

# U.S. Rep. Jeffries tells 5000 Role Models: 'Press on'

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U.S. Rep. Hakeem Jeffries, D-N.Y., the House minority leader, delivered a keynote speech to the 5000 Role Models of Excellence members that evoked the journey of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., urging them to have the courage to continue even when times are tough.

"We know that this is a moment of great challenge here in our community, in the county and in the country, throughout the world. Turbulent times are in front of us," Jeffries said with the cadence of a Baptist preacher. He continued, urging the young men to "summon the strength and the resilience of a Dr. King and those civil rights heroes, the strength and resilience that Congresswoman Frederica Wilson, that your mentors and role models have shown, that you all have shown to get to this point on the brink of taking the next step in your higher education and professional journey to press on."

Jeffries encouraged the young men to "press on" in the face of adversity at the 32nd Annual 5000 Role Models of Excellence Foundation's Martin Luther King Jr. Scholarship Breakfast at the Miami Beach Convention Center on Saturday. Jeffries recounted King's personal journey, connecting it to the civil rights Black people in the U.S. now have as a result of King's perseverance.

The breakfast serves as the cornerstone event of the Martin Luther King Jr.



PHOTOS BY AL DIAZ adiaz@miamiherald.com

Several of the many 2025 inductees are shown being sworn in during the 5000 Role Models of Excellence Foundation's 32nd Annual Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Scholarship Breakfast in the Miami Beach Convention Center on Saturday.

holiday weekend in South Florida, honoring Black and brown youths and mentors in the region. Typically held on the King holiday, this year's observances were moved to Saturday to avoid conflict with Inauguration Day.

U.S. Rep. Frederica Wilson, D-Fla., founded the organization in 1993, when she was a Miami-Dade County School Board member, out of a need to decrease the school-to-prison pipeline among young Black and brown boys. The program seeks to provide educational opportunities and mentorship to students in South Florida and has since expanded to other areas in the U.S., most recently the Los Angeles region.

Wilson touted the success of the program, saying that often mothers and grandmothers thank her for instituting the program. "We steer little boys on a

carefully chartered course and bring them up on that carefully chartered course to manhood, and then we send them to college," she

said, wearing a gold hat. The organization honored four elected officials: North Miami Mayor Alix Desulme; North Miami

Beach Mayor Michael Joseph; Miami-Dade County Commissioner and Commission Vice Chair Kionne McGhee; and Miami-Dade Commissioner Oliver Gilbert. Miami-Dade County Homeless Trust Chairman Ron Book and the Arc of the City Foundation founders Terry and Sherria Elliott were also honored at the event. The organization also received a check for \$250,000 from Career-Source South Florida that will go toward scholarships.

Also among the honorees Saturday was Wilson's son, Paul V. Wilson Jr., who followed in his mother's footsteps working as an educator before becoming a consultant. Wilson said it hadn't occurred to her to honor her son until recently.

"When I started the 5000 Role Models, he was

a little boy, and I used to come home at night out of my mind," she said, recalling a time when she wanted to stop her work with the organization to focus on him. "He said, 'Mommy, you can't do that. Do you think that the president cares about these little Black boys? ... Nobody cares about them but you. You give this up, what are these boys going to do?'"

Wilson told anecdotes of each of the honorees, but particularly recalled fondly how the program shaped each of the elected officials honored, rattling off memories of how the men joined the program in their youth or how she came to know them. "I've watched these children grow up," she said, affectionately. "How do you think I feel?"

After the breakfast, Wilson said she's looking to continue expanding the program, which already has spread to other parts of Florida and Detroit. She has her eyes set on Nashville, Minneapolis and the Bahamas. She hopes the expansion helps continue to address the school-to-prison pipeline.

"The difficulty with the 5000 Role Models is this: Unless you experience it, you don't get it. People don't understand prevention," she said. "They understand criminal justice. 'Oh, I have a brother in prison' or 'Oh, I have a cousin in jail.' They understand that, but they don't understand what they could have done for that brother and that cousin to prevent them from going to jail."

