

THEY'RE BACK!



HOME AGAIN: James Faghmous struggled to get back to America but not in school at City College.

Best & brightest fuel CCNY revival

Over the last six years, CUNY's four-year schools — especially City College — have begun competitive admissions. The school is now living up to its nickname as "the poor man's Harvard," having produced Rhodes scholars and academic-award winners.

Todd Venezia spoke with two of the standout scholars in the class of 2006.

City College senior James Faghmous had to overcome a host of obstacles on his path to academic achievement — from kidnapping to hatred of Americans.

The senior computer-science major — who hopes to one day find a cure for Alzheimer's disease — is graduating with a 3.8

grade-point average and has earned a National Institutes of Health fellowship, which he will use to pursue his doctorate in computational neuroscience.

He is one of CCNY's most accomplished grads, but it was a rough journey to the top.

Born in Syracuse, the 23-year-old was spirited away by his father to Algeria at age 6.

Unable to speak the language and desperate to see his mother, Catherine, Faghmous struggled in school.

"In the '90s, when the first Gulf War took place, my fellow elementary-school students were picking on me because I was American," he said.

Still, he persevered and learned Arabic. He became a basketball standout, was invited to the national team and eventu-

ally began to settle in in his father's country.

But he was still viewed as a Westerner, and he was forced to move around because of threats from terrorists.

"It was a pretty rough time," he said.

He pressed on, though, determined to go to college.

"I had faith in education — that it would give me a better life," he said.

College in Algeria, however, was interrupted by riots and strikes. He finally decided to try to come back to the United States.

But getting here would not be easy. He would have to get an appointment — but just approaching the building could make him a target for extremists.

A visit entailed shouting

through a hole in the embassy's thick wall and hoping someone would reply.

Luckily, someone did, and after a bit of red tape, embassy officials found they had a file on him because of his mother's search.

When he came back to the States in December 2003, a family friend suggested that he try City College.

"We knew it was going to be the best for me because of its history of dealing with immigrants," he said. "It was going to give me something no place else would give me — a chance."

But his homecoming was bittersweet. His grandmother was suffering from Alzheimer's and died soon after his return. It has made him forsake the money he could make in his profession and work in research for a cure.

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