Visionary
Charting a Course for Excellence

Margaret and Jack GUISTWHITE
Set an Example for a New Generation

PHI THETA KAPPA®
International Honor Society of the Two-Year College
CONTENTS

Charting a Course for Excellence ................................................................. 1
Students Helping Students – An Open Letter from New Orleans ....................... 2
Florida Chapter Leads Operation Green Efforts .............................................. 4
Happy Birthday – Project Graduation Turns Five ............................................. 6
Guistwhites Set an Example of Excellence for a New Generation ....................... 8
Transfer Scholarship Recipient Seeks Career in the Arts ................................ 10
International President Finds Success at Community College ......................... 12
All-USA First Team Member Dreams of Ending World Poverty ......................... 14
Leader of Promise Learns Leadership Begins at Home .................................. 16
Coca-Cola Scholar Juggles Education, Work and Volunteerism ....................... 18
Jack Kent Cooke Scholar Discovers Life Through Literature, Travel ................ 20
Nota Bene Scholarship Winner Enjoys a Second Chance .................................. 22
Distinguished Alumna Navigates Course from Refugee to Pulitzer Prize ............ 24
Donors and Visionaries ............................................................................. 26
Giving Opportunities .............................................................................. 28

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Editor: Melissa Mayer
Contributing Editors: Nancy Rieves, Nell Ewing
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On the Cover: Margaret and Jack Guistwhite, seated, with Phi Theta Kappa alumni (from left) Perla Alzate, Angelica “Angel” Bruno and Matthugh Bennett, on the campus of Florida Atlantic University. Photo by Mardie Banks

The purpose of Phi Theta Kappa shall be to recognize and encourage scholarship among two-year college students. To achieve this purpose, Phi Theta Kappa shall provide opportunity for the development of leadership and service, for an intellectual climate for exchange of ideas and ideals, for lively fellowship for scholars, and for stimulation of interest in continuing academic excellence.

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“IT IS NOT FROM OURSELVES THAT WE LEARN TO BE BETTER THAN WE ARE.”

Wendell Berry
Poet and Author

Charting a Course for Excellence

In Phi Theta Kappa, we share a passion for excellence in order to become better. Just as one spends a lifetime searching for the meaning of life through the pursuit of truths, the quest for excellence is a pursuit that knows no final destination. Value is found in the journey itself.

While our members vary in age and circumstance – some have just finished high school and others are retraining for second careers – they all share the common quest of pursuing excellence. We seek to help them chart a course for excellence that will guide them throughout their lives.

In this issue of Visionary, you will read about inspiring examples of those in our Phi Theta Kappa family whose individual pursuits of excellence not only changed their own lives, but profoundly impacted the lives of others – individuals like Dr. Jack Guistwhite, who planted the seed that resulted in hundreds of four-year colleges designating transfer scholarships for thousands of Phi Theta Kappa members. You will read about Phi Theta Kappa’s 2006 Distinguished Alumna, Mirta Ojito, who came to the United States during the Mariel Boatlift from Cuba. Ojito, one of the first-ever recipients of a Phi Theta Kappa transfer scholarship, later became a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist. You will learn how Phi Theta Kappa members as well as chapters utilized international Society programs to transform their local communities while overcoming tremendous personal challenges.

These remarkable souls have come to the realization that life is more meaningful when they are engaged in the pursuit of excellence. All these individuals have learned that life is fluid, filled with events and circumstances that demand decisions about the unfamiliar. Excellence, for them, serves as a reliable compass point to guide in the selection of new paths to walk and stations to pass through.

By pursuing excellence and engaging in Phi Theta Kappa programs, our members are preparing for lives as scholars. What should be the life of a scholar? Perhaps Theodore Roosevelt says it best, “…scholarship is of worth chiefly when it is productive, when the scholar not merely receives or acquires, but gives.” Our aim is to help Phi Theta Kappa members prepare to make informed decisions about their lives, which ultimately impact those they serve.

Thus, the worth of education and the work of Phi Theta Kappa lie in preparing individuals to make informed decisions about paths to choose. It is also our responsibility as an organization to increase the number of paths from which our students may choose.

