



MIKE EWEN / Democrat

Amandla Mitchell, a former Godby student, will be getting a free education from the Cuban government.

## Student turns to Cuba for degree Program pays for medical school

Jan 2, 2006 By Rocky Scott DEMOCRAT STAFF WRITER

Amandla Mitchell decided she wanted to be a doctor while attending Godby High School in Tallahassee and Xavier University in New Orleans. The high cost of medical school threatened, however, to derail her plans.

But her dream is on the way to becoming a reality now, thanks to the unlikely combination of Fidel Castro and Colin Powell.

"The Cuban government covers all the expenses," says Mitchell, 23, who started her studies in September at the Latin American School of Medical Sciences, in a suburb of Havana.

Mitchell returned to Tallahassee after finishing her first semester and will return to school in March or August, depending on which classes she chooses to take.

The program, started in 1999, trains more than 2,000 students annually - including about 90 Americans - from outside Cuba. All expenses except spending money and travel are paid. The students attend school for six years, then head back to their native countries to finish residencies.

The program is sponsored in the United States by the Interreligious Foundation for Community Organization and Pastors for Peace. The first students will graduate from the program in 2007.

The only requirement is they spend some of their medical careers providing services to areas where doctors are needed - inner cities or remote, rural locations.

Mitchell, soft-spoken and bespectacled, says she's thinking about specializing in family practice when she returns to the United States for her residency.

She grew up in a house of health-care workers. Her mother, Miaisha Mitchell, is a health-care administrator and her father is Albert Haines, a Ph.D. who specializes in acupuncture treatment in Tallahassee.

Miaisha Mitchell says she and her husband urged their daughter to consider a career in health care often while she was growing up.

Amandla Mitchell graduated from Xavier in 2003, majoring in pre-med studies. She heard about Cuba's medical-school plan from other Xavier students who were enrolled in the school and returned to campus to talk about it.

"I was like, 'Hey, here's this opportunity to go to medical school for free,'" Mitchell says. She was accepted in October 2003 and made plans to head for Cuba.

### Politics force a delay

But the opportunity was delayed for two years because of the long-standing enmity between the United States and Cuba, which began with an economic, commercial and travel embargo the United States slapped on Castro's regime in 1962. (Continued on reverse)



For more information on this scholarship program, contact:  
the interreligious foundation for community organization

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Castro has used the embargo to bolster anti-U.S. feelings. He also made no secret of the fact he was training American citizens from families of modest means who otherwise might not have had a chance to be doctors.

In 2003, the U.S. Treasury Department issued an order barring "gifts" between the United States and Cuba. Free medical school for 90 Americans fell into that category.

Mitchell, meanwhile, had gone to work in an after-school program at Nims Middle School in Tallahassee and waited while the politics of the situation played out.

The ban was due to go into effect in August 2004. A group of black and Hispanic lawmakers sent a letter to then-Secretary of State Colin Powell, asking for help.

"We ought to find a way to fix this," the former four-star general scribbled in the margin of the letter, it was reported at the time.

Treasury Department officials found a way to exempt the students, and Mitchell's dream was back on track.

She flew to Havana in September via Cozumel, Mexico, with five other students from Xavier. She's been living in a dormitory at an old naval academy where the medical school is housed, studying Spanish.

She is aware of the politics involved in her medical training in Cuba; she received an object lesson in international relations when Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast.

Castro ordered nearly 1,600 doctors to Mitchell's school to assemble a disaster-relief medical team, but his offer of help was rebuffed by the Bush administration.

Mitchell, who held seminars in American culture and language for the assembling physicians, was stunned at the rejection.

"We (American students) tried to organize a group to go back and help" after the offer to supply doctors was rejected, she said, but travel complications and politics stopped the plan.

Politics also works its way into medical-school classrooms, she says, but doesn't interfere with the learning process.

"We know why we are there," she says. "We are not there as political tokens. We are there to become doctors."

Mitchell says there are drawbacks - power interruptions, occasional problems with running water - but those are offset by her classes and the fact that she can see American movies "for about 5 cents."

Miaisha Mitchell says she also understands the politics of the situation and tries not to be overly concerned.

"I do worry," she says, "but I don't worry (that much) because I know she will be in good hands."