

**Phi Beta Kappa Alumni Association of Greater Houston:
Building Community, Rewarding Achievement**

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Every spring, members of the Phi Beta Kappa Alumni Association of Greater Houston gather to recognize outstanding high school students from across the greater Houston area at its scholarship banquet. The underlying scholarship program has formed the cornerstone of the association since 1972, when the founding members agreed that the association should do something of substance to encourage students to pursue academic excellence.

In 1974, under the leadership of our first president, Jenard Gross, \$250 scholarships were given to six college-bound graduating seniors drawn from 26 Houston public high schools. Since then, the scholarship program has grown dramatically. In 2005, the program awarded \$3,000 scholarships to an academically gifted student from each of 75 different Houston area high schools and a \$5,000 Jenard M. Gross Scholarship to the pre-eminent scholar. The program now reaches nearly every public, private and parochial high school in the Houston metropolitan area, recognizing academic excellence, helping these young scholars along their paths and building awareness of the Phi Beta Kappa Society and its mission.

Each year at the banquet, it is exhilarating to meet these young academic leaders who are headed off to colleges across the country and to hear their plans for the future. These scholars embody such a wonderful patchwork of backgrounds, interests and intellectual enthusiasms and truly reflect the remarkable diversity of the greater Houston area.

In addition to showcasing and celebrating the students' achievements, the association also awards an Outstanding Contribution to

Education Award and an Outstanding Alumnus/a Award at its scholarship banquet. These awards are designed to highlight the achievements of a fellow Phi Beta Kappan and to celebrate others in the community who share our commitment to educational excellence. Past honorees include President George and Mrs. Barbara Bush, Dr. Denton Cooley, Dr. James Willerson, the Hon. Lloyd M. Bentsen, Jr., Dr. John Mendelsohn and Mrs. Leslie Blanton.

The success of this program is built upon the diligent work of two key groups. First, more than 50 members of the Scholarship Reading Committee who, drawn from the association's over 500 members, read the student applications and help choose the one student from each school who epitomizes the committee's selection goals. These goals focus on academic merit, exceptional talents (such as musical or athletic talent), community service and other intangible factors, such as success over adversity. The dedication of the scholarship committee members, many of whom return year after year, is easy to explain. Reading the student applications is both a humbling and inspiring task. The achievements of many of the applicants are truly phenomenal, fostering hope and confidence in each successive group of young scholars.

The selection process is never easy. Some of the student essays strongly stir emotions. One successful application was from a young woman who arrived in Houston in 9th grade. Speaking no English and with a poor academic background, she was determined to become her high school's valedictorian. Not only did she succeed, but, as her guidance counselor noted, she did it on her

own without family support. The scholarship money was crucial to her ability to attend college.

The second pillar of the program's success is the generosity of the Houston business and philanthropic community and association members. Through many years of diligent fund-raising, under the leadership of member Jenard Gross and our annual dinner chairs, the association has been able to fund each year's scholarships while building an endowment that now totals over \$2 million. The funding challenge increases every year as the number of scholarships increases in tandem with Houston's growth. The annual success of the association in meeting this challenge is a testament to our members' and the wider community's generosity and dedication to this program.

The success of our program can be counted not only broadly in the more than 1,500 scholarships that we have awarded to academically gifted students but also in the full cycle of achievement. Early in the history of our program, we awarded a scholarship to Hugh "Skip" McGee III, who subsequently excelled academically in college and was elected to Phi Beta Kappa. Returning to Houston, Skip has had a very successful career both in business and with our association, serving on the association's Board of Directors and as dinner chair for the scholarship program. Two years ago, the association honored Skip with its Outstanding Alumnus Award.

With such a potent combination of inspiring students, devoted alumni and generous donors, the Greater Houston Association is proud of its scholarship program and our society's commitment to educational excellence. ■