# FEFOCUS

Volume 12. Issue 2 Spring 2014

# **President's Message**

At its inception, the FEF envisioned that our programs and the McKnight Fellows we support would help transform lives, strengthen families, connect communities to resources and create environments that promote individual and group achievement. The articles published in this edition of the *Focus* succinctly illustrate that vision in action.

The vision comes alive through Dr. Richard Gragg, an Associate Professor of Environmental Science and Policy and Founding Director of the Center for Environmental Equity and Justice at Florida A&M University, as he works diligently to address some of America's lingering environmental pollution problems, especially in minority communities. Dr. Gragg not only has raised millions of dollars to conduct research, but also has helped produce well trained environmental scientists.

During the last two years, to further support our vision, we have placed greater emphasis on increasing opportunities for our Doctoral Fellows to improve writing skills, complete dissertations, present conference papers, write grant proposals, and publish articles.

To provide an efficient, cost effective means to assist students in these areas, we have created online workshops to address writing issues such as thesis and abstract development, cause and effect relationships, and coherence. Now, our scholars may work from their homes in our virtual classroom to improve their skills. They also may use professional editorial services provided by the FEF throughout the year.

These and other services and our developmental conferences also have provided our Fellows greater opportunities to collaborate with

peers and other professionals. You will read in this edition of the *Focus* how McKnight graduates met with U.S. Ambassador John Limbert to discuss the significance of research on American foreign policy. You also will read how MPLE graduate Attorney Tiffany Moore Russell, the youngest person ever elected to serve on the Orange County, Florida, Commission, brought new vision to the City of Orlando.



Dr. Lawrence Morehouse President & CEO

In this edition of the *Focus*, you also will learn how our institutional collaborations with Florida school districts and the College Board have enabled us to expand our efforts to help pre-college students improve their skills, particularly in writing. We now offer live online tutoring and SAT Strategies courses to provide students with interactive, real-time instruction at home from experienced tutors and certified instructors located around the State. We also continue to use competitions and prizes to reinforce skills and now engage technology to supplement our more traditional Laws of Life Essay and Speech Writing Contests with innovative vocabulary-building and writing-focused games and contests on NAS Online.

This year, thirty years after our programs were created, we have made tremendous strides toward realizing our vision of stronger individuals, families, and communities through increased opportunities for education and a continued focus on service. Despite this success, FEF will never rest on its laurels but will always seek ways to help more people more efficiently, while anticipating challenges that are bound to arise periodically.

# Ambassador John Limbert and Dr. Mohsen Milani Discuss U.S.-Middle East Relations

Embracing the conference theme, "On the Cutting Edge: Meeting the Demands of a Changing World," the FEF introduced fresh approaches to two signature events at the Annual McKnight Fellows Meeting last October. First, a Saturday "Keynote Conversation" on a contemporary news topic replaced the more traditional format of a motivational luncheon keynote speech. Second, while seasoned scholars continued to address a set of general topics during the Saturday afternoon roundtables, matriculating Fellows undertook new roles by developing discipline- and campus-spe-



USF's Dr. Mohsen Milani and Ambassador John Limbert at the 2013 Annual Fellows' Meeting

cific questions, moderating the panels, and recording panel highlights.

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# **MDF Alumnus Dr. Richard Gragg**

Dr. Richard Gragg

In 1987, 60% of African and Hispanic Americans lived close to uncontrolled toxic waste sites, according to the United Church of Christ's landmark study "Toxic Waste and Race in the United States." Since then, numerous scientific studies have confirmed environmental pollution as a major cause of illness among Americans, especially children, the elderly, and minorities. As McKnight Fellows study ways to reduce pollution and minimize its health impacts, they fulfill the McKnight

program mission to promote scholarship responding to critical issues in local and global communities, and McKnight alumnus Dr. Richard Gragg of Florida A&M University epitomizes their dedication. At FAMU, Dr. Gragg is Associate Professor of Environmental Science and Policy in the School of the Environment, Founding Director of its Center for Environmental Equity and Justice, and Chair of its Environment and Sustainability Council.

Seven years after the Church's groundbreaking national study, the Florida Legislature commissioned an investigation which confirmed that in Florida, as in the country overall, low-income and minority communities suffer more exposure to environmental hazards. As a result, the Legislature funded the Center for Environmental Equity and Justice (CEEJ) at FAMU, and in 1998, Dr. Richard Gragg, a co-founder of FAMU's Environmental Science Institute (now the School of the Environment) became founding Director.