~ Phi Theta Kappa Executive Director Rod A. Risley
“Our chapter has really embraced the service hallmark of Phi Theta Kappa as our community needs us and we want to be a part of New Orleans’ rebirth.”

Emily Cospar

SUPPORT LOCAL CHAPTERS AND REGIONS

Phi Theta Kappa chapters are making a difference in communities all around the world, and they need your help! For more information on how you can support local chapters and regions, contact Director of Institutional Advancement Dr. Nancy Rieves at 1.800.946.9995, ext. 3537, or nancy.rieves@ptk.org.

Delgado students help with campus cleanup and remove debris left by Hurricane Katrina.
An Open Letter from Delgado Community College in New Orleans

To the many students across the world who contributed to the Phi Theta Kappa Students Helping Students Hurricane Katrina Relief effort, your generosity and support for Delgado Community College in New Orleans is greatly appreciated. Because of you, many students were given much-needed help in the face of seemingly insurmountable difficulties.

It is difficult to fathom what our city was like in the days, weeks, and months following Hurricane Katrina. Even those of us who live here have a hard time comprehending the tragedy that took so many lives and left our city in shambles. But the one constant during this entire event has been the kindness of so many people from around this country and the world. We still have a long way to go, but our difficult journey is made a bit more palatable knowing that so many people have us in their hearts. For this, our college is very grateful.

When the hurricane devastated our city and scattered us across the country, Charlie Bellone, then Delgado’s chapter advisor, and his assistant, Kim Russell, began to contact chapter members and see what kind of assistance they might need. At this time, there was still little information available about our college as the city was still on lockdown, phone service was non-existent, and transportation difficult.

Unfortunately, our college was devastated by the storm and we would not return until January 2006. We came back to a much different campus, a campus that sat in floodwaters for about three weeks. One of the most heartbreaking sights was the pile of soggy books stacked outside of the library. We lost our Phi Theta Kappa office and with it over 30 years of records, awards, and memories. We lost our student services building that housed financial aid, the registrar, and a math and science high school. We lost our math building and a state-of-the-art computer lab. We lost offices and books and years of work. We lost students and faculty members and for a brief while, we lost a sense of home.

All the while, Charlie and Kim were working hard to keep our chapter alive. Sadly, for the Delgado community and our chapter, the hurricane was only the beginning of our tragedies. On Christmas Eve, 2005, Charlie Bellone died of a massive heart attack. I cannot describe to you what a sense of loss we all felt upon hearing this news. Charlie embraced the mission of Phi Theta Kappa and encouraged his students (and his colleagues) to be the best they could be. He had spent seven years encouraging, cajoling, pushing, supporting, and loving his students as their Phi Theta Kappa advisor. His colleagues and his students were devastated. It was another loss after so many others.

I had worked closely with Charlie over the years and knew about Phi Theta Kappa and truly believed in all that it offered students. I volunteered to be the advisor and have spent a year learning my way with Kim Russell’s help. It has not always been easy, especially the Spring 2006 semester. We had no office phones until the summer; the mail was still not functioning regularly; and our student population had decreased by about 30 percent. A sense of confusion and sadness still permeated our city and our college and our students’ lives, but Kim and I worked hard to keep our chapter going.

We participated in our Campus Cleanup Day where more than 100 faculty, staff, and students, including about 20 Phi Theta Kappa members, came to campus on a Saturday morning to help pick up trash, to weed the overgrown beds, and plant flowers. This was a psychological boost for all of us – in the midst of the construction and devastation, our campus was once again sparkling.

We also inducted 30 new members – nothing to compare with our last induction before the storm, when 150 eligible students accepted membership – but to us this was a renaissance. We celebrated our students’ accomplishments in the face of tremendous adversity.

Each semester is easier and our chapter slowly, but surely, is rebounding, like our city.

None of us will ever forget all that we lost on August 29, 2005, but we will always be honored to have worked with students who have overcome so much. It is an honor to be affiliated with an organization like Phi Theta Kappa. Delgado Community College cannot thank you enough for all of your support this last year.

~ Emily Cosper, Advisor, Delgado Community College
Phi Theta Kappa promotes student development through opportunities for service and civic engagement. Partnering with an international agency in a two-year service program allows the Society to focus its army of volunteers and considerable information resources toward a unified goal. The current International Service Program is Operation Green: Improving Our Communities, a partnership with Keep America Beautiful and its global affiliates in the United Kingdom and around the world.

