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## Firm reneges on scholarships

### Auto dealer offered 4 Patterson students aid to attend BCCC

By Sara Neufeld

Sun reporter

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Castle Toyota/Scion in Southeast Baltimore promised \$8,400 in scholarships to four graduating seniors from Patterson High School to cover tuition at Baltimore City Community College.

But in a dispute over publicity, the dealership withdrew its offer, leaving all parties feeling bitter.

The money was to come from Castle's advertising and marketing budget, and the owner wanted news media present at the school's senior farewell awards ceremony to document his gesture of goodwill.

Then, the week of the ceremony, Patterson's longtime JROTC instructor collapsed in the school parking lot and died of a heart attack, and the principal decided the ceremony should assume the tone of a memorial service. Since students and staff were grieving, she decided that no media would be allowed.

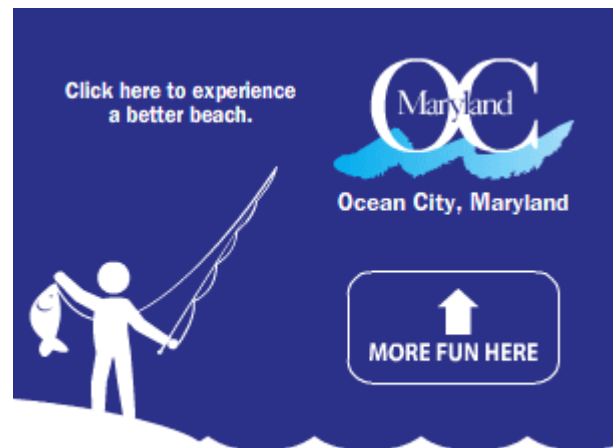
And Castle reneged on the scholarships.

Now the school is trying to raise funds to give the students what they were promised. Principal Laura D'Anna said yesterday that she's raised about three-quarters of the money, some of it from staff members who heeded her call for donations.

The president and CEO of Castle Automotive Group, Howard Castleman, said it didn't have to be this way. "We opted not to give it to them because of, quite frankly, attitude," he said in a phone interview. He said school officials accused him of wanting to bring in a "media circus" and would not allow him to hang his company's banner.

Castleman said that having press at the event would have paid public tribute to the teacher who died, it would have encouraged more people to donate to the school, and "we would've gotten some PR."

Instead of giving the \$8,400 to Patterson, Castleman said, he will donate the money to the Community College of Baltimore County, for scholarships for students from city neighborhoods surrounding the dealership.



Castleman said he didn't know that Patterson students were already expecting the money; he thought they would be learning the news at the awards ceremony. But they had already been informed.

"My family was very excited when they heard I would receive the money from Toyota in order to go to college," said one of them, Iftin Iftin, a Somali refugee who graduated from Patterson on Saturday and plans to study English and computer programming.

When D'Anna summoned the students to tell them Castle wasn't donating the money after all, Iftin said, "I couldn't even smile all day." At night, he said, "I couldn't get sleep."

At the senior farewell ceremony May 23, Iftin and the other three winners were still called to the podium, and they still received vouchers saying the school would pay \$2,100 to Baltimore City Community College upon their enrollment. "I let them know that we were going to make it right," D'Anna said.

Kelly Flores, a teacher at the school, wrote in an e-mail that was widely circulated in the community that "the company that promised this money wanted to use this as a scheme to turn the 'senior farewell assembly' into a media circus and commercial promoting their company." She said Castle was "not respecting our students nor that fact that the school is in mourning due to the untimely passing of our beloved Major Thomas."

Air Force Maj. Gerald Thomas, who had worked at the school for 15 years, died May 19. He was 61.

Even before Thomas' death, Castleman said, his staff had to go through "unbelievable" bureaucratic hoops to donate money to Patterson.

Castle officials provided *The Sun* with e-mails from people who said the school should have done more to accommodate them. "It's a shame that your efforts couldn't have worked out as intended," said one from the school system's former chief operating officer, Carlton Epps. "Creative adult minds should have made it a priority to accomplish all goals (scholarships for the kids; tribute to the deceased ROTC instructor; and positive publicity for your business). Unfortunately people who have no business sense view business and marketing negatively as a reflex."

The dealership had invited several public officials to attend the awards ceremony. Advertising executive David Pivec, a Patterson alumnus who played professional football, was scheduled to address the graduates on behalf of Castle, but the school system said he'd have to limit his remarks to a few minutes.

City Council President Stephanie C. Rawlings-Blake was planning to attend the ceremony on behalf of Mayor Sheila Dixon to recognize the business' donation, a spokesman confirmed, but she canceled her appearance after learning the donation was no longer being given.

Castleman said he empathizes with city students, having grown up in a poor Boston neighborhood and losing the use of his right arm in a childhood accident. For the past few years, he's teamed up with the Steve McNair Foundation to throw an annual Christmas party for impoverished Baltimore children and provide them with presents. "These people aren't going to buy cars from me," he said. "We get a little PR out of it."

But no more. After what happened at Patterson, Castleman said, "I'll never, ever, ever give money again. This is it. I'll never have another Christmas party for these kids. It doesn't pay."

[sara.neufeld@baltsun.com](mailto:sara.neufeld@baltsun.com)

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