

Dr. John T. Crawford

Greater Steps Scholars began in 1983 as the dream of John T. Crawford, the Youth Services Director for Charlotte Housing Authority (CHA). It is the oldest program of its kind and a true model for the nation, unique in that it provides scholarships specifically for students from Charlotte public housing communities.

Crawford had been approached by a young CHA resident who was concerned that he would be unable to return to college for his senior year. The difference between completing his baccalaureate degree and returning to public housing amounted to \$300. Crawford could not imagine allowing this young man's chances for a brighter future to be derailed. He, himself had come from a family that was rich in spirit, but struggled financially. So, any opportunity to help someone in need was second nature. Crawford contacted a personal friend and the two of them paid the \$300 for the student to return to school and he graduated the following semester.

This experience spawned Crawford's "calling" by making it clear that this young man's burden of limited financial resources was shared by hundreds of otherwise talented students who happened to be residents of public housing. As a result, Crawford decided to create a scholarship fund so that these youth could have a permanent source of support for their educational pursuits.

Knowing that he could not start and grow a scholarship fund alone, Crawford met with several advisors who helped him develop the program, appoint an advisory board and raise seed money. With the support of the Charlotte community, Crawford and his colleagues raised \$64,990 to establish Greater Steps Scholars and assisted 16 students with funding for their college education starting in the fall of 1984. Crawford asserts that the best advice he received was to partner with the Greater Charlotte Foundation (recognized today as Foundation For The Carolinas) to manage the scholarship. The Foundation still professionally and prudently manages Greater Steps' assets and this partnership has grown stronger and deeper over the years.

To date, \$4.4 million has been awarded to 1,000 young public housing residents. Greater Steps recipients have attended over 80 colleges including the University of North Carolina system, Johnson C. Smith University, Queens University, Winthrop University, Howard University, Spelman College, Wake Forest University, Central Piedmont Community College, and the Art Institute of Charlotte. Degrees earned are numerous and include mechanical engineering, computer science, medicine, accounting, psychology, business management and social work to name just a few.

With a 40+ year legacy, John Crawford remains optimistic about the future of the scholarship fund and the continued success of its recipients. "Education is the key to positive life outcomes, especially for underserved kids," he notes. "When I first wanted to start the scholarship fund, I remember being told that it was a nice idea but that I'd never get very far. Over the years, I have enjoyed proving the naysayers wrong!" ¹

¹ <https://greatersteps.org/about/25-about/history/157-from-our-founder-john-crawford>