When Tyra Stephens, an honor student at Simeon Career Academy, was applying for colleges, she didn’t care where she went. She simply wanted a school that would help take the financial burden off her mother. She chose Ball State University. The four-year University in Muncie, Indiana paid for room, board and tuition. But college is expensive, and there were miscellaneous fees for things like books and car maintenance. That’s when the Chicago Housing Authority’s Scholarship Program assisted.

“I receive $1,000 every academic year from CHA,” Stephens said. “If someone can give me $1,000 a year, every year, it’s a relief to my mind. Ball State is a 3 1/2-hour drive. Things like oil changes and books are never included in scholarships. One book alone is about $200. So, it has definitely helped me.”

Stephens will graduate in May with a Bachelor of Science in Criminal Justice and Criminology.

Stephens was always an honor student. She grew up in a single-parent home in Stateway Gardens, surrounded by friends and family. When she was six years old, she moved when Stateway was demolished. But her memories of Stateway are good ones.

“My entire family lived in Stateway; so that is pretty much all I knew,” she said. “I was absolutely always on the honor roll. I never had issues in school. I was the second person in my family to go to college. My mom was the first to attend college, so she understood that college was a gateway to a better life. Everyone was in bed by 9 p.m. We got proper rest and food. I come from a large family, so I had cousins galore. It wasn’t difficult because we had a strong family and we never strayed away from each other, even when we left Stateway. We were always together.”

Stephens graduated from Simeon with a 3.2 GPA and began looking for colleges.

“A degree is a degree, it didn’t matter where it was from,” she said. “It was about who was going to give me a scholarship. I applied to about 15 schools, and the University Iowa and Ball State were my final two choices. Ball State offered the largest scholarship, so that is the school I chose. I’d never heard of it before I came here.”

Stephens chose Criminal Justice and Criminology as her major because, growing up, she saw how family members were treated unfairly in the criminal justice system.

“I wanted to be better than what I saw when I witnessed family members being treated horribly while they were on probation,” Stephens said.

Done with her coursework, Stephens is currently an intern at the Marion County Adult Probation Division in Indianapolis – the final leg of her college career. Once she graduates, she hopes to become a probation officer, and – just like in college – she’ll go where the opportunity takes her.

“It’s just adapting and getting the job done,” said Bussell, a former Englewood resident who grew up in the Chicago Housing Authority. “Coming from where I come from, you have no choice but to be resourceful in order to succeed in life.”

After graduating from Simeon High School, Bussell earned a Bachelor of Science in Business Administration from Eastern Illinois University. She is currently working toward a Master of Science in Cyber Security.

CHA helped jumpstart her career. She attended CHA-sponsored coding camps the summer after graduating from high school.

“It really provided that hands-on experience,” she said. “When I got to college, I continued educating myself. I knew it was a good field to get into. It was a good field that was growing. I knew it wasn’t going anywhere.”

Today, she runs her own business, consulting on a range of industries – everything from locksmiths to pizzerias to real estate.

“I do different things - marketing, creating websites, search engine optimization,” she said. “Every day, it’s a different fire to put out. You learn something new to help clients, especially in times like these. It’s definitely been a fun journey.”

Today, in addition to running her own company, Bussell sits on the Springboard 2 Success Associate Board, helping and encouraging other students.

“It’s a way for me to give back,” she said.