

TAR HEEL PEOPLE

A Purpose-Driven Life

John Crawford's quest to find his life's mission led to the creation of the Charlotte Housing Authority Scholarship Fund, which has helped hundreds of students pay for college.

BY ROSIE MOLINARY

John Crawford was trying to find his purpose. For years, as the Charlotte Housing Authority's director of youth services, he drove Charlotte's streets, going from one public housing complex to the next, and the same question always occupied his thoughts: "Lord, what do you want me to do?" It was an interesting question for a man who

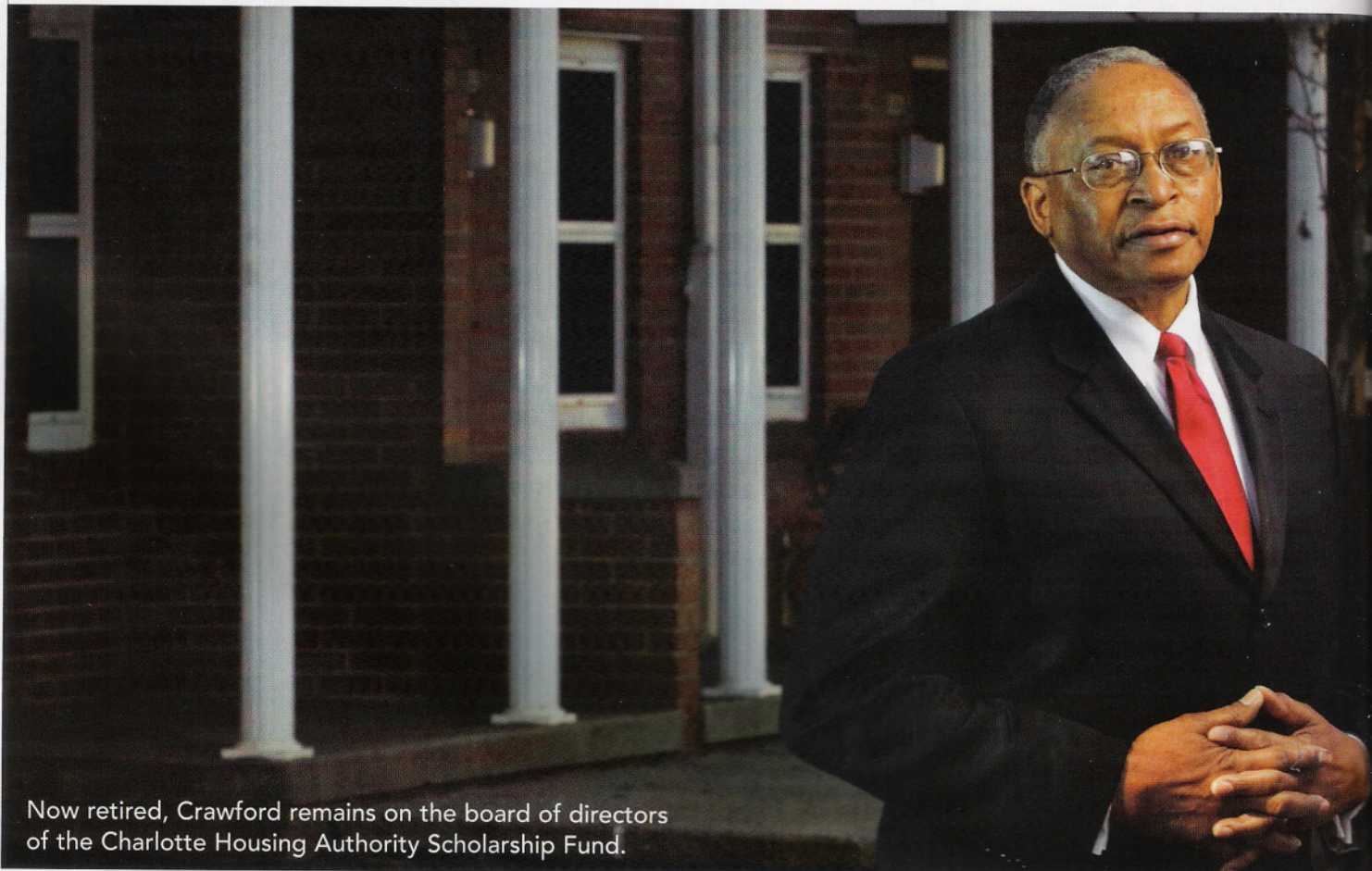
was already doing so much for so many others.

