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By [Janice Neumann](#)

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Resident establishes scholarships for young workers at Smith Crossing in Orland Park



Smith Crossing resident Bill Hurley stands with scholarship recipients Saja Kanan, left, and Marisa Garza, who work at the community in Orland Park where Hurley established scholarships for employees taking classes at Moraine Valley Community College. (Janice Neumann/Daily Southtown)



Not long after Bill Hurley moved into Smith Crossing in Orland Park, he noticed a young employee leaving one night with a binder that said Moraine Valley Community College. He started thinking back to his own school days, and the struggle of working while trying to get an education.

“It’s not easy to do,” said Hurley. “If I had been of an age then and had someone to support my efforts, it would have been a good thing.”

So Hurley established scholarships for the young people he saw working at Smith Crossing. But the impact of that decision first dawned on him when a receptionist there greeted him with a big, warm smile and thank you.

At first, Hurley didn’t know why Saja Kanan, the receptionist, was thanking him. But then she explained she was one of the two students at Moraine Valley Community College to receive the \$1,000 scholarships — \$500 each semester.

“When Saja said that to me, I thought, boy this is great,” said Hurley, who lived in Tinley Park with his wife of 55 years, before she died and he moved to Smith Crossing a year ago. “She made me feel good because she told me it was necessary and important.”

He’d come a long way since growing up in Chicago at 69th and Halsted streets and taking part time jobs while a student at Brother Rice High School.

“I was in a good position to provide it,” he said.

Hurley, 82, earned degrees in communications and theater before working at Allstate for 25 years and then MetLife for six more before retiring. He’s also used his degrees as an actor and singer in productions each year until his last play, “Other Desert Cities” at the Theatre of Western Springs.

“Some very nice things have come out of my mouth written by others,” said Hurley.

But education and culture were always important to Hurley, who has a daughter who lives in Orland Park, as well as two grown grandkids.

The Smith Crossing employee with the Moraine Valley Community College gave him the idea to help people who want to “further” their education at the Palos Hills college. He had also taken a few cooking courses there, which helped when he needed to prepare meals for his wife later, as she dealt with health problems.

He knew what he wanted to do but not what it would require, so called the college and talked to Kristy McGreal, executive director of the MVCC Foundation.





Smith Crossing resident Bill Hurley sits with scholarship recipients Marisa Garza, left, and Saja Kanan, who work at the community in Orland Park where Hurley established scholarships for employees taking classes at Moraine Valley Community College. (Janice Neumann/Daily Southtown)

“They were very welcoming,” he said. “She made it simple.”

McGreal was excited about his proposal.

“I thought it was wonderful that he as a resident gets to see these students every day and they make his life there comfortable and happy,” she said. “He knows how difficult it is to get a college education, work and achieve those dreams.

“For him to even think of the idea ... that’s pretty powerful,” she said.

The college has a group of volunteers who review scholarship applications and score them, partly based on the essays the candidates provide.

Both Kanan and Marisa Garza, the other employee who received a scholarship, are grateful for Hurley. Kanan is taking general education courses but is thinking of moving on to a respiratory therapy major. Garza is already on her way to becoming a nurse.

Garza has been working as a certified nursing assistant at Greenleaf Rehab, the rehabilitation center at Smith Crossing. While in school, she’s been working 30 to 40 hours every two weeks, picking up more shifts as needed to pay her tuition without taking out loans.



She wanted to work with older adults after earlier helping to bring seniors to a local church service.

"I wanted to be in that environment," she said, adding that she grew up with great-grandparents. "I consider myself an old soul."

So the scholarship was a blessing in reaching her goals.

"It's going to help me a lot," Garza said with emotion. "It's a great school, they have great professors and everybody helps you out."

Kanan had been a server at Smith Crossing before becoming a receptionist. Her sister worked for four years in the rehab center.

"It meant a lot because I have been working a lot of hours recently," she said. "Knowing I'm going to have the scholarship is just really going to help me."

She's also enjoyed working with the residents.

"They're very sweet and easy to talk to," said Kanan.

Kanan said even working as a server taught her the importance of a strong education in health care. She had to remember what types of diets each resident was on and how and what foods should be prepared for various health issues.

"Everywhere you go in this building, it's related to health care," she said.

Hurley, who has led a group discussion on classic plays at Smith Crossing, enjoys the occasional game of bridge and his regular walks down by the pond, said he appreciates the employees and residents.

"Because of the level of amiability and their openness to others, it's kind of easy to disappear into the fabric of things," he said.