to come home once a year and estimates she needs about \$2,500 a year beyond what the scholarship covers. She has been trying to raise donations, but if nothing else, she says, she'll try to earn money when she comes home for breaks.

"She seems like a very intelligent, dedicated person," Heitzer said. "You've got to be an extremely mature person with great dedication to your goal. Not everybody can do that, that's for sure. I admire her for her commitment to it." Neither Walker nor Heitzer is worried about the medical school's prospects after Castro's time has passed. It's a high priority for the Cuban government and has benefited too many other countries to think that it should be discontinued, they said.

"The program is secure. It's permanent," Walker said. "Nothing is going to be modified because Fidel is sick or even if he should die."

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