Scholarships threatened as fundraisers canceled, altered

By JILL ZIMA BORSKI Key West Citizen
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The high school Class of 2021 will still have many scholarship opportunities greeting students upon graduation in the spring.

It will be subsequent graduating classes that could pay the price of major fundraising events being canceled or scaled back due to the coronavirus pandemic, such as the annual Gigantic Nautical Flea Market in Islamorada.

According to Chuck Licis, Take Stock in Children scholarship program director, the mission of TSIC to provide opportunities for a post-secondary education to financially and academically eligible students remains on track for this year. The Florida Prepaid tuition scholarships for this spring’s graduates already have been purchased. However, the ability to purchase additional Florida Prepaid scholarships is up in the air.
Take Stock partners in the Upper Keys include the Upper Keys Rotary Club, the Key Largo Rotary Club, the Ocean Reef Club, Keys Children’s Foundation and other nonprofit organizations, Licis said. They have been affected by the pandemic because events they organize to generate funds for scholarships and similar charitable gifts cannot be held.

Licis, who is a member of the Sunset Key West Rotary, said his club traditionally hosts a BrewFest during Labor Day weekend, which could not be held this year, as well as a February golf tournament to fund scholarships. It remains to be seen if that event can happen but it seems unlikely, he indicated.

The Upper Keys Rotary Club's annual Gigantic Nautical Flea Market will not be granted a permit to be held this February at Founders Park, the Islamorada Village Council recently decided upon the recommendation of its staff and the county medical director. The village's large event ban in the park currently is set to last until April 1, so the Upper Keys Rotary instead is planning a virtual event.

Upper Keys Rotary President Jill Miranda Baker said the flea market committee will meet Wednesday, Dec. 2, to determine what the event will look like, and as it solidifies its plans, it will convey them to the public.

“We must remain focused on the goal of scholarships for graduating seniors for college and technical career training,” she said. “This is a chance for people who have attended and support the event to donate to the cause.”

In the Middle Keys, the Marathon Seafood Festival set for March 13-14 at Community Park is hoping for a green light so the local chamber of commerce and Organized Fishermen of Florida can continue to support local college scholarships with the event's entry fee and proceeds.
Licis said the pandemic’s impact is real, especially with the named scholarship opportunities. These amount to several $25,000 scholarships a year. Furthermore, in the past few years the Upper Keys Rotary has donated $40,000 annually to Take Stock in Children, which is valuable since it is matched by funds at the state level.

Throughout the years, many students benefited from hardworking groups and generous community members who value continuing education. The 55 scholars of the 20th Take Stock in Children class received $2.2 million in May in Florida Prepaid tuition scholarships, said Licis. The prepaid scholarships are purchased in bulk each April, depending on how much local funding is available.

The May graduation ceremony was held virtually and highlighted three students who spoke about the importance of the unique scholarship opportunity, the value of having a Take Stock mentor guide and support during middle and high school, and the hope for a better future thanks to this program.

The diverse group of Take Stock students from Coral Shores, Marathon and Key West high schools passed more than 220 advanced placement courses and nearly 60 dual enrollment courses. They collectively earned a 3.74 weighted grade point average. Fifteen received Florida Bright Futures scholarships in addition to their Take Stock in Children scholarship, said Licis.
The Monroe County Education Foundation provides the TSIC Monroe students with the tools and skills necessary to complete a degree, diploma or industry certification. The foundation, established in 1996, is a Florida not-for-profit organization dedicated to enhancing and improving the educational experiences of Monroe students. In addition to the MCEF flagship program, Take Stock in Children, the foundation provides leadership development opportunities and international travel experiences for qualified Monroe County students.

More than 700 students from Monroe County have received Take Stock scholarships since the program was founded. For information, visit http://www.monroecountyedfound.com.

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