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James Potts must pay \$4,670 in tuition owed or American Heritage will withhold records

June 04, 2010 | By Lois K. Solomon and Robert Nolin, Sun Sentinel

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The son of a scrap collector with a criminal record, James Potts turned to academics and athletics to overcome a disadvantaged background and win a full scholarship to the University at Buffalo.

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Now that chance for a better future is in jeopardy.

The prestigious American Heritage School of Boca/Delray is holding Potts' transcripts hostage, blocking his enrollment in the New York State college. The issue: \$4,670 Potts owes in an outstanding work-study obligation.

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"Pleased be advised that no report cards or transcripts can be released until the balance is paid in full," American Heritage registrar Marie DeFago wrote to Potts' father in a May 10 letter.

Without the transcripts, Potts has no proof he graduated from the private, nonsectarian high school and thus cannot register to attend the University of Buffalo, said Christine Vidal, that school's spokeswoman.

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"This is such an outrageous story," said Peter Schweich, a retired vice president of Boston University who wrote a letter that Potts delivered Thursday to American Heritage proposing the student pay off his obligation monthly over the next four years.

The school did not provide an immediate response. But in a statement to the Sun Sentinel, American Heritage officials said, "As always, we are happy to sit down with his parents to see if we can come to a successful resolution to this unfortunate predicament."

Potts, 18, transferred from Park Vista High School to American Heritage at the start of his junior year. He was attracted to the superior academic atmosphere, and also made a name for himself on the football field as a running back/defensive back.

The school acknowledged as much.

"James has been a stellar student and an outstanding athlete," DeFago wrote in her letter.

But Potts' father, Larry Gamble, of Boynton Beach, who collects scrap for recycling and served time in prison for drug convictions in the '80s, could not afford the school's \$27,000-a-year tuition.

"I'm barely working," he said.

So Potts arranged to work off his tuition as a janitor and landscaper on campus: 420 hours a year at the rate of about \$10 an hour. It took him until the middle of his senior year, however, to fulfill his junior year hours, and he still owes the school about 400 hours, which translates into the \$4,670 debt.

"I feel bad about this," said Gamble, now a minister and father of five. "They gave us such a short time to figure this out."



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