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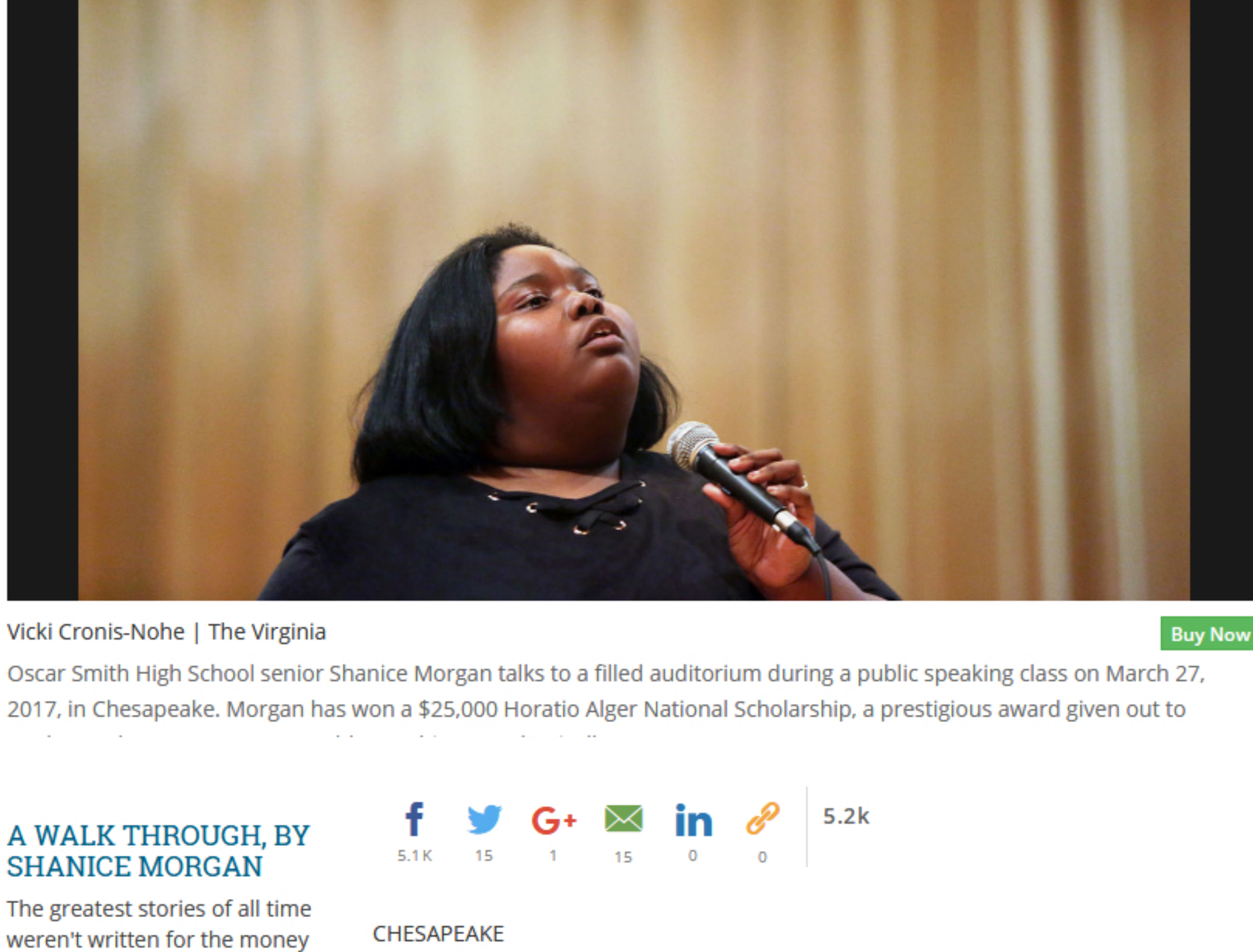


PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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Out of "hell": Oscar Smith High School senior's journey to a prestigious \$25K scholarship

By Vicki Cronis-Nohe
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Vicki Cronis-Nohe | The Virginia

Oscar Smith High School senior Shanice Morgan talks to a filled auditorium during a public speaking class on March 27, 2017, in Chesapeake. Morgan has won a \$25,000 Horatio Alger National Scholarship, a prestigious award given out to...