The CEEJ brings together an interdisciplinary team of highly trained professors and scientists to address environmental issues by conducting cutting edge research; publishing articles to alert the public on how to avert crises and avoid illnesses; and encouraging more students to undertake studies related to the environment at both undergraduate and graduate levels. It is an information resource for community organizations such as the Florida Brownfields Association as well as government entities, including the Environmental Protection Agency. "A signature of the program," according to Dr. Gragg, is that "it is not just training students in science but also in understanding the role of science in policy decision-making."

CEEJ operates under the auspices of the School of the Environment. Through the School, FAMU is a quiet leader in Florida environmental science programs, was the first university in Florida to offer a doctorate in the field, and is among Florida's most productive sources of doctorates in the discipline. It is the most productive source of African American environmental science Ph.D.'s overall.

In fact, Dr. Gragg quickly cites one of his major accomplishments as having been the chair for seven doctoral and ten master's graduates. Additionally, he has collaborated on grants totaling more than \$37 million for studies related to conservation and environmental issues. The School of the Environment is also receiving nearly \$15 million to help the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) meet its workforce needs, training students in STEM (science, technology, and math) areas.

# MPLE Alumna Tiffany Moore Russell, Esq.

In 2006, Minority Participation in Legal Education Program Alumna Tiffany Moore Russell, Esq., became the youngest person ever elected to serve on the Orange County, Florida, Commission, in charge of a budget exceeding \$5 billion and more than 8000 employees. In November 2014, Russell's successful run as Commissioner will end due to term limits.

A community advocate for years prior to her election, Russell served on the Orange County Community Action Board, Board of Zoning and Adjustments and Citizens Review Board. As a Commissioner, she has helped set policy for a wide range of public and non-profit commissions and organizations as a board member of the Orange County Commission on Aging, Value and Adjustment Board, Youth and Family Services Board, Orange Blossom Trail Community Rede-

velopment Agency, Downtown Orlando Community Redevelopment Agency, African American Chamber of Commerce of Central Florida, Electoral Canvassing Board, International Drive Mass Transit and Improvement District Board, and United Arts of Central Florida.



During her tenure as Commissioner, Russell has initiated many programs to benefit her constituents and commu- Tiffany Moore Russell, Esq.

nity. Those programs include the Annual Summer Safety Event, established to prepare students for a safe, positive, and productive summer vacation; Women/Minority Business Enterprise Town Hall Meetings, citizen-driven for aheld to allow local business owners to discuss one-on-one topics of concern related to doing business in Orange County; the E-Zone Workshop, a community business workshop designed to highlight tax incentive programs offered through Orange County; the "School Days Are Here Again" Back to School Rally, hosted to provide students with valuable resources needed to be successful throughout the school year; and the "Holiday Senior Brunch," hosted to promote healthy living during the holidays for the mature and vibrant residents of Orange County. Most recently, she created the Women's Empowerment Summit held in conjunction with the Southwest Orlando Jaycees to provide training for future women leaders in the community.

As Commissioner, Russell also has secured funding for the Orlando Science Center, the Zora Neale Hurston Festival, the Clerk's Satellite Office at the Orange County Jail, the Summer Jobs Program, the Black Business Investment Fund Micro-Loan Program, and a substantial amount of convention business for the International Drive District.

An attorney, Commissioner Russell earned her B.A. in Political Science from the University of South Florida and a Juris Doctorate from Florida State University College of Law. She practices law at Emeritus Law Firm in Orlando and is a member of the Florida Bar, the Orange County Bar Association, the Virgil Hawkins Chapter of the National Bar Association, the Paul C. Perkins Bar Association, the Central Florida Women's Lawyer Association, and Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority. She is married to Anthony K. Russell, Jr., and they have two children, Anthony, age 4, and Aiden, age 2.

## Ambassador John Limbert and Dr. Mohsen Milani Discuss U.S.-Middle East Relations

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### **New Luncheon Keynote Format**

The new format presented a conversation between USF's Dr. Mohsen Milani and Ambassador John Limbert. Ambassador Limbert was one of 52 Americans held hostage for 444 days after dissident Iranian students captured the U.S. Embassy in Tehran in 1979. According to Dr. Milani, widely published authority on Middle East politics, the Ambassador is among the top three Iran experts he's encountered in 22 vears. The conversation between the two offered historical perspectives and insights into the relationships among Iran, the United States, and other world powers and discussed possibilities for improved relations under President Obama and future leaders.