Florida Chapter Leads Operation Green Efforts

On a sunny Florida day in late 2006, members of Phi Theta Kappa at Valencia Community College’s West Campus gathered with other Keep America Beautiful volunteers to construct a new neighborhood park and playground.

The chapter’s work with the Society’s 2006-2008 International Service Program, Operation Green: Improving Our Communities, put them in the spotlight during 2006.

The chapter has been so successful working with “Operation Green” initiatives that Phi Theta Kappa’s International Service Program partner, Keep America Beautiful, invited chapter president Kerry Anderson to share information about their projects during the organization’s 2006 National Conference held December 6-9 in Orlando.

Following Phi Theta Kappa’s 2006 International Convention, where the “Operation Green” program was launched, Anderson attended a meeting with Jane Ferry, the Regional Keep America Beautiful Coordinator. During the meeting the group put together four main areas of concentration for Florida, including:

- **Graffiti Removal** - Ferry said people often report graffiti to her office, but she lacks the resources to remove it. Valencia’s Phi Theta Kappa members are working with the local chapter of Keep America Beautiful and the Orlando Mayor’s office to start a graffiti removal program. Plans are to develop a volunteer team drawn from all four Valencia campus chapters, who will rotate the monthly duty of removing any graffiti that has been reported to Keep America Beautiful.

- **10,000 Trees** - While the Phi Theta Kappa International Officers challenged members to plant 2,007 trees by the 2007 International Convention, the Valencia chapter also decided to work toward a tree-planting goal specific to Florida. The “Plant 10,000 Trees” campaign was developed after four hurricanes hit Florida and the Gulf Coast states in 2004. Florida alone lost an estimated 20,000 trees that summer, and this campaign is an effort to combat that loss.

- **Adopt a Stop** - The chapter is working with the local public bus system to adopt at least one and possibly two bus stations near the school campus. Members will be cleaning up the area and making sure the bus stops are free of graffiti and litter.

- **Recycling** – The chapter has also started a used cellular phone and ink cartridge drive on campus. Used cartridges are donated to Habitat For Humanity to help rebuild homes in the hurricane-devastated Gulf Coast area.

The heavy community involvement and participation in regional and international programs has paid off. In 2006 the Valencia chapter’s honors included election as Florida Executive Chapter, being named Florida’s Most Distinguished Chapter and winning a Beta Alpha Continued Excellence Hallmark Award at the Society’s International Convention in Seattle, Washington.

So what’s the secret to their “Operation Green” accomplishments and achievements as a chapter?

“Excellence is attained not necessarily from planning or just ‘happenstance’. It is often achieved by a great group of people who have a common idea, goal, or plan and are willing to work together to attain it,” said Laura Gaylor, the chapter’s Senator of Finance.
“We, as a chapter, do our best to have a goal – whether it is to raise money or show by example how we can help our community and in doing so the path we travel teaches us some of life’s greatest lessons.”

Laura Gayler  
Phi Theta Kappa Chapter Officer
Phi Theta Kappa’s Project Graduation will celebrate its fifth birthday as a Society-wide civic engagement initiative this year, but chapter members around the world will not be content with cakes and candles. Instead they will keep collecting the thousands of non-perishable food items and books to help stock local food pantries and literacy agencies, meeting needs in their own communities while commemorating one of the most important milestones in their lives.

THE FORD COLLEGE STUDENT PURCHASE PROGRAM has provided financial support as a sponsor of Project Graduation since 2003. Since Phi Theta Kappa adopted Project Graduation as a civic engagement initiative, the program has provided 307,666 food items and 252,567 books to needy persons around the world.

Members, graduates and their families pitch in to make Project Graduation a success.
Project Graduation was conceived in 1998 at Burlington County College in New Jersey, as an opportunity for graduates to give back to the community while celebrating their new beginnings inherent in commencement ceremonies. Graduates and commencement guests were asked to bring a can of food and a children’s book. The first food items collected for Project Graduation went to local food banks while the books were given to the America Reads Challenge, at that time Phi Theta Kappa’s International Service Program.

