

# METRO MIAMI

## Aid for scholars targeted for trims

College students may get less help

BY HOLLY STEPP  
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TALLAHASSEE — Amid the late-week wrangling over the state budget, Florida's senators served notice for the first time that the state's hugely popular Bright Futures Scholarships program — which has provided tens of thousands of students with a free college education — may no longer be untouchable.

**Bright Futures is one of the state's biggest success stories.**

The Senate voted 20-10 on Thursday to cut back the merit-based program for top high school graduates that covers tuition and fees at public and private universities and colleges around Florida.

The measure, however, probably won't pass into law during the special session. The bill doesn't have a counterpart in the House, and that chamber is unlikely to take it up, said Rep. Evelyn Lynn, chairwoman of the education budget committee.

But the Senate's action may pave the way for permanent changes during January's regular legislative session. Proposals to tighten the financial reins on Bright Futures have been introduced every year since the program was established in 1997, and all have failed.

"I think there is a growing consensus that something has to be done about Bright Futures continuing to be a drain on our revenues," said Sen. Don Sullivan, R-St. Petersburg, who introduced the trim-back measure this week.

Sullivan, ironically, was one of the original sponsors of Bright Futures.

Still, he says the message and the promise to students is still the same: "If you work hard and make good grades, we will help you pay for college."

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**RELIEVED:** Helga Luest, sitting next to her husband, Randy Byrd, grasps the hand of Hialeah detective Sgt. Bassam Fadel, far right, after hearing good news in the courtroom on Friday.

PHOTOS BY CHARLES TRAINOR JR./HERALD STAFF



**'SERVED TIME':** Stanley Cornet asked for sentence reduction.

## HEALING WORDS

Tourist-victim testifies about pain to try to keep attacker in prison

BY DAVID GREEN  
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One morning last month, Helga Luest was about to leave her Washington, D.C.-area house to take her terrier for a walk when the phone rang.

It was the Florida Department of Corrections, informing her that an inmate named Stanley Cornet could soon be let out of prison.

Luest went pale.

She immediately realized what she had to do: fly to Miami to stop his release. On Friday, she testified at a hearing before a Miami-Dade judge about why she believed this man should never be free.

Eight years earlier, at the height of Miami's tourist robberies and shootings, Luest and her mother had taken a four-day vacation to the Florida Keys. But when they tried to return to their car, they got lost in Hialeah — and were attacked by Cornet and a second man.

Cornet sprinted up to their car and kicked out the window. He slugged, slapped and elbowed Luest in the head — and, when she struggled, he bit her arm to the bone.

In 1996, the 31-year-old Cornet was convicted of burglary with assault, attempted robbery and

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## Exec guilt pado book

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BY JAY WEAVER  
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panic attack, Eljallad and Lambert were released.

"There was nothing to hold them for, so we let them go," Howes said.

Another law enforcement source familiar with the incident said Eljallad got a "thumbs up" after a check by revealed Eljallad entered the United States on Dec. 29, 2000, and that his visa expired Oct. 18. The Georgia State Police were notified and told to hold Eljallad until Immigration and Naturalization Services deals with him.

The St. Andrews at Winston Park rental community where Eljallad lives was quiet Friday night.

There was no answer at his second-floor apartment door. All the lights were off in the well-groomed complex.

A call to Eljallad's Coconut Creek home went unanswered. He refers to himself as A.J. on his voice recorder.

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# Tourist-victim faces attacker — again

**TOURIST, FROM 1B**

aggravated battery. Because of his lengthy rap sheet — including another similarly vicious robbery during which he bit another motorist on the shoulder — he was sentenced to life in prison.

The crime wave against tourists eventually faded. Miami recovered from its international black eye. But the attack on Luest forever altered the arc of her life.

Before the vacation, she and her 56-year-old mother had been best friends. They gardened together. They took trips to Manhattan to see Broadway plays. They chatted on the phone through entire episodes of the PBS show *Three Tenors*.

When they returned from Miami — after the hospital treatment for the bite on Luest's arm, after the AIDS and hepatitis tests, after all the statements to detectives — they suddenly found themselves estranged.

**MOTHER WITHDREW**

Luest's mother, Marianne, refused to talk to police. She stepped down from her job as a New Jersey county manager and grew fearful of crowds. She pleaded with her daughter to drop the incident and put it behind them.

But for Luest, a Washington-based producer for a German television network, that was her method of coping. She flew back to Miami a half-dozen times over the next several years — assisting detectives, appearing on *Larry King Live*, exhorting the city of Miami to post better signs around the airport, begging rental agencies to remove stickers and tags from their cars.

This week, Luest was back in Miami for what she hopes is one final time.

