

EDUCATION

This year the South Florida HBCU Picnic handed out scholarships for the first time

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The first South Florida HBCU Picnic Scholars at Florida Memorial University. GREGORY REED, MFA

Jaden Gilliam, a recent graduate of Coral Reef Senior High school in Kendall, had attended the South Florida HBCU Picnic as a child. But this weekend he attended as one of the event's inaugural scholarship recipients.

"I didn't really think about the real implications of where I really was," said Gilliam, 18, referring to the annual gathering that brings together alumni and students of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) from South Florida. "But now,

coming back eight years later, I'm just really starting to understand the gravity of how important this HBCU picnic is.”

For that past eight years, thousands of alumni and students of Historically Black Colleges and Universities have flocked to Florida Memorial University, the only HBCU in South Florida, for the annual event.

The South Florida HBCU Picnic has become like the city's own homecoming, which for HBCUs is more than just a chance to watch football, but an opportunity to network and support alumni-owned businesses. Alumni that typically bicker about who has the best band or best football team put aside their loyalty to their alma maters to celebrate the shared culture of the institutions.



FMU alumni Rochelle Spann (1992) and Jason Holland (1988) take a selfie together during the 8th Annual South Florida HBCU Picnic at Florida Memorial University in Miami Gardens, on Saturday July 13, 2024. Pedro Portal pportal@miamiherald.com

At the heart of Florida Memorial's yard were tents representing some of the 107 HBCUs from a cross the nation as well as all nine of the Black Greek organizations. Attendees were greeted by the smell of food cooking on the grill and classic songs like "Atomic Dog" as they searched for their college's association to catch up with friends and meet new faces. Each college was called to the front of the stage where photographers took pictures as if it they were snapping family photos.

But this year during the picnic, eight students were awarded scholarships to help with their college expenses. The students were brought on stage to receive their awards, most of which totaled \$4,000 per student.

Kalimah Muhammad, 19, who couldn't attend the event because she's currently at an internship in Washington, DC, sent her dad to the stage on her behalf, but was surprised to find out she'd won the larger scholarship totaling \$6,000.

"Listen, you know... it's been a climb," said Muhammad, a rising junior studying Biology at Howard University. Every year, Howard has raised tuition, she said, so when her dad told her about extra funds, she was beyond grateful.

Muhammad, a Liberty City native, hopes that the scholarship and the picnic continue to inspire kids from her neighborhood to remain limitless and explore Black colleges outside of Florida.

"This scholarship really plays a major part in me being able to stay at Howard," she said.

Matthew Pigatt, [former mayor of Opa-locka](#) and one of the founders of the picnic, said this was the goal all along. When he and co-founders Melody Miller and Josh Jones first came together to start the picnic eight years ago, the goal wasn't just to throw a party but to actually build a community of HBCU students and alumni here in South Florida.

When the founders realized the picnic was nearly as popular as some colleges' homecomings, they knew the picnic needed to be more than just a gathering.

"We want to leverage all these thousands of people that attend to become one of the largest fundraisers for students from South Florida going to HBCUs nationwide," said Pigatt.

Pigatt, 37, who also created a Facebook group to share information about scholarships for Black college students, said he remembers having to hustle for scholarships to stay in his alma mater Morehouse College in Atlanta.



Oliver Spicer, FMU alumni and member of Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc. grills some burgers during the 8th Annual South Florida HBCU Picnic. Pedro Portal pportal@miamiherald.com

A Morehouse man he met in high school encouraged him to attend a Black college, but Pigatt was placed on academic probation because of his low GPA in high school. The work he did hustling for scholarships made him the man he is today, he said. And helping nurture other scholars is the best way to pay it forward.

Mia Hanfield, 20, a Booker T. Washington Senior High grad and a third year biology student at Tennessee State University who received a scholarship, said the attendees of the picnic constantly congratulated her, asking what they can do to make sure her story doesn't end here.

“It wasn't just people from my institution, alumni of my institution, congratulating me,” said Hanfield.

While Hanfield loves the cultural aspect of the picnic, she said she wants people to realize Black colleges are more than just culture, but the foundation of many thriving Black professionals in her own community.

No matter where she is, she said she'll always come back for the picnic here in South Florida.

“At the end of the day it's just so amazing to see all of these Black professionals, or aspiring professionals just connect by the idea that we were chosen by these HBCUs,” she said.

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