A former teacher and basketball coach, Crawford went to work for the Charlotte Housing Authority as the director of community services in 1970. While he worked with families and seniors, his heart was always with the children who lived in the housing complexes. So it was only natural

that after several years on the job, Crawford created a new program that prioritized youth. As the director of youth services, Crawford's focus was on education.

"The only way that these children had a chance to be successful in life was to get an education. We had a real truancy problem," he recalls. "I worked from 1977 to 1982 to really get kids in public housing going to school. We had schools coming to the community to meet with the children's parents. We opened learning centers in our 10 largest communities, and we had teachers come a couple days a week for tutoring."

His efforts made a difference. Piedmont Courts, the complex with the worst truancy problem, had its rate drop



Now retired, Crawford remains on the board of directors of the Charlotte Housing Authority Scholarship Fund.

from 25 percent to six percent in one year. But Crawford still folded his tall frame into his car each night after work with the same question lingering. What was he meant to do with his life?

Funding the future

His answer came in the form of a question. In 1982, one of the students that Crawford had worked with through his youth services program called him. He was \$300 short of making it back to college for the next semester, and he needed help finding the money. Could Crawford help him? Crawford found the money, and the young man returned to college and soon graduated with a 3.9 grade point average.

"Here I had been wrestling with what the Lord wanted me to do, but then I was driving up South Tryon Street one day, and a voice spoke to me as clear as day that said, 'I want you to keep doing what you are doing,'" says Crawford of his mission to find the resources to send that young man back to school. With his question answered and his purpose identified, Crawford set out to create a scholarship program for public housing students.

After establishing a partnership with the Foundation for the Carolinas, Crawford hosted a community breakfast with 100 people present.

"I asked the folks there to help me raise \$50,000. We raised \$64,000," he says. "The fall of 1983, we sent 16 kids to college. The next year, we continued to have our little breakfast, and we raised \$89,000. Our third year, we raised \$117,000 and the next year \$165,000," recalls Crawford. "I didn't know how we would get there because that first check we received was for \$5, but we have gone on from that to a check for \$350,000."

Once money was coming in, Crawford had to ensure he had students ready for college.

"I had to grab kids ... and yank them in because they didn't realize this was for

them," he says. "The greatest challenge was to get the kids to realize that they could go to college and to get the parents to understand that their children can go to college. But they began to see that they could do it, and they began to tell other kids. After about five years, the numbers started to grow well into the 20s and 30s."

Currently, the Charlotte Housing Authority Scholarship Fund (CHASF) supports 85 college students and has sent at least 420 on to higher education since 1983. The program continues its annual fund-raising breakfast and also hosts an awards ceremony each summer for scholarship recipients.

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"One of the highlights has been when parents come to

Awards Day to see their child get a scholarship or graduate from college. It has been Mama all those years that made a difference in the lives of those kids, and, although they didn't have the money, they wanted this for their children. This scholarship fund makes it possible. There is not a dry eye in the place," says Crawford with a smile of satisfaction as he notes the graduates who have gone on to pursue their master's degrees, become doctors, and even work at the Pentagon.

Full circle

Recently, the board of directors

launched an endowment campaign to raise \$4 million so that the fund can send 100 students a year to college in perpetuity. The first executive director was hired to oversee fund-raising, board management, and program development in the fall of 2006, and Crawford is especially proud of the new hire. Ohmar Land, an Olympic High School graduate, received a scholarship from the CHASF to attend Appalachian State University (ASU).