From the witness stand she told Miami-Dade Circuit Judge Roberto M. Pineiro how the attack left her with no feeling in one side of her face. She explained that two ruptured discs in her neck have rendered her vulnerable to a paralyzing blow.

**SLEEP PROBLEMS**

She described how she still suffers migraines and insomnia — and sometimes wakes up with fingers bloody from gnawing her nails in her sleep.

But her deepest grief



CHARLES TRAINOR JR./HERALD STAFF

**IN COURT:** Helga Luest, one of the victims in a rash of tourist robberies in the early 1990s, gets ready to testify at the sentencing hearing of Stanley Cornet on Friday morning.

seemed to stem from the broken relationship with her mother.

"We were once so close," a tearful Luest said from the witness stand, answering questions from Assistant State Attorney David Kelly. "But because of what happened, she decided to withdraw, and we've never connected the same way again."

The basis of the hearing was an appeal filed by Cornet himself. He claimed he'd been wrongly sentenced to life in prison because an earlier judge had taken into consideration the second biting attack Cornet had committed — even though it came several days after he attacked Luest.

It was unfair, Cornet reasoned, to consider him a "habitual offender" when the second incident occurred at a later date.

The Third District Court of Appeals ultimately agreed. In August, the higher court ordered Cornet to be sentenced again — this time before Judge Pineiro.

After Luest testified at Friday's hearing, Pineiro granted Cornet the opportunity to speak.

At first, Cornet told his lawyer he had nothing to say. Later, when Pineiro ordered him to stand, Cornet rose and addressed the court.

"I'm sorry about the horrible crime that happened to Ms. Luest," Cornet mumbled. "But

... I've served my time."

Pineiro was swift in issuing his ruling.

He rebuked Cornet for committing the robbery just 35 days after being released from jail on charges of selling cocaine and carrying a gun. He pointed to the devastating toll the attack has taken on Luest.

"I do find there's ample reason," Pineiro concluded, "to sentence you to life in prison."

Cornet shook his head to himself.

At Luest's side were her husband, Randy Byrd, and one of the Hialeah police detectives who worked the case, Sgt. Bassam Fadel. They held her hand and squeezed her knee.

## CAREER AT END

Once a television field producer, Luest was left unable to haul equipment, and her TV career came to an end. Her new goal, she said, is to create a nonprofit organization to help victims of violent crime.

This latest twist in Cornet's case has triggered old grief, she told the court.

"I have nightmares," she testified. "Flashbacks of Stanley Cornet biting me."

But, she added, it has also provided an unexpected well of hope. Terrified that Cornet might be freed, her mother called her recently and asked what she could do to help.

It was the first time her mother had made the offer.

leaving City Hall voluntarily in 1993 after eight years in office. He finished fourth in a 1996 race for mayor of Miami-Dade County, an election he had been favored early on to win.

## IN CONTROVERSY

In 1997, he seemed to have achieved a comeback when he defeated Joe Carollo and again became mayor of Miami.

But any good works he accomplished were drowned out when he became embroiled in controversy after controversy.

And after 111 days in power, an appeals court threw him out of office and put Carollo back in, after a lower court judge ruled that fraudulent absentee ballots — collected by a city commission candidate — had given Suarez the victory.

So as the 52-year-old attorney once again seeks to occupy the second-floor mayoral suite at City Hall, he is not only seeking the power to carry out his vision, he is also seeking political redemption.

Not that he likes to admit this.

Suarez is sitting in the Little Havana restaurant, Ayestarán, eating a Cuban sandwich and drinking a Corona beer in a glass with ice.

Asked whether the need for redemption is fueling his campaign, Suarez looks intently across the table and says he wants to be mayor "to improve the lives of Miami's people."

He begins outlining his platform. He wants to foment development of a privately-owned 56-acre tract of land just south of Interstate 95 and west of Biscayne Boulevard that he would call Miami Place.

He wants to lower the \$325 garbage fee that every household pays annually to \$80 twice a year, for a total of \$160.

He wants to eliminate the \$61 fire fee charged to each household.

He wants to lower the city's property tax rate by 5 percent for each of the next four years.

When Suarez is told that financial experts believe these actions would cause a huge gap in the city's budget, he is unconcerned.

He notes that Miami's city manager said just a few days earlier that city officials had discovered the existence of \$148 million in unspent capital improvement money.

This was important news for the former mayor because he had been claiming since 1996 that Miami had far more cash than anyone realized, that the city's financial problems were overstated. When he

he was fighting for the city, he was fighting for the city. He says, not going to that [Donatella] not a good person the city had

## FACING Q

But aside from he still faces several controversies during his last mayor.

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Fearing he grabbed a piece open her door.

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