

Shawn Carter Foundation HBCU Virtual Bus Tour Teaches Future College Students that Seeing is Believing

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When it comes to helping people navigate their future options, it often begins with providing access and exposure to opportunities. After all, achieving a goal depends on seeing it and believing it can be reached. Enter the Shawn Carter Foundation, which for seventeen years has been helping those facing socio-economic hardships further their education at institutions of higher learning.

Through scholarships, a college prep program, college bus tour, study abroad opportunities and career exploration, SCF aids students across the US. Seventy-nine percent come from single-parent households. Sixty-four percent of SCF scholars are first-generation college students.

In economic terms alone, the need for the mission becomes even more stark: seventy-seven percent of the participating scholars represent annual household incomes of less than \$40,000, and of that group fifty-nine percent fall under the national poverty line. The range of those helped is widely inclusive, addressing personal, social and economic setbacks such as teen pregnancy, former incarceration, interrupted schooling, poverty and homelessness.

Founded in 2003 by Gloria Carter in response to a question from her son, Shawn “Jay-Z” Carter, as to just how she wanted to help young people towards an education, the Shawn Carter Foundation has awarded over 200 scholarships annually to students attending over 100 colleges and universities throughout the nation.

One of the Foundation’s centerpiece programs is the annual bus tour, which Toyota has been involved with since 2019, to expose aspiring college students to the world of historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs).

This year, in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, the show did go on with a virtual tour, which offered 40 prospective college students a chance to see for themselves what life and learning are like in these academic settings. Toyota jumped in to help by giving each of the participants a new MacBook laptop and a \$1,000 COVID-19 Relief stipend to help them through this difficult time.

https://toyota-cms-media.s3.amazonaws.com/toyota-videos/SCF_BusTour_2020Recap_Sizzle_V3.mp4

On the heels of this innovative solution event, Toyota checked in with Gloria Carter, CEO and Co-Founder, and Executive Director Dania Diaz to hear more about the tour and how to expand options for new scholars.

How was the virtual bus tour received?

Dania Diaz: Based on students’ reactions and testimonials, they were surprised and grateful that they learned so much without physically stepping foot on a campus. Brandon, one of our 40 students participating in the virtual college bus tour from Brooklyn, was doubtful at first but by the end of the virtual experience, he shared that he was newly convinced that he is going to college and that he *will* get a degree. This shift in perspective and confidence is exactly what we hope to see in our youth, and we are pleased that we could support this transformation with a virtual tour.

Do you think a virtual component could become a feature of the scholarship program going forward?

Dania Diaz: Absolutely. We are actively working on using this experience as a blueprint for high quality educational programming. We saw that [the virtual tour] can reach even more young people who have the desire but may not have the resources.

Does the roster of colleges change from year to year?

Dania Diaz: We have a dedicated group of HBCUs that have been with us since the inception of our HBCU tour program in 2007. They have been excellent partners thanks to a genuine interest in the scholars we serve and support. We will always work with schools that share a strong belief in our mission, as well as in our youth.

What was the triggering event for founding the scholarship?

Gloria Carter: After 25 years of working as a financial analyst, I retired from my job at the Controller's Office of the City of New York and shortly after, became restless. I saw that there were so many young people that desired an education but did not have the funds. My son asked me what I wanted to do, and I told him that I wanted to help these young people: the ones with dreams, but without the financial means. We were blessed, so we decided to bless others. That's how the foundation was conceived, and it has grown from there.

Since the founding of the scholarship in 2003, what changes have you seen in the kinds of students it serves?

Dania Diaz: We have always served students who have a want to pursue their dreams but may not have the guidance or resources or support to do so. In the past several years we have seen that students are even more motivated as they hear about the successes of their friends and classmates who previously participated in the Foundation's workshops and programs and are now thriving in college or have graduated and are pursuing their career goals.

What areas of study are the students most interested in?

Dania Diaz: All of our students have a variety of academic interests. Each year we learn of students' aspirations in the medical field, or students who want to become educators, activists, or business leaders or entrepreneurs in any field of their choice. There is no one particular area of study that students are most interested in, and we value and support the diversity in their passions and dreams.

The program is noteworthy in its 360-degree student support, including sessions to offer guidance in test prep, college essays and admissions interview skills. What other support might be needed as the college experience undergoes a transformation in the COVID-19 era?

Dania Diaz: Our model has been about education, connection, opening doors and inspiring confidence. When our scholars enter college, we maintain regular communication with them to learn of their progress, what needs they may have and how they have grown as it relates to their academic, leadership and community service goals. I think this type of support and communication is needed regardless of the impact of a pandemic. We can't forget the importance of relating on a human level.

What are some of the experiences on the tour that expose the students to what's possible?

Gloria Carter: What's powerful for our young students is seeing people who look like themselves on a college campus—people of color who are like-minded and progressive. That's unique to HBCUs. Also, when we invite our alumni and college-age scholars to speak with our high school students they share their struggles, how they got through them, and how they've grown, and these conversations are so powerful to our high school students because they see what's possible. Our special guests have that effect on our young scholars as well. This year we had music artist Rapsody return to share inspiring words and also welcomed notable HBCU alumni such as Emil Wilbekin and Terrence Jay who reflected on their personal experiences as students and the roads taken to get where they are now.

What does it mean to you to witness the transformation of these young lives?

Gloria Carter: It means that the world is going to be transformed by these young people's greatness.

How does Toyota's participation assist in your goals for the program and the needs of the students? How did this year's virtual bus tour participants react to the announcement of the MacBook Air laptops and \$1,000 COVID stipend?

Dania Diaz: Toyota's support is not just a financial transaction. For the company to come in and give so generously in a time of crisis, thanks to Ms. Alva Adams-Mason [national manager, Diversity Dealer Relations, TMNA Business Relations Alignment] and Mr. Al Smith [group vice president and chief social innovation officer, TMNA], it is clear that they understand the real challenges that our young students face, and that they believe in them in the ways that we do. Our students are incredibly grateful for their amazing demonstration of care and support, and we are as well.

What else would you like people to know about the SCF, Toyota's support, and the scholarship's mission to improve the lives of the students and help them fulfill their potential?

Gloria Carter: We have been supporting youth since the inception of the foundation in 2003, and we will continue to do so as long as there is the need to support young people in fulfilling their dreams. When a corporate supporter comes in like Toyota – one that genuinely cares about our young people – there is a collective message and *louder* message that is communicated and heard: You matter, we care, and we are here for you. We are forever grateful to Toyota.