According to a post-luncheon survey, the overwhelming majority of attendees enjoyed the Keynote Conversation and approved of the two-person discussion format. They also indicated they would like to see other contemporary world issues discussed at future Saturday luncheons and shared enthusiastic comments about the Conversation, including the following:

- "This discussion made clear the importance of conducting research to inform policy, improve diplomacy, dispel myths and correct misinformation disseminated through the press and other outlets."
- "Great speakers! I admired their expertise and the discussion was lively and informative."
- "The Conversation was great, time relevant and uncensored. I'd like to see a format like this again."

"I was honestly surprised by how much I enjoyed the Keynote Conversation. It was not a topic I thought I would be interested in, but the presenters were so engaging that it held my attention the entire time."

### **New Roundtable Structure**

For the past several years, the Annual Fellows Meeting has featured several discipline-specific Saturday afternoon roundtable discussions, during which professors in

the field share advice and best practices for completing Ph.D. programs, developing useful research and publication skills, and securing employment. The discussions serve as informal, interactive fora to address general topics as well as more discipline-specific matters.

General discussion topics include the relationship between The Annual Fellows' Meeting Physical Sciences Panel job opportunities and research

foci; the advantages and disadvantages of accepting post-doctoral fellowships; how and what to publish, especially before earning the Ph.D.; how to package oneself for the job market and interviews, including creating and assembling a portfolio, preparing a professional presentation, developing and polishing interview skills, and conducting a job search; how graduate training impacts the ability to secure tenure and promotion; and the importance of networking.

For the 2013 Annual Fellows Meeting, the FEF enhanced the roundtables by affording matriculating Fellows at several universities the opportunity to facilitate the panels, much the way they will help organize and conduct sessions at professional conferences throughout their careers. The facilitators first surveyed students on their campuses to determine discipline-specific issues they wanted to learn more about and then prepared to present those issues at the roundtables.

At the Annual Meeting, the facilitators moderated the panels by raising discussion topics and asking follow-up questions. They also recorded panelists' insights and advice, which the FEF will compile into a compendium of best practices.



In Meeting evaluations, participants favored the opportunity to contribute to the topics addressed and found the discussions "most relevant" to their concerns regarding completing their programs and gaining employment.

### **Annual Fellows' Meeting Highlights**



MDF Alumnus Dr. Floyd Tyler presents the Financial Planning Workshop.



FSU's Dr. Michael Uzendoski accepts the William R. Jones Most Valuable Mentor Award.



New MDF Alumna Dr. Christi Navarro-Batista receives her McKnight jacket at the annual Jacketing Ceremony.



Dr. Lawrence Morehouse presents FIU's Dr. Sonja Montas-Hunter with the FEF President's Award.

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# **National Achievers and Believers Excel at Service**



UCF-McKnight COE Achievers deliver gifts to residents of an assisted living facility.

An important part of the leadership training Florida's Centers of Excellence provide for National Achievers and Believers includes encouraging them to balance their rigorous study schedules with a generous block of time reserved for serving their communities. For the 2013-2014 school year, NAS

members have logged hundreds of hours of community service, enabling students to learn about the needs of their communities, explore diverse interests, develop a passion for helping others, and meet both school and Center volunteer mandates.

From helping organize a Fort Lauderdale Beach cleanup; gathering donations for several toy, food and other charity drives; visiting retirement homes; helping compost and weed the grounds of a

historic garden; and hosting a food festival to raise money for orphans in Haiti, Achievers and Believers have developed valuable work-related skills by coordinating and implementing service projects from the planning stages through completion.

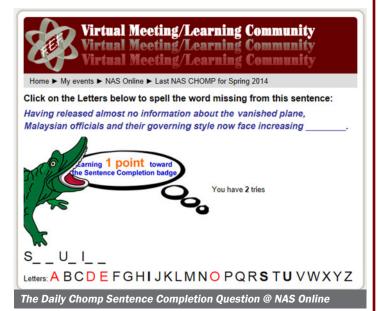


Atlantic Coast COE Achievers clean up Fort Lauderdale Beach.