In 1999, Phi Theta Kappa chapters at Burlington County College and Delaware County Community College in Pennsylvania developed, coordinated, and promoted this program to Society chapters nationally. The Society assumed responsibility for the program three years later. Currently Project Graduation is among Phi Theta Kappa’s civic engagement initiatives.

In the program’s initial year as an international initiative, 283 chapters enrolled. In just one year that number more than doubled, and donations increased by 250 percent. In 2004, Project Graduation reached more than 500 communities and increased donations by 109 percent. By 2005, participation had expanded into 48 states, Canada, Germany, and Guam, and enterprising chapter members were beginning to collect donations at induction ceremonies, orientations and regional meetings in addition to graduations.

One of the founders of Project Graduation was the late Dr. Carole Gavin, longtime Phi Theta Kappa chapter advisor at Burlington County College. Dr. Gavin - whom BCC President Dr. Robert Messina called the most dedicated teacher he had observed during his 20 years at the college - lost a long battle with cancer in February 2007.

Dr. Gavin always credited chapter officers for Project Graduation’s initial success, including two who later became International Officers – 1999-2000 New England/Middle States Vice President Wade Hale and 2000-2001 International President Heidi White.

“This is an initiative that education is a privilege and hopefully use it in ways that make a difference in the world. Through our contributions on that final day at commencement, Project Graduation becomes a small reminder that by working together, we can make a difference,” White said.

“I’m thrilled to know that Project Graduation continues to gain momentum. It’s a project that has endless possibilities.”
The purpose of this merit-based program is to enhance Phi Theta Kappa members’ attainment of baccalaureate degrees and to recognize the scholarly achievements. Twenty qualifying students will receive scholarships of $5,000 each, for completion of baccalaureate degrees. To be eligible, a student must post a minimum 3.5 cumulative GPA and must graduate with an associate degree.

- In 2007 20 Guistwhite Scholars were selected.
- Guistwhite Scholarships are funded in part by the Society’s MBNA credit card program (now Bank of America).

For more information about how you may help fund the Guistwhite Scholars Program, or establish a scholarship program, contact Director of Institutional Advancement Dr. Nancy Rieves at 1.800.946.9995, ext. 3537, or nancy.rieves@ptk.org.

“"The journey of your life is very important and in thinking about the future, your destination is important as well. So many younger people don’t appear to have any goals, but Phi Theta Kappa members are different."

Margaret Guistwhite
Margaret and Jack Guistwhite still visit the campus of their beloved Florida Atlantic University, where the Phi Theta Kappa alumni members flock to see them. The Guistwhites are largely responsible for making it possible for them and for many other Phi Theta Kappa members to complete baccalaureate degrees – because more than 30 years ago, while an administrator at Florida Atlantic University, Dr. Jack Guistwhite established the first-ever transfer scholarship offered exclusively to a member of Phi Theta Kappa.

“I remember in the old days, Executive Director Rod Risley used to have me get up and present the Florida Atlantic scholarship at the International Convention, because it was the only one,” he said. “Afterward I would have all kinds of people ask how Florida Atlantic was able to do this. I would tell them, and things just grew from there."

Other four-year colleges and universities followed Florida Atlantic University’s lead, and today Phi Theta Kappa now boasts an ever-growing transfer scholarship partnership with more than 600 institutions of higher learning offering over $36 million in transfer scholarship to Society members.

“A Phi Theta Kappa transfer scholarship enabled me to continue my college education in Public Administration. The Phi Theta Kappa alumni chapter is also a great place to make friends and have a more meaningful college experience,” said FAU student Beth Higgins.

While Dr. Guistwhite originated the concept of the scholarship opportunity for Phi Theta Kappa members, he is quick to credit the role of his college administrators in making the scholarship happen.

“I never could have done it without the support of our college administrators,” he said. “And of course the support of administrators is crucial to scholarship development today.”

A native of New Cumberland, Pennsylvania, Dr. Guistwhite attended the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania. He moved to Florida in 1939 to work in a business owned by relatives, and in 1941 enrolled as a junior in the College of Business at the University of Florida. But fate intervened, and after the attack on Pearl Harbor he withdrew from the University and enlisted in the U.S. Army.

