

James Black by Sarah Coomber

Eastern Washington University freshman James Black had an Olympic moment in January: He was selected to carry the torch along its Seattle route.

That honor is the latest in the Tacoma, Wash., native's year of firsts. In June, Black, 21, became the first member of his family to graduate from high school.

Washington students from families with low incomes.

"He's doing awesome academically," said Maria Reyna, his on-campus mentor, who coordinates student and faculty mentors for the other 27 Washington State Achievers at EWU.

Black said he did not know financial aid and scholarships were available for college, but Michelle Guilmet, his English teacher at Tacoma's Lincoln High School, encouraged him to complete the Washington Achievers application.

"There are certain kids that just hook you," she said, describing her charismatic former student, who took six years to graduate. "Although he hadn't really demonstrated it in high school, I really felt there was an intelligence there and he'd be wasting it if he didn't get an education."

Black said that despite a strong academic record in elementary school, he turned to

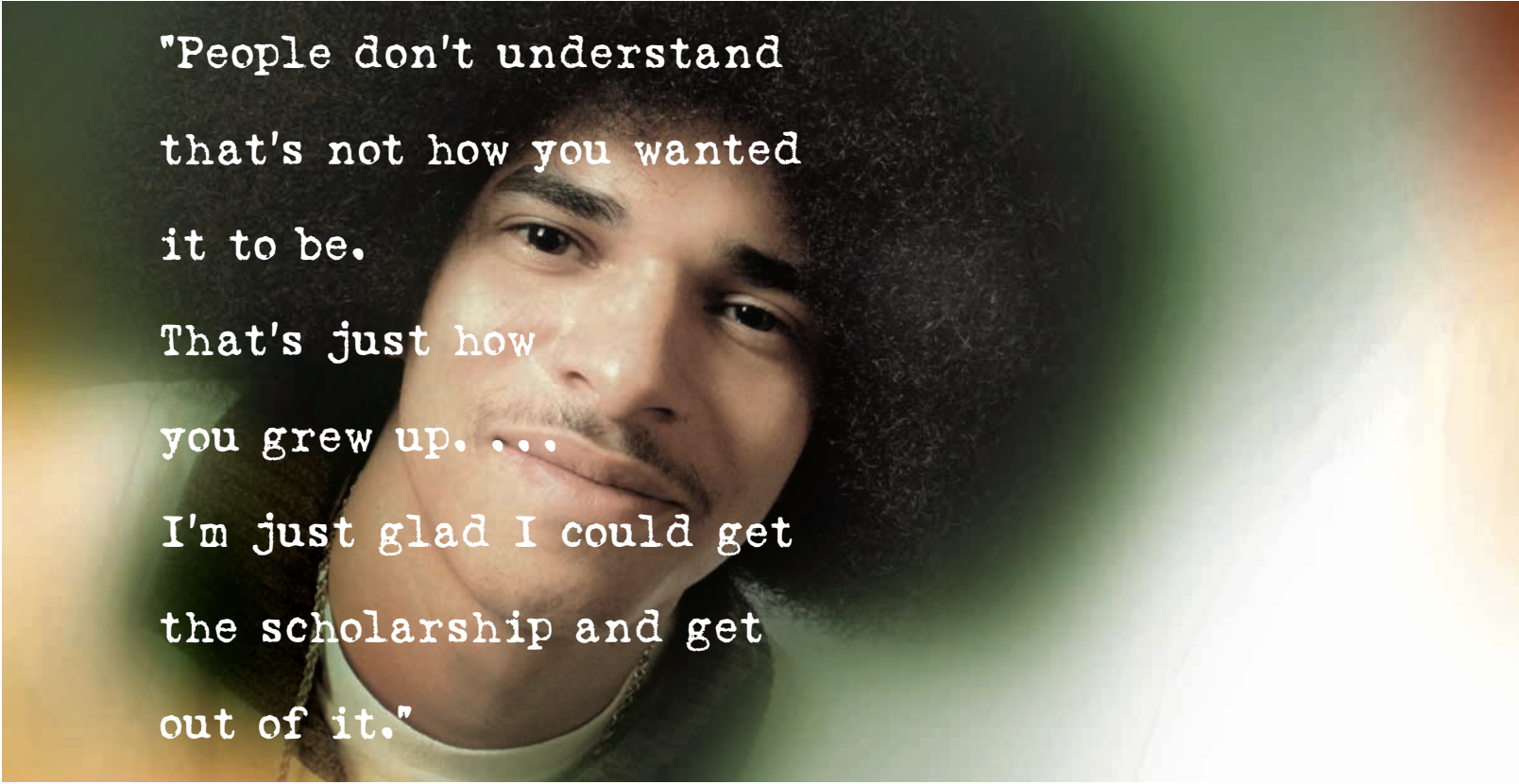
"I forgot how much I liked to learn," he recalled.

Guilmet keeps a photograph of Black standing by the EWU sign in her classroom for other students to see.

"They said, 'We always knew he was smart,'" she said. "And that Gates scholarship gave him a chance that wasn't out there in any way, shape or form."

Because this is the scholarship's first year, and the only one for which high school seniors will be selected, Black reflected that had he graduated on time he would have missed this opportunity. He said there are many students, like him, who don't receive family support for their education or know about financial aid options. But now Black is looking ahead to a career in business or engineering or somewhere he can work with math.

"I just somehow lucked out," he said, reflecting on the life he came from and the



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"I started to see there was a chance for me to go to college, and I started wanting to go," he said.

Black's chance came with his acceptance in the Washington State Achievers Scholarship program. Administered by the Washington Education Foundation, the scholarship is funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation — which recommended Black for his torchbearer post. The scholarship program's goal is, each year for the next 10 years, to send to college 500 highly motivated

gangs in middle school and "started going down the wrong road." By the time he reached high school, he rarely attended class and was so hard on his teachers that where other students were immortalized in the yearbook with captions like "most likely to succeed," his photo was labeled "teacher's nightmare" and, Black was proud of it.

After getting kicked out of one high school for fighting, he enrolled at Lincoln and began passing some classes. He then decided he might as well pass all of his classes.

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For more information on EWU's work with the Washington State Achievers Scholarship program and mentoring opportunities, please check out the EWU Web site (careers.ewu.edu:9000/hosted/wap) or contact EWU at (509) 359-6505 or wap@mail.ewu.edu.