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U.S. Rep. Frederica Wilson, speaking at the event Saturday, launched the 5000 Role Models of Excellence program in 1993 while on the Miami-Dade County School Board.

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## WISH BOOK

lenges and inspire action. I am deeply grateful for the unwavering support our South Florida community continues to show through action and donations," said Miami Herald and el Nuevo Herald Executive Editor Alex Mena.

"Donations ranged from household essentials and toys to computers, furniture, appliances, and medical equipment. One particularly touching gift was a new keyboard for an autistic musician with big dreams," said DiPietro.

Diagnosed with autism when he was 2 and struck by an SUV when he was 7, Walter Sylvain, now 15 and a student at Miami Central High School, finds peace through music. After he was nominated by Hope for Miami and his story ran in the Miami Herald's Wish Book series in December 2024, Tony Siciliano from Piano Music Center in Hollywood gave Walter a brand new Yamaha P-125 full-size digital keyboard.

A family of farmworkers in Southwest Miami-Dade with four children nominated by the Redlands Christian Migrant Association received furniture for their sparse and small one-bedroom apartment, including beds they had asked for, after a Wish Book story ran around Christmas.

### AN UNEXPECTED GIFT

One Wish Book story was a double bonus for two clients from the Multiple Sclerosis Foundation. One recipient was a Wish Book nominee. The other was not. Both received a much-needed scooter thanks to two generous donors.

Bernhard Lukoschek of Miramar read the December Wish Book story about Stella Georgakopoulos, a 46-year-old woman who woke up three years ago with sudden vision loss in one eye. Tests revealed she had multiple sclerosis, a chronic, neurological dis-



FABIOLA DELERME Miami Central High School

Miami Central High student Walter Sylvain, 15, received a Yamaha P-125 full-size digital keyboard from Tony Siciliano of Piano Music Center in Hollywood.

ease that affects the body's central nervous system. She regained her vision but her mobility is compromised. She and her husband are raising a 9-year-old daughter, but it's hard to keep up with an active child when struggling with MS.

Lukoschek, who uses a wheelchair, reached out to Wish Book to grant Georgakopoulos' wish for a blue, Vive 4-Wheel Mobility Scooter. A scooter would let her keep up with her daughter at parks and malls and other places where that can be a challenge.

But the new scooter lacked a platform underneath the seat and weighed about 50 pounds — too heavy for her needs, said Marcia Harris, support groups and outreach manager for the Multiple Sclerosis Foundation.

An anonymous donor, meanwhile, also read that story and donated a scooter that, at 29 pounds and with the platform attachment, worked well for Georgakopoulos.

But what about Lukoschek's kind offer of a scooter? "I had an extra one," he said. So he said he told Harris at the foundation, "I can give you one if you have another person who needs one. I've got one available."

Harris scoured the foundation's database and told him about another client who had applied internally for a scooter. He was not nominated for Wish Book, she explained. But he sure could use a scooter like the one Lukoschek was offering.

Deryan Deal, a 19-year-old engineering student at the University of Central Florida, received that unexpected gift over the holidays.

Deal, who was home in Hollywood for the holi-

days, had said he was so exasperated walking from class to class around the Orlando campus he was almost ready to quit, DiPietro said.

A recent MRI revealed lesions on his spine so his mother suggested he stick close to their Hollywood home for a semester. He's taking classes this semester on campus and online at Florida International University, Harris said.

"He wants to be an engineer and he wants to work at NASA. He's very smart,"



Courtesy Multiple Sclerosis Foundation

Deryan Deal is able to get around the University of Central Florida and Florida International University, where he is an engineering student, because of a gift of a scooter from a generous donor, Bernhard Lukoschek.

Harris said, as emotion crinkled her voice when she spoke of Wish Book's impact in South Florida.

"I wish other states would do the same thing. It's just wonderful. I get teary talking about it because it's amazing that people are so generous with their donations. Last year we had a person that needed an electric wheelchair and within the first day, she got it. She she cried and cried. She said, 'I can't believe it.' And I said, 'Well, there's people out there that care.'"

### HOW TO HELP

To continue helping the nominees of 2024:

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