He graduated from the Transporation Corps Officer Candidate School as a 2nd Lieutenant, spent two years in the European Theatre and separated from active duty in 1946 with the rank of Captain. He continued in the reserve with a Mobilization Assignment in the Office of Transportation in the Pentagon until 1966 and retired with the rank of Lieutenant Colonel in 1977.

After the war he returned to the University of Florida, graduated in 1947 with a bachelor of science degree in business administration and joined the staff of the university registrar. In 1963 Dr. Guistwhite was invited to be a part of creating a new institution, Florida Atlantic University, which opened its doors in 1964.

“What it finally came down to was, how many chances do you get to be in on building something from the ground up?” Dr. Guistwhite said of the decision to move to Boca Raton and accept the new position. At FAU he also served as Community College Relations Officer, the first in the State University System, a position that put him in touch with community college students – Phi Theta Kappa members in particular. These contacts led him to establish the FAU/Phi Theta Kappa Scholarship Program, become the charter advisor of Alpha of Florida, one of the first Phi Theta Kappa university-based alumni chapters in the Society, and Florida’s first Alumni Regional Coordinator. He was also a member of Phi Theta Kappa’s National Alumni Council, a forerunner of the Alumni Advisory Council.

Dr. Guistwhite retired on December 31, 1982, after more than 35 years in the Florida State University System. Along the way he had earned master’s and doctoral degrees and garnered numerous campus and community honors. At the time of his retirement he was Director of Inter-Institutional Relations for FAU.

He was named an International Honorary Member of Phi Theta Kappa in 1975. Dr. Guistwhite remained active in Phi Theta Kappa until 1989, when he was named Alumni Regional Coordinator Emeritus at the International Convention in recognition of his years of service to the Society.

Phi Theta Kappa further honored the Guistwhites by naming the Guistwhite Scholar Program, which provides funds for baccalaureate studies, in their honor. The first class of Guistwhite Scholars was announced at the 1992 Phi Theta Kappa International Convention in Washington, D.C.

Currently Phi Theta Kappa selects 20 Guistwhite Scholars annually, who each receive $5,000 scholarships. Almost 300 Phi Theta Kappa members have received Guistwhite awards since the program’s inception.

The Guistwhites have given a deferred gift of $500,000 in the form of a life insurance policy to support the Guistwhite Scholar Program. Being able to help so many students achieve their educational goals has been an important part of Dr. Guistwhite’s life.

Dr. and Mrs. Guistwhite say that over the years they have been amazed as they read profiles of the students who have been selected as recipients of the scholarships carrying their name. They continue to enjoy receiving letters of thanks and occasionally meeting Guistwhite Scholar recipients.

“They enrolled at a community college, they got involved with Phi Theta Kappa and now they’re doing things for other people; they think of something other than themselves,” Dr. Guistwhite said.

“Margaret and I unfortunately never had any children, but we consider these Guistwhite Scholars from all over the country to be part of our family.”
Savannah College of Art and Design is a landmark in the historic town of Savannah, Georgia.

Keri Szymanski
Savannah College of Art and Design Transfer Scholarship Recipient

“Taking a chance at something new has led to paths I never knew existed. When charting a course I felt lost — yet it is in looking back that I now realize the direction was actually very clear.”

Keri Szymanski
Savannah College of Art and Design Transfer Scholarship Recipient

Transfer Scholarship Recipient Seeks Career in the Arts

$36 MILLION IN TRANSFER SCHOLARSHIPS OFFERED TO MEMBERS

• More than 600 four-year colleges and universities in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Canada and Great Britain, and five institutions with online degree programs offer designated scholarships to Phi Theta Kappa members.

• Presently, $36 million in scholarships is offered to Phi Theta Kappa members through this program.

• Phi Theta Kappa is currently developing a new web-based system to facilitate transfer planning as early as the first days of enrollment at the community college.

ARE YOU INTERESTED IN SUPPORTING SCHOLARSHIP OPPORTUNITIES FOR TRANSFER STUDENTS?