Land recalls the importance of the program in preparing him for college.

"Throughout high school, they had different enrichment workshops for us to attend," he says. "Those workshops



Crawford's vision is shared by Ohmar Land, who benefited from CHASF as a student and is now the program's executive director.

were about life enhancement, financial management, and an overall comprehensive approach to making us well-rounded individuals and citizens. Overall, they were about using education as a tool to make things happen."

After Land graduated from ASU, he returned to Charlotte and promptly volunteered with CHASF. It was only natural for him to apply for the executive director position when it was created several years later.

"What better way is there for me to give back to my community than to specifically help the organizations and

people that gave to me?" asks Land, who has a master's degree in business administration and has begun course work for a doctorate in management and organizational leadership.

"My vision is John Crawford's vision — to see as many youth in our community attend college who could not otherwise because of their financial or socioeconomic status in our society," says Land. "He doesn't accept 'no' as an answer. His faith and his belief in the youth and their abilities is the greatest thing. ... I am honored to personify this scholarship, to show that you can come from a low-income home or public housing background and go to school."

Retired since 1989, Crawford has remained on the board of directors, and he is thrilled to have someone with Land's perseverance and experience as the first executive director.

"He is such a bright young man. ... I was just elated when we selected him because I knew that he had the same passion and compassion that I had," says Crawford.

Life's work


Today, the program still works hard at preparing low-income students for college so that they can take advantage of this scholarship opportunity. With public housing as it once was disappearing, students who live in Charlotte's Section Eight subsidized housing also qualify for the scholarship program.

"What we are trying to do now is get kids involved by ninth grade so that we can monitor them and get them better prepared. In their senior year, we help them go through the college application process and then the scholarship application process," explains Crawford.

Once they receive a scholarship that can range from \$500 to \$3,400 a year, depending on the institution, students can reapply yearly as long as they maintain a 2.0 grade point average in their program.

Meanwhile, Crawford goes through his days with a sense of satisfaction that only comes from truly living one's purpose. He is recognized in local restaurants by students who profusely

thank him for the opportunity he gave them and receives unexpected calls at his home.

"This has become my life's work," he says. "Once I realized I had to do it, I have never been bothered with questioning since. It just warms my heart to see the kids do well and to live in a community where people are so giving and so responsive to the needs of others." 

Rosie Molinary lives in Davidson.

to know more

For more information about the Charlotte Housing Authority Scholarship Fund, its scholarships, and its students, visit www.chasf.com, or write to:

Charlotte Housing Authority
Scholarship Fund
c/o Foundation for The Carolinas
217 South Tryon Street
Charlotte, N.C. 28202



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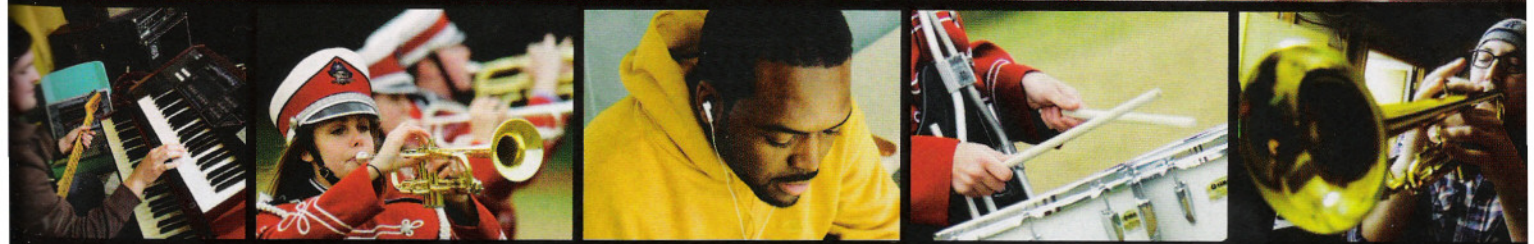
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