

Teen Prodigy Picks Southern University

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14-year-old turns down Ivy League in favor of HBCU

While many 14-year-olds look for ways to spend the summer vacation, Polite Stewart Jr. has made his plans. He will be beginning his freshman year at Southern University in Baton Rouge, La.

Home schooled by his parents, Ava and Polite Stewart Sr., until the age of 10, he later attended academic programs at Southern. According to retired East Baton Rouge school system teacher Stewart Sr., he enrolled his son in the programs at Southern because Stewart Jr. was "surpassing my knowledge";

The knowledge gained from programs like the Garrett A. Morgan/Ford PAS Summer Business Institute, a national program at Southern University that mentors pre-college students, the HBCU Summer Up-Smart Pre-Algebra Program and the nationally honored Timbuktu Academy, led him to score a composite 30 on the ACT.

He was later recruited by Harvard, Princeton and Yale, but turned them all down to become a member of the "Jaguar Nation." The fact that both of his parents are Southern alumni along with his success at Timbuktu Academy contributed to his decision to attend the university.

"Because of Dr. Biola Bagayoko and the Timbuktu program, I would feel guilty to go to another school," Stewart said.

The one-on-one attention in the classroom was also a reason because he felt that at other schools he would be "just another number";

He described an experience he had recently. "I needed something explained and I couldn't find the teacher who taught my class," said Stewart. "I found an instructor who dropped everything to help me and that stuck with me";

Because of the programs he attended at Southern, Stewart said being a full-time student "wasn't that big of a step." Currently, he is taking general psychology, freshman composition and honors colloquium classes. Stewart said that while his planned major was biology, he was considering a change to physics.

Stewart attributes his achievements to reading. He says he read 100 books three years in a row including encyclopedias, science books and more. He also said he loved reading books above his level because it challenged him to learn more. According to Stewart while his favorite book is the popular Japanese comic book series Naruto, he takes an eclectic approach when it comes to his reading selection.

"His discipline comes from his parents," said Stewart Sr., who believes that parents should lead by example if they want their children to succeed. Making sure that parent's focus on a child's education and that they participate in educational programs is what Ava Stewart gave as advice toward parents.

"Just like we run behind football, basketball and other sports; we need to run behind academics," said Ava Stewart, who teaches middle school for the East Baton Rouge school system. "If your child needs help in school, go seek help for your child";

At the time of the interview with Black College Wire, Stewart Jr., who has garnered plenty of attention from the national media, was preparing to be interviewed for Ebony magazine later on that day.

"Well, for me, the media attention hasn't been a problem; I'm the modest type," said Stewart Jr.

Keeping modest and humble is easy for him; he tutors kids, is a part of the youth ministry and sings in the choir at Greater Mount Carmel Baptist Church. Faith is also important to the Stewart family because according to Stewart Sr., keeping their Christian values first helped tremendously. Though he was homeschooled, Stewart said that attending church also kept him socialized.

"If you keep Christian values first, everything will be much easier," said Stewart Jr.

While his academic career may be going hundreds of miles an hour, he said that he's still a kid who loves to play video games, watch television, play sports and more. Stewart also said that in the fall, he would like to participate in music activities on campus.

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