To obtain giving opportunities at Phi Theta Kappa contact Director of Institutional Advancement Dr. Nancy Rieves at 1.800.946.9995, ext. 3537, or nancy.rieves@ptk.org.
Phi Theta Kappa’s 2004-2005 International President Keri Szymanski finds herself playing many roles these days – both literally and figuratively - as a student at Savannah College of Art and Design, which provided her a generous transfer scholarship. She has alternated as an artist, sound designer and actress.

Since enrolling at SCAD in Fall 2005, Szymanski has acted in 11 local films, served as a stand-in for two professional shoots filmed in Savannah, and was the only student hired to work on the 2006 Savannah Film Festival. “As I am learning more, I am able to bring more to the table when booked on a project” she said. “I am frequently re-writing stories, working on sound and even producing some of the projects.”

Last year Szymanski also tried live theatre for the first time, when she landed a lead role in a play performed at the Savannah Actors Theatre.

To quote a reviewer, “Keri Szymanski, as Marie, is the clear focal point of the show, and her energy, humor and physical presence fill the intimate space.”

But for Szymanski, a lot of the fun associated with production comes behind the scenes.

She has changed her major to sound design with a film minor. She has worked on “Foley” sound design for a graduate animation project entitled *Cereal Killers*, a 20-minute cartoon.

“‘Foley’ is the term to describe finding all kinds of strange tools and props with which to create a sound to emulate what’s taking place on the screen – for example, walking on corn starch sounds more like walking on snow than the sound of actually recording someone walking on the snow,” said Szymanski.

Always fascinated by odd sounds, Szymanski remembers dropping lunch meat on the kitchen floor as a child – just to hear the distinctive noise.

“I have no doubt that Phi Theta Kappa prepared me not only to position myself to be this busy at SCAD but to handle, with a level of excellence and professionalism, every project of which I am a part. From time management to communication skills, to integrity to follow-through, I would not be able to succeed in those areas without the help and support of Phi Theta Kappa,” Szymanski said.

The year she served as an International Officer completely changed my life. Successfully completing that year, especially after a bit of a rocky start, I felt more accomplished than I have ever felt.”

Her Phi Theta Kappa experiences, as a chapter and regional officer prior to her election as International President, also gave her confidence in her future after graduation.

“I have no concerns about where I’ll end up or what I’ll be doing. I can work with a team or on my own. I get scared of new things, but do them anyway – all of this I learned in Phi Theta Kappa,” she said.

“Sometimes life moves so fast that one doesn’t have the time to look around and assess where they’ve been or where they currently are. Phi Theta Kappa taught me to assess and live in the process, not just the results.”

Szymanski said she chose SCAD partially because of her creative interests and partially because of the generous scholarship opportunities available to Phi Theta Kappa members there.

The college is particularly sensitive to the needs of transfer students, she said. Phi Theta Kappa helped her overcome “transfer trauma” also. “I was scared to death to move out of my comfort zone – being a non-traditional student with no art background, I didn’t think I’d be able to survive the art foundation classes.”

“But my Phi Theta Kappa training gave me the courage to walk into a new and intimidating situation knowing that I would be able to rise to the occasion, meet the challenge and bring something to the table that would make the experience positive.”

At the same time success hasn’t always come so easily for Szymanski, who suffers from a learning disability. “Fortunately Tompkins-Cortland Community College (in her home state of New York) was very supportive of my alternative methods of learning – they allowed me to start fresh and then proceeded to show me how to build a solid educational foundation for myself,” she said.

“SCAD is also extremely supportive. I have discovered that being learning disabled is pretty common among artists. At SCAD all of the professors are happy to help me get what I need.

“This is a challenge for me every day. I’m taking on new areas of study that are completely foreign to me. The craziest part is that I’ve never been happier,” Szymanski said. “I think I have always wanted excellence in my life. For most of my life, however, I just didn’t think I was capable of it. I didn’t realize how far I could really go until I was introduced to and then involved with Phi Theta Kappa. New skills came to me one by one, the same way we take classes.” Szymanski said. “It is up to me to stay sharp and in shape in order to remain on this path of excellence.”
Serving as an International Officer is considered the pinnacle of student leadership in Phi Theta Kappa, and the campaign experience has also been hailed as an opportunity for personal growth. An International President and four International Vice Presidents representing the Society’s four geographic divisions are elected each year.