# Achievers/Believers Compete in 2013-2014 Writing-Focused Contest @ NAS Online

From September 14, 2013, through March 14, 2014, National Achievers and Believers Society members enrolled in NAS Online logged in every day to earn badges for completing tasks aimed at improving their writing skills. Those tasks included answering sentence completion questions (Daily Chomp), solving science or math word problems (Math Minute, Science Seconds), posting paragraphs in the Members Only discussion forum, and posting daily updates in the Comments block.

In mid-March 2014, the FEF surveyed participating Achievers to learn their impressions of the badge contest and gather suggestions for the future. All survey respondents indicated they learned new vocabulary words from the Daily Chomp, and 80% said they learned new math or science facts from the Math Minute or Science Seconds. Also, all who posted in the discussion forum stated they enjoyed writing and felt as if they were engaged in an actual conversation, and all who posted in the Comments block enjoyed both sharing and reading other members' daily written updates.



# Take the Spanish Vocab Challenge II Answer today's NAS Chomp Take a Few Science Seconds (Quick! You've limited time!)-->



Tell us briefly what's going on with you in the Comments block

Badges Earned So Far

New rules for Earning Badges & Winning Awards!

### The NAS Online Contest for Badges

Asked what they liked best about the contest, one Achiever said, "... the Members Only Forum, because you can 'talk' with other Achievers around the state and make cyber friends. This is the perfect place to interact with other Achievers." Another added, "I enjoyed reading members' updates in the comments block. I found it nice to have the opportunity to read about other members' everyday activities, such as Priyanka's robot competitions and Tyler's excitement regarding graduation."

A third stated, "the best thing on NAS Online is being able to learn new things that you can use in school and in the real world. When I did the Daily Chomp, I didn't know a single answer, but I learned what the words meant from reviewing the questions and looking in the dictionary and thesaurus."

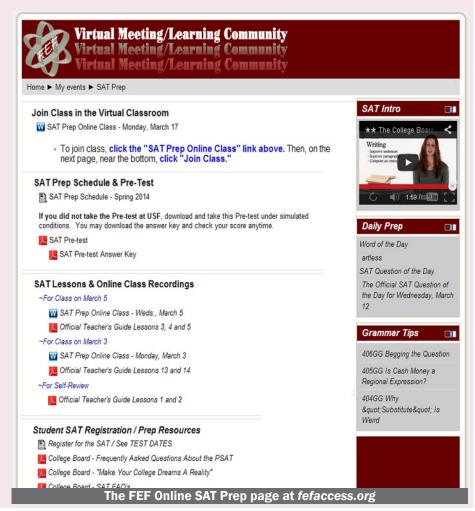
For this year's contest, the student who has amassed the most badges will win the title of Best NAS Online Student, and the Center with the most badges will win the Best NAS Online Center award. Both winners will be announced at the Annual NAS State Summit on March 22, 2014.

# FEF Offers Free Online SAT Preparation for the May/June 2014 SAT

On March 3rd, 2014, high school students from around the State logged into the first of twelve free 2-hour class sessions designed to help prepare them for the May or June 2014 SAT. The sessions take place in the FEF's virtual classroom, which students access through any computer with a high-speed Internet connection. The classroom sessions are fully live and directed by certified instructors with impressive histories of teaching test preparation.

During the sessions, students view lessons and demonstrations on the whiteboard, ask questions, and interact with the instructor and other students. Throughout the course, they will learn effective test-taking strategies, complete hundreds of SAT problems, review content, and focus on their problem areas. They also will have the opportunity to review class recordings in case they miss or need to review something.

In addition to attending class sessions, students enrolled in FEF Online SAT Prep have unlimited access to the course web page at fefaccess.org, where they may download all lessons from the College Board's Official SAT Teacher's Guide and two full-length practice tests; link to the SAT question of the Day, Merriam Webster's Word of the Day, and Grammar Girl's weekly podcasts; and review a wealth of test-taking resources and information on registering and paying for the SAT.



# Four Seniors Vie for the 2014 Dr. Israel Tribble, Jr., Achiever of the Year Award

Each year, the Director of each of the Centers of Excellence names an Achiever of the Year at his or her Center who has maintained focus, achieved excellence, distinguished him or herself in leadership, and made a difference in the community. The FEF then reviews the records of those Achievers and selects the one who has demonstrated the greatest 4.5 GPA leadership and achievement Intended Career: as the Dr. Israel Tribble, Jr., Finance Achiever of the Year, the

award presented in memory of the FEF's late inaugural president.