A WALK THROUGH, BY SHANICE MORGAN

The greatest stories of all time weren't written for the money or glory

It wasn't even about the context of the story

What really mattered at the end of the day was how one felt after the journey

The journey

Where I'm from we don't take journeys

We're lucky if our homes were even sturdy

Because when the winds blew at night and the house shook

There were no second chances

The wind had already took

Finally have time to take second glances

We did pretty well considering

And when people ask how

There's no need in lyin' and romancin'

The story wasn't great

Yet it made for great entertainment

Who doesn't like to see you be filled with pain and hatred?

But that's not why I'm here

I'm here to give you some words of advice if you got time my dear

If it causes you fear then pursue it

Never let the negative comments get to you

There's no one who's been through

What you've been through

Because at the end of the day the only person ya gotta please is you

Call me later on and tell me how the journey felt

I hope to see you at the end one day myself

CHESAPEAKE

Throughout high school, Shanice Morgan has gone from sleeping on a couch in a cramped house to living in a hotel where there were drugs and prostitutes and she could often hear neighbors having sex.

Despite her circumstances, the 18-year-old has thrived. She has joined clubs, maintained a grade-point average around 3.4, and volunteered extensively. She is set to graduate in June and plans to attend Roanoke College.

"Sometimes, you have to be really strong," she said in a recent interview at Oscar Smith.

Her efforts have not gone unnoticed.

She recently won a \$25,000 Horatio Alger scholarship, an honor given annually to students who achieve academic success after overcoming insurmountable obstacles.

The Horatio Alger Association of Distinguished Americans, a nonprofit organization that awards the scholarships, gets thousands of applications from students who come from households with an average yearly income of \$12,775. This year, it selected 116 winners – only two from Virginia.

For Shanice, the money will help her attain her dream of producing plays or movies.

Shanice's early life was far from perfect. Her mother left her father when she was young. Her maternal grandfather – whom she considered her best friend – died from an aneurysm when she was 10. When she was 13, Shanice lost her grandmother to cancer.

Through most of her early years in school, she lived in one home where she was surrounded by relatives. She attended private elementary schools before going to Oscar Smith Middle.

Shortly after she turned 14, her mother and stepfather split up. She stayed with her mother in the home her grandmother owned before she died. Shanice slept on a couch. Her uncle and two other adults also lived there – five people crammed in a two-bedroom house.

The upstairs shower leaked. Water would drip to the bottom floor.

She still excelled at school. She joined a variety of clubs, from French to drama.

In class, she was fearless.

Katie Cirilli taught her freshman English class. One day, Cirilli was trying to coax her students to share personal work.

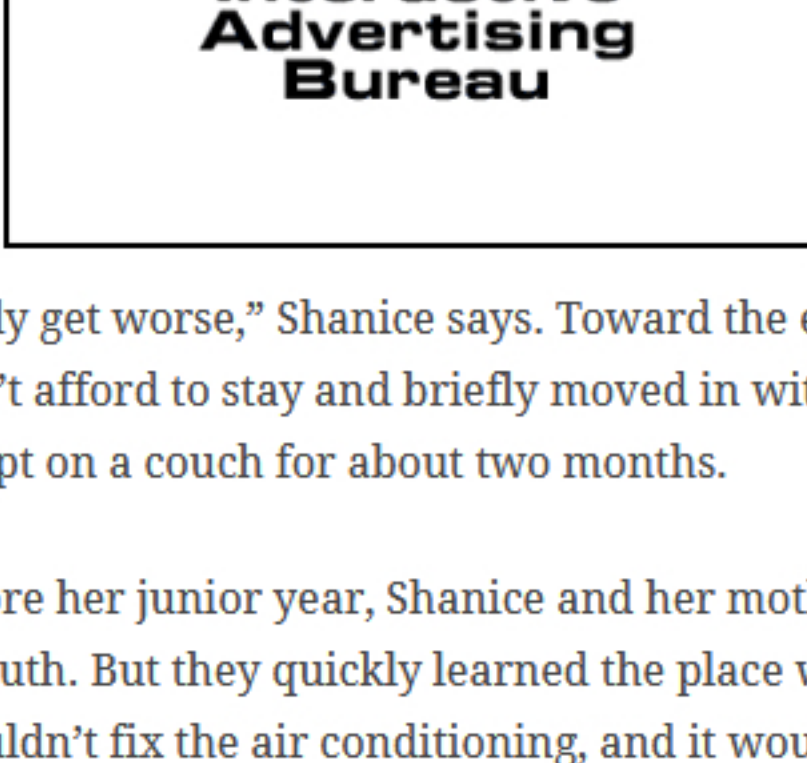
Shanice stood right up, went to the front of the room and started reading.

