

PORTRAIT

Funding Our Future

Boca Raton resident Aubrey Strul donated \$1 million to create the Kelly/Strul Emerging Scholars Program for first-generation college students attending Florida Atlantic University.

By **Christie Galeano-DeMott**

Smart and determined high school seniors are not going to college anymore. They can't afford it.

After mortgage debt, student loans are the second highest consumer debt category in the country, with more than 44 million borrowers who together owe \$1.5 trillion, according to Forbes.

Adding to those staggering numbers, only 25 percent of first-generation students, those whose parents didn't earn a degree, attend a four-year university and 11 percent of low-income, first-generation college students will graduate with a degree within six years, according to the Postsecondary National Policy Institute.

Aubrey Strul wants to change all that.

As the youngest son of a shopkeeper, Strul was the first in his family to attend college. He became a successful manufacturing entrepreneur and now is a philanthropist with a mission to give kids, just like him, the chance to get on a level playing field.

"We need to be stewards of this great country and give these kids, who don't lack talent, decency or guts, a chance at an education," says the 70-year-old South African native.



During a dinner party hosted by John Kelly, the president of Florida Atlantic University (FAU), Kelly spoke with Strul about the talented high school graduates who had been accepted to FAU but who would never set foot on campus because they simply couldn't afford it. That was Strul's light-bulb moment that evolved into a master plan to create a structured scholarship designed specifically for first-generation, low-income students with sky-high potential.

After a year of preparation and a \$1 million donation from Strul, the Kelly/Strul Emerging Scholars Program accepted its first four students in 2017. The program offers 100 percent financial support, which includes tuition, books, on-campus housing and fees, enabling students to graduate debt free in four years.

The program's 17 pillars create a turnkey and timely path to graduation. These checkpoints, designed to maximize success, include one-on-one mentoring, financial literacy, career and life planning workshops, internship and job placement assistance and student organization memberships. And it's working. Two students created a first-in-family club that already has more than 200 members. Other scholars have secured notable internships at businesses such as global footwear company BBC International. The undergrads in the program aren't just surviving college, they are thriving.

This year the program received more than 200 applications for 20 available spots. At a cost of \$50,000 per student for four years (\$12,500 per year), Strul's goal is to grant the scholarship to 80 students each year, raising the annual fundraising need to \$16 million.

Strul doesn't want to stop there. He wants the program to act like a think tank for other universities interested in launching a similar program. University of Florida and Tulane University are two other universities in the southeast that have a dedicated Office of First-Generation Student Success comparable to FAU's.

As a three-time U.S. bridge champion, Strul has even temporarily retired from competing so that he can focus on making sure the program flourishes.

Impressively, his significant donation to start the Scholars Program isn't the largest he's given to an organization. Strul and his wife of 45 years, Sally, are both big believers in always giving back. "We are on this earth a certain amount of time and this is the only way to define your life—how you have helped others less fortunate,?" Strul asks. ■