This year, four seniors who boast outstanding levels of NAS participation have applied for the award.



Tyler Daniels NAS State President NAS Induction 10/2007

In addition to serving admirably as NAS State Vice President in 2012-2013 and President in 2013-2014. Tyler Daniels from the South Florida COE in Miami has competed for four years on his Center's Brain Bowl Math team and contributed

for five years to its community service efforts. He also has attended the NAS State Summit each year since 2010.

Tyler says, "As an Achiever I have been

given opportunities to participate in many activities and learning experiences that all have contributed to sharpening my math skills, improving my FCAT and SAT scores, and

helping me reach my goal of gaining admission to FIU." He will enroll in FIU in the fall of 2014.

Guerbrea Fort, the local NAS president for the Santa Fe College COE in Gainesville has competed in the History & Culture

> Brain Bowl for the past two years, contributed to her Center's community service projects for the last five years, and attended both the NAS State Summit and the I-10 Connection Conference for the past four years.

> Guerbrea credits NAS for introducing her to "people who continue to support [her] in all aspects of [her] life," and affording her the "opportunity to learn more about [her] heritage

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NAS Induction 5/2008 3.6 GPA Intended Career: Event Management

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# **2014 State Laws of Life Essay Contest Winners**

Camrawn McPhee

Each year, students in grades 3 through 12 compete in the FEF's Laws of Life Essay Contest, which requires them to exercise writing and critical thinking skills as they think about and communicate the principles that guide their lives. Each

contestant selects a quotation that expresses a key value and explains in the essay why she or he feels the chosen value is important.

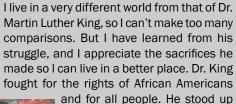
### Laws of Life Elementary School Winner Camrawn McPhee is a 4th grader from the South Florida COE.

"Education is our passport to the future, for tomorrow belongs to the people who prepare for it today," once said the great leader Malcolm X. I agree with this quotation because it is true that you have to prepare for the future. My parents often tell me that education is the key to success and that a great education can take me places beyond my greatest dreams. I believe this is the same thing that Mr. Malcom X is saying in his famous quotation. Just like a passport allows you to travel wherever you want to go, if I work hard, study and apply myself, I can be whatever I want to be. As Mr. Malcolm X said, "tomorrow belongs to the people who prepare for it today," and I'm preparing myself to be the most successful person that I can possibly be.

### Laws of Life Middle School Winner Charles West is a 7th Grader from the Palm Beach County COE.

The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy. - Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

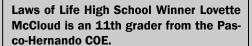
I chose the quotation by Martin Luther King, Jr., because it expresses a key value that I have used to persevere in school and in sports. When Dr. King speaks of standing in times of challenge and controversy, the words remind me of when I have had to study harder to excel in my classes or make the free throw that wins the game.



and for all people. He stood up for those who faced challenges in life, like being denied the right to vote.

His quotation represents what I have learned in life. I have learned that when life brings you

take the easy road. Dr. King has served as a living example of where to stand in times of challenge and controversy. He has shown me how to be a hero.



"I know you're upset, but sitting here crying and feeling bad for yourself won't make your problem any easier. You have to get up and fix your problem." Those wise

I recall an incident that affected me deeply

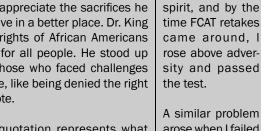
last year: I found out that I didn't pass Flor-

ida's Comprehensive Assessment Test or

FCAT. This devastated me because passing

words from my mother have helped guide me through many difficult times. Her statement reminds me of the quotation by President Barack Obama, "You can't let your failures define you. You have to let your failures teach you."

Each year, students in grades 3 through 12 compete in the FEF's Laws of Life Essay Contest, which requires them to exercise writing and critical thinking skills as they think about and communicate the principles that guide their lives. Each contestant selects a quotation that expresses a key value and explains in the essay why she



my Algebra I End of Course Exam. twice. After failing the FCAT and finally passing it, I was beginning to feel defeated.

challenges and you work hard, if you persevere, you will be stronger and better off than if you

A similar problem arose when I failed

Lovette McCloud

I kept repeating in my mind, "why can't

I just get it right the first time?" I knew I

would be able to pass the exam because I

previously passed a test I had failed. Still,

failing the first time made me question my

intelligence. I thought that I lacked critical

thinking skills and questioned whether I

was ready to go to college. I quickly put

those thoughts out of my head and began

to study hard, and when I took the test

again, I passed. After that accomplishment,

I forever realized that tests don't define me

as a person, and I can achieve anything I

what I was capable of if I put more time

into studying. I would not let my current

situation break my

or he feels the chosen value is important.

put effort into.



