



How and Why Geoffrey Stevens Gives Scholarships for Students to Attend an ICSC Event



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With some time on his hands during the pandemic, veteran Florida retail real estate broker Geoffrey Stevens was dwelling on his career and how to make an impact on his profession. From that open-ended question came a concrete action: Stevens has set up an organization that provides scholarships to Florida college students who show an interest in the real estate industry. But these scholarships are a little different.

Stevens' [Florida Retail Scholarships](#), a charitable 501(c)(3) corporation, is now in its third year and offers two main programs. One awards Florida college students \$1,000 each in "pocket money" to use as they wish to further their education.

The other program sends students to the annual ICSC@FLORIDA event in Orlando. Individuals or companies can sponsor a student for \$479, which covers housing for two or three nights, meals, registration for the event and ICSC student membership. That's if the student's school is not an ICSC University Partner, as [ICSC University Partnerships](#) include unlimited ICSC student memberships. The attendees also participate in group mock lease negotiations, as Florida Retail Scholarships' focus is on the brokerage side of the business.

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Another sponsorship route is corporate sponsorships, which help fund the organization's operational costs and overhead as well as individual monetary scholarships. Woolbright Development is the inaugural corporate sponsor. "They have been a champion for us in helping us with some of our scholarships that we have awarded," said Stevens.



Florida Retail Scholarships founder Geoffrey Stevens, in front, with scholarship recipients and Woolbright Development employees in front of the Woolbright booth at ICSC@FLORIDA in August. "The more students we can expose to ICSC@FLORIDA, the better chance we have of turning [scholarship] recipients into future attendees," said Stevens.

Florida Retail Scholarships raises additional money through annual Florida Real Estate Summits, of which it has held three so far. Here, students can network with other industry professionals. Stevens sells sponsorships to local businesses which can present tabletop exhibits in an effort to meet brokers that could help them find locations.

The next fundraiser will be April 18's [FRES Ultimate CRE Networking Fundraiser](#), a tournament at Topgolf Miami Gardens. When each team of six enters, it selects a school to play for. The first place team's school will receive 40% of the available net proceeds, the second place team's school 25% and the third place team's school 15%. The remaining teams' schools split the other 20%.

Stevens said networking events are a good way to introduce students to the world of commercial real estate brokerage. "Networking has always been the hallmark of my real estate career," he said. "If you need information, you need to talk to peers that can help you. I find that the most productive conversations begin in social settings. Most of our real estate deals began as a casual conversation at a networking event and quickly turned into advancement for our clients. ICSC has always been my go-to for networking because the organization provides programs and access to decisionmakers, which is super important to future leaders."

Applications for the ICSC@FLORIDA scholarships [are open now](#). Stevens will interview the applicants and choose the recipients. To date, Florida Retail Scholarships has provided \$7,500 in monetary awards to six students and has sent 30 students to attend ICSC@FLORIDA. Of those 36, 21 are women and 25 are students from historically underrepresented backgrounds. Stevens hopes to double or triple the monetary awards while continuing to send upward of 20 students to ICSC@FLORIDA each year.

In 2023, he brought 12 students to the event, and his goal is 20. "Through the ICSC@FLORIDA scholarship program, our goal is to demonstrate the possibilities that various careers in commercial real estate, especially brokerage, have to offer so students will consider this as a career choice and not a consolation prize." He added: "It is not our goal to get students to get into retail real estate. It is just our goal to expose students to what commercial real estate in general has to offer – whether it is retail, industrial or office – and provide different opportunities for them to consider when they consider their career paths."

One 2023 ICSC@FLORIDA scholarship recipient, Bethune-Cookman University student Shalya Lewis, volunteers for Florida Retail Scholarships' education and organizational outreach committee, helping shape future education programs. "Receiving the Florida Retail Scholarship allowed for my transformative experience at the ICSC@FLORIDA conference, unlocking doors to educational opportunities I had once deemed out of reach," said Lewis. "This scholarship has empowered me to pursue my passions within the real estate industry, instilling a sense of gratitude and a commitment to giving back in the future."

Another student, Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University junior Bianca Holsey, volunteers on the organization's social media committee and helps with graphics for social media posts. "Working with Geoffrey has been truly rewarding," said Holsey. "It's been an honor to discover a new facet of real estate through his guidance. Initially, I never realized my passion for commercial real estate. Being new to real estate, I assumed real estate only revolved around housing, but through network opportunities Geoffrey has presented me, I've learned that is so much more than that. Geoffrey not only opened my eyes but also presented numerous opportunities, from Florida Retail Scholarships to attending ICSC conferences with the help of sponsorship. Beyond that, he provided a platform for me to enhance my graphic design skills and forge a meaningful connection between design and real estate. Initially unsure about the application of my prospective degree, Geoffrey consistently demonstrated not only the potential to be in the market side of real estate but also highlighted the significance of marketing oneself within the industry."

Why He Does It

Stevens became familiar with scholarship programs by happenstance. "I helped a close friend of ours set up and manage a not-for-profit scholarship company to honor the memory of another friend of ours who died of lung cancer at age 58," he said. "That's how I learned about the power of giving back and how scholarships work, and I was hooked!"

Then came the pandemic, which left Stevens with time on his hands. "I started dreaming up what other things we could do. I started reaching out to friends and colleagues of mine, and we set up the scholarship company and we came up with the Florida Real Estate Summit as a vehicle to raise money for scholarships."

Stevens said the organization developed organically: "I really didn't have a business plan for this. I don't have a magic wand. We just started doing the right thing. These are not the [students] that the national companies go after. These are the ... ones that end up doing most of the business anyway but previously didn't have access. What we are doing through our vehicles is providing access and information that will help guide them in their career choices. That is really what it is all about for us."

He recognized that Florida Retail Scholarships would be "a great adjunct" to what the ICSC Foundation does through its [mentoring program](#) but in a different format. "I started recognizing from my colleagues that a lot of students were going to real estate schools," said Stevens, "but the reality was they were going to school to learn real estate development or acquisitions, maybe investment sales or the finance side. They weren't learning anything about the brokerage business and there is no real estate program that teaches the brokerage business, so we started doing summits and raising money. I got hooked on the bug of helping students and giving out money. It is a very exciting thing to be able to do. I enjoy it."

Stevens' younger self could have used a mentor like his older self, it seems. "If I had a mentor and was given some direction when I was a much younger professional, I probably would have been successful 10 or 15 years earlier in my career," he said. The three biggest pieces of mentor advice he tells students now: "Find a career that excites you and that you are passionate about, learn what it takes to become successful in whatever your choice is, and shadow professionals and ask questions."

By Ben Johnson

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