International Officer Scholarships are made possible through the generosity of donors to the Phi Theta Kappa Foundation. What does a donation for International Officer Scholarships support?

- The five members elected annually each receive scholarships of $2,000 to continue their education.
- International Officers receive (1) a laptop computer following successful completion of their summer orientation, (2) complimentary internet service throughout their term in office, and (3) a $1,000 stipend to assist with expenses incurred during their terms.

For more information on how you can donate to the International Officer Scholarship program, contact Director of Institutional Advancement Dr. Nancy Rieves at 1.800.946.9995, ext. 3537, or nancy.rieves@ptk.org.

“I was lost. Tallahassee Community College grabbed my hand, gave me a flashlight and helped me find success. That led me to Phi Theta Kappa, and now I feel I have a purpose again.”

Tycia Foster
2006-2007 International President

2006-2007 International Officers and Executive Director Rod Risley plant a tree at Phi Theta Kappa’s Center For Excellence. From left: Preston Schmidt, Tycia Foster, Erin Wilson, David Kerr, Rod Risley and Carlos Acevedo.

Community college opened new doors to Tycia Foster, including opportunities available through Phi Theta Kappa.
By the time Tycia Foster entered Florida A&M University on an academic scholarship at the age of 17 she understood her role in her family.

“I was the smart academic achiever,” said Foster, one of six children. “My downfall was, that was all I knew how to do.”

In high school, Foster made top grades without studying. In college, she became overextended and her grades began to slide.

“When I was placed in a university setting with thousands of smart kids who also were extreme socialites and leaders, I began to sink,” Foster said. “I attempted to get involved in campus life as a leader, socially, and tried to do some community service. My time management skills were poor, and I ended up failing tremendously.”

Foster took a break from college. A job as a teacher’s aide showed her she had a passion and a gift for working with young people—and would be an outstanding teacher.

“But all the passion in the world could not allow me to teach without a degree, so I knew I had to tackle this college thing again,” Foster said.

So Foster enrolled at Tallahassee Community College, which offered a scholarship to childcare workers wishing to study early childhood education. She saw community college as a quick route back to the university.

“I thought that community college was for people who were not as smart as most, or did not know what they wanted to do with their lives,” she said. “I was determined to hurry through and get back to REAL school,” she said.

Phi Theta Kappa not only helped change her perception of community college, but also of herself.

“I was invited to become a member of Phi Theta Kappa. I was introduced to the four hallmarks: Scholarship, Leadership, Service, and Fellowship, and that was when I became hooked.”

In spite of her initial impressions about community college, Foster now realizes Tallahassee Community College allowed her to reinvent herself. “I have been able to do things that even I did not believe I was capable of,” she said. “I gained something I lacked in my first college experience. I was able to engage myself in campus life, and benefit not only academically, but become more conscious of issues that affected students.”

Foster became president of her Phi Theta Kappa chapter, and attended her first Convention.

“When I attended my first International Convention in my hometown of Dallas, Texas, I saw 4,000 honor students coming together to celebrate the hallmarks and their involvement in many different prosperous endeavors.”

“I was amazed at what the different chapters were doing to make a difference on their campuses and in the surrounding communities. I was just amazed at the impact that Phi Theta Kappa had internationally as well as locally,” she said.

“I decided then that I wanted to help other students who were like me—to make their transition into college easier. The best way was to run for International President.” Foster was elected at the 2006 International Convention in Seattle.

“Now I can give students the help I needed when I was at their stage of life. Phi Theta Kappa taught me to enjoy helping others as much as making good grades.”

Two African American men have served as National and International Presidents of Phi Theta Kappa, but Foster is the first African American woman to hold the office.

“If proud to be the first,” she said of her pioneering role. “I think it definitely carries a responsibility to perform to the best of my ability.”

Foster said her year as International President has been a whirlwind of excitement and learning experiences.

“I felt that I have gained tremendous amounts of confidence in public speaking and leadership roles. I still believe I have a lot to learn, but my year as International President has helped me try more things and assume roles I usually would shy away from,” she said.

“I have grown more aware of current events and how I can impact those around me. Social awareness is much more tangible to me now. Before I felt that I wanted to do something, but did not know what. Now I see the avenues and ways to help others.”