"She never makes excuses for herself," Cirilli said.

Shanice's take on it?

"If it doesn't cause you fear, you are probably doing it a little too small," she said.

Shortly before Shanice started her sophomore year, she and her mother moved into a homeless shelter – a place she liked because she was around friends her own age.



But "things usually get worse," Shanice says. Toward the end of that school year, they couldn't afford to stay and briefly moved in with an aunt. Shanice again slept on a couch for about two months.

The summer before her junior year, Shanice and her mother found a house in Portsmouth. But they quickly learned the house was in bad shape. The landlord wouldn't fix the air conditioning, and it would get so hot that at times the walls oozed water, she said. They had to move again.

They went to live with Shanice's biological father. Her parents were still bickering. But "desperate times call for desperate measures," Shanice says.

It was during Shanice's junior year that she got to know Lynne Savoy, Oscar Smith's graduation coach. Shanice already was loading up on advanced-placement classes and building a resume that reflected her participation in clubs and volunteer work. She quickly got on the ball in picking colleges and searching for scholarships.

Shanice believed that by working hard, "life will get better."

Savoy was impressed at the young student's dedication and perseverance in the face of adversity.

"It's not the norm to go through all of that and still be self-motivated," Savoy said.

Shanice and her mother finally moved away from her father into another hotel. Shanice could hear neighbors having sex all the time, it seemed, and she could see drugs and prostitutes.

"Hotel hell," she called the place.

Through all her turmoil, Shanice stayed active in the drama club and became president of a school literary magazine. She also volunteered, serving as a mentor for freshman students as well as an election page for the city and Hampton Roads Pridefest.

"She's tenacious," Savoy said.

A few weeks ago, Horatio Alger held a celebration in Washington. Shanice got to take a photo with actor Tom Selleck, a member of the organization. Among the other big names who attended were Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, former Secretary of State Colin Powell and NFL Hall of Famer John Elway.

Two more good things happened about that time. Shanice turned 18, and she and her mother moved into a new apartment.

"This year has been amazing," she said.

Savoy and Cirilli think Shanice's future is bright. Cirilli said she maintains an even keel, which will serve her well.

"I can't wait to see what she does next," Savoy said.

Shanice was accepted into four schools and picked Roanoke because she found its offerings best fit her dream of producing plays or movies.

She plans to graduate with two majors, creative writing and theater arts, with a concentration in film studies.

"There's not a person here who can stop me," she said.

In about four months, she will head west, where residence halls offer digital cable and Wi-Fi in all rooms, lounge space and kitchens.

For Shanice, a new beginning.

Mike Connors. 757-222-5217.

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Mike Connors Mike Connors is an education reporter for The Virginian-Pilot and has worked at The Pilot since 2006.

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Pilot Reader Rank 0 Congratulations on your success. You have worked hard and I bet you will continue to be successful. You proved beyond any doubt you can beat adversity. You are a role model for both the young and the old. Thank you for sharing your story

Raymond Russell, Va Beach, VA Rank 0 VERIFIED Good for her. Congratulations on your hard work and fortitude.

Kathy Hoggard Dodge Rank 0 3 days ago What a remarkable young woman. Wishing her much success in all she does. Keep doing it big!

Juliette Wallace Rank 0 Also, don't listen to what people tell you about "good" and "bad" majors... you will be successful regardless of what you select, trust me.

mike carter Rank 0 @juliette wallace - Good or bad majors.... If I remember correctly we were talking last week about all the people who attended "For Profit Colleges" just to get worthless degrees and now they can't find a job in that field and not they want their debt wipe away by the government....

Mike Mike Rank 0 Good on you kid , it sucks you had such a tough life so far . I wish you well. Keep doing what your doing because you obviously know the formula.

mike carter Rank 0 Awesome for this young lady..... I do hope she changes her degree path to were she can land a good job.....

Shanice Morgan Rank 0 @mike carter aw I thank you for your concern even though I won't change my degree path it fills my heart completely to know that you care so much

Charles R Rhodes, Portsmouth, VA Rank 0 VERIFIED @mike carter She can land a good career if her writing is creative and original. In the end she'll have a BA with a strong concentration in writing and English. If her dreams detour a little many companies will hire her because of her ability to write. I wish her dream comes true, but she has chosen to go to college. She is already ahead in the game. Good job, Shanice.



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