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Battling tough odds, Hub student remains committed to education

Posted by Matt Rocheleau March 28, 2011 01:39 PM

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(Courtesy: Sun Life)

Mattaya Fitts was surprised with her college grant from Sun Life Financial several months ago. Holding the oversized check From left to right: Artist's for Humanity Executive Director, Susan Rodgerson; Mattaya Fitts; Sun Life Financial Regional Vice President, Dana Mancini. They are surrounded by the Cirque du Soleil entertainment team.

By Matt Rocheleau, Town Correspondent

Mattaya Fitts has had plenty of excuses to quit school.

She grew up in a Dorchester housing project known for its violence. Many of those she once called friends or classmates skipped school regularly, dropped out, got involved with gangs, drugs, or became pregnant at a young age.

Her father, paralyzed along his entire left side from an incident before she was born, stays at home and needs special care. Her mother, who moved to the United States from Cambodia shortly after the late 1970s genocide there, has always worked long hours, including weekends, struggling to pay the five-member family's bills. Since age 14, Mattaya has regularly held jobs, in between her studies and looking after her younger twin siblings, in order to help fund her own expenses and chip in to help her family out when she can.

Now, the 19-year-old college freshman is on track to become the first in her

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family to earn a degree. And for defying at-times seemingly insurmountable odds to continue her education, Mattaya was one of three Boston-area high school seniors, and one of 22 across seven cities nationally, [recently honored](#) through a private company's annual scholarship program.

"I've always been very dedicated to school," said Fitts in between running errands that included picking up her father's medication. "I really just wanted to get out and get away," from the dead-end lifestyle she'd watched many others around her fall into.

"I remember times it was really difficult and busy at home, and I'd be really quiet when I was in school. I woke up every day, and a lot of times I didn't really want to go to school."

There were times she would "slack off." But, ultimately, "I decided I didn't want to keep living like this," she said.

Fitts received a one-time \$5,000 scholarship through the Sun Life "[Rising Star Awards](#)" program established last year that recognizes high school seniors "who have overcome the odds and remained committed to furthering their education." The award, along with financial aid, is helping to pay for her studies in fashion design at the Massachusetts College of Art and Design.

While she would have been able to afford MassArt without the scholarship money, it was a major financial boost. And, for a teen who was afraid she wouldn't be accepted to any of the dozen schools she applied to as a senior at Boston Latin Academy, it was a much-welcomed surprise.

"I was having an OK summer, and when I found out, I was like 'wow, this is awesome,'" Fitts said.

She lived in the [Franklin Hill housing project](#) before her family moved to Brighton about four years ago. Fitts had long aspired to study in New York City, and is still considering moving there after college. But, in retrospect, she's glad her dorm is just a short T ride away from home.

"I'm happy [at MassArt]. Now that I've been through this year, being in New York would've been tough," she said. "Being close to my family has been very helpful."

Around 30 years ago, her father Emerson Fitts, a Newton native, was mugged while walking down a Boston street, she said. He was wearing jewelry that he refused to hand over. When he started to run away, a brick was thrown and struck him in the head, his daughter said.

She said her dad, paralyzed on his entire left side as a result of the attack, had been told by doctors he may never be able to walk or talk again. He too defied odds, and has done both. However, his condition has left him unable to work and susceptible to falls and other injuries. Broken legs, arms and most recently a hip, have meant frequent hospital visits and the need of canes and, currently, a wheel chair to get around.

"Things we take for granted, he's not able to do," Mattaya said, listing how her dad needs help with everyday tasks such as preparing meals, making coffee and showering.

Her now 51-year-old mother, Sipa Saing, moved here from Cambodia when she was in her 20s, without having completed high school and shortly after the Khmer Rouge was taken out of power in 1979, Fitts said. During the regime's four-year rule over the Southeast Asian country, the Khmer Rouge's

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policies, which included forced labor, executions, starvation, and torture, led to the [death of an estimated 1.4 million Cambodians](#).

Despite their own challenges, "My parents have always been very supportive," Mattaya said. "They definitely wanted to do more in their lives and weren't able to, and I don't want that to happen to me."

As their big sister, she continues to push her 16-year-old twin siblings – sister Sackona and brother Phocian – to stay committed to their education.

What helped Mattaya stay focused was her passion for the arts.

Through the South Boston-based [Artists for Humanity](#) (AFH), she found a haven to explore and develop her creative talents in photography, painting and fashion.

The two-decade-old nonprofit nominated Fitts for the scholarship through Sun Life. The organization received a \$50,000 grant of its own from the [financial services company](#). The money will go toward AFH's "apprenticeship and leadership program that employs underserved urban teens," partnering youth "in small groups with professional artist mentors to create, market and sell fine art and design," said an announcement from Sun Life.

Fitts also finds time to volunteer at [The Dance Complex](#) in Cambridge and at the [Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals](#) headquarters in Jamaica Plain. As a junior in high school, she went on a three-week volunteer trip working with poor communities in South Africa's legislative capital, Cape Town.

"There are definitely times I look back and I'm surprised," she said of her academic and extracurricular journey thus far. "I'm glad. I'm glad I'm in college and I'll do something with my life."

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