Charles West

this test is required for students in Florida to graduate. I was very studious and it saddened me to think that a standardized test could determine whether or not I would receive my standard diploma. I was gloomy at first and thought I would never pass, forcing me to get a General Educational Development diploma. However, deep down, I knew

Through rising above my trials and tribulations, I have been able to gain confidence in myself. I was upset about failing at first, but I figured out that I had to change my mindset. I had to tell myself that a test doesn't determine my intellectual abilities and it doesn't make me any less of a diligent student. I now believe that failing those tests was a blessing in disguise. It gave me confidence, and I will never again think of myself as inadequate because of a failure. Instead I'll just put more time in, focus on what I did wrong and work diligently until I get it right.

# **Center of Excellence Director of the Year Michelle Domany**

Michelle Domany's passion for working with children began when she volunteered at the New Mount Olive Baptist Church in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. For 10 years, she worked as a training coordinator with the Church's Girls Enrichment Ministry for Success (GEMS). Although she had a background in business administration and worked in private industry for most of her career, Michelle realized she needed additional preparation to work with youth and to have a greater impact in their lives. She thus decided to return to school to work on a master's degree in Mental Health Counseling at Nova Southeastern University. She graduated in 2007.

In 2010, Michelle joined the staff of the Urban League of Broward County as a Substance Abuse Prevention Coach assigned to work with Broward middle schools and agencies. Within a year, she was offered the opportunity to oversee two programs, including the Atlantic Coast Center of Excellence, for which she was appointed Director.

Michelle works with the program facilitator and the National Achievers Society Board to offer Achievers opportunities to grow both academically and personally and to serve their communities. She and her staff are dedicated to helping students access and succeed in post-secondary education by providing information and resources to COE Director Michelle Domany help ease their transition.



# Four Seniors Vie for the 2014 Dr. Israel Tribble, Jr., Achiever of the Year Award

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as well as that of others." As she feels she has benefitted greatly from advice from older Achievers, she pledges to visit the

Center when she comes home from college to help younger Achievers anyway she can. Guerbrea will enroll in college at UCF in the fall of 2014.

Jessica Jacobs serves as a local NAS president for the UCF McKnight COE in



Jessica Jacob NAS Induction 6/2008 4.9 GPA Intended Career: Pharmacy

Orlando. She also has competed in the History & Culture Brain Bowl as a sophomore, participated in her Center's community service projects for the past six years, and attended every NAS State Summit since she was inducted in 2008.

"NAS has given me something I used to lack, which is confidence" Jessica states. "This program has taught me the importance of believing in myself and having faith

in my abilities. It has taught me to always strive for success and to believe that I am truly excellent." Jessica will continue living excellence as a freshman at UCF in the fall.

Stacy Tinner III from the Tallahassee Area Coalition COE has competed on the Math Brain Bowl team and worked on his Center's community service projects for four years and attended the NAS State Summit for the past five years.

"Along with my deeply caring and loving parents," he asserts, "NAS has provided a source of support in my academic and community endeavors. It has become a

part of my foundation that has given me confidence, courage and strength." Stacy looks forward to applying those traits to his studies and other pursuits at USF, starting in the fall.



Stacy Tinner III NAS Induction 12/2005 3.5 GPA Intended Career: Engineering

# **Upcoming FEF Events**

June 20-21, 2014 July 27-Aug. 1, 2014 November 7-9, 2014 MDF New Fellows' Orientation, Tampa MDF Summer Research and Writing Institute, Tampa MDF Annual Fellows' Meeting, Tampa

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Volume 12, Issue 2 Fall 2014

Layout & Design: Lyra Logan, Monica Olivera

Editing: Lyra Logan, Monica Olivera, Phyllis Reddick

Writing: Charles Jackson, Lyra Logan, Lawrence Morehouse, Phyllis Reddick

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The FEF's mission is to strengthen the larger community by creating and implementing programs and services that lead to greater educational advancement for historically underrepresented groups.

For information on how you may support FEF programs, please call 813-272-2772.

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