Foster said her experiences—dropping out of college, becoming a preschool teacher, and finding success as a college student—helped her see the disconnect and miscommunication that can sometimes happen between administration, teachers, and students.

Becoming involved with student organizations has also encouraged her to motivate other students to become active in campus and civic endeavors. She plans to use her International Officer scholarship to pursue a degree in educational leadership and business, although she is interested in public administration as well.

“The drive and the heart of the members I have met this year have really inspired me. I see how dedicated, innovative, and caring our members are and I feel that there is no limit to what we can do.”
It wasn’t so very long ago that HongJu “Jason” Lee was sitting in his macroeconomics classroom at Lorain County Community College in Ohio as Professor Alan Atwood discussed the plight of low-income countries and their struggle with poverty and disease.

“After class I started to think about all the times in the past I had wished I had more wealth. I started to feel ashamed.” Lee said. “I went to the library to further research world poverty. I couldn’t put out of my mind a thought my professor had offered in class. He said, ‘According to a news article, we can eliminate world poverty within five years if wealthy countries help low income countries financially.’”

Lee completed his research and forwarded his findings to his professor, who encouraged him to further develop his thoughts on the subject.

And that was the birth of Lee’s dream, albeit an ambitious one, to cure the world of poverty. His dream is based on building business, trade and marketing skills and teaching them to those in need. While at the community college Lee obtained first-hand experience of poverty and economic growth possibilities by visiting Vietnam and raising funds for victims of the Asian Tsunami and Hurricane Katrina.

In 2006 Lee was selected as a member of the All-Ohio Academic First Team, a New Century Scholar, and a member of the All-USA Academic First Team. “I felt a strong sense of responsibility after becoming a member of the All-USA First Academic Team,” said Lee, who considered it an honor simply to be selected as his college’s nominee. “After receiving the awards, amazing events happened.”

Lee soon found himself giving a speech in the Ohio State Capitol, giving interviews to the media and even seeing his face on billboards. He gave a graduation speech at Lorain County Community College and also appeared on television. Membership in Phi Theta Kappa, he emphasized, and his experience as an All-USA First Team member, broadened his horizons as a community college student.

“As a member of Phi Theta Kappa, there was so much for me to learn about American culture and college life,” said Lee, a native of Korea.

“Participating in Phi Theta Kappa gave me a chance to explore the differences and similarities of other communities, while allowing me to build well-rounded skills. Visiting other college campuses across the state for regional events allowed me to meet other successful students in different environments. Traveling to the International Convention to meet thousands of my peers from across the world really emphasized that there are so many others different than me, yet still similar enough to meet the same criteria I have, to become inducted into this honor society.”

“I can see that I am truly part of a much bigger organization, a much bigger world. From my personal experience these opportunities provided me with inspiration and energy that I would never find in my typical college life.”

As for his future beyond eventually earning a baccalaureate degree, he still hasn’t forgotten that dream formed back at Lorain County Community College.

“Based on my international background, travel and association with people from different countries, I recognized the need for a global economic organization dedicated to developing third-world countries,” Lee said. “I would like to use my knowledge and energy to support those who are less fortunate. This goal provides me with a great sense of purpose and meaning in my life.”

Many of these life ambitions became apparent to him after experiences both inside and outside the classroom.

“I have been taught the importance of contributing to the community and this lesson went far beyond traditional learning in the classroom. I found that the more I shared my life and myself, the happier I became,” Lee said. “These shared moments have allowed me to become more concerned with human diversity, equal opportunity, and cultural pluralism.”

He said the greatest challenge he has faced was leaving his family behind in Korea to attend college in the United States, where he had no friends or relatives, and was hampered by knowing very little English. “But I believed in myself and I believed I could overcome any obstacle that I would find in my path,” Lee said. “I saw the obstacles as motivational tools.”

His challenges did not end after he became acclimated to a new country. His father died after Lee left Korea. “The regret of my not having seen my father before he passed away increases my determination to complete the American education he worked so hard to make possible,” Lee said.

“My journey led to a discovery of new things; discovery of a new culture, discovery of new relationships, but most of all discovery of myself. I started my journey with a particular path in mind; however, my experiences have been greater than I could ever imagine.”