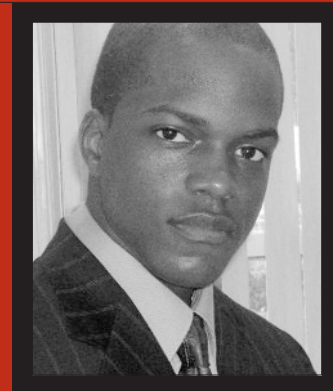
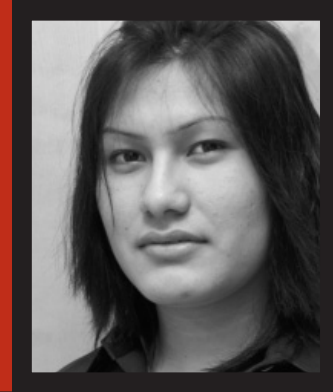


EIGHTH ANNUAL



Child Welfare Fund

Awards for Youth in Foster Care



YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE WRITE ABOUT:

- challenges they've faced in care and how they've overcome them
- the help they've given to others

The College Board

June 19, 2006 • 5:30-8:00 p.m.

Reading by Sharahn LaRue McClung

THE SPONSORS

The Child Welfare Fund

The Child Welfare Fund was established in 1992 by an anonymous benefactor to improve the well-being of children and families in New York City. The Fund supports projects in two broad areas: system-wide reform in child welfare and direct services that prevent foster care placement or improve the lives of children and families.

For more information about the Child Welfare Fund and its programs, go to www.nycwf.org.

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Youth Communication helps urban teens develop the literacy skills, reading habits, and perspectives they need to make thoughtful choices about their lives. Our journalism-based training programs help them develop writing, research, speaking, and leadership skills. Our publication program produces magazines and books which motivate young people to read and educate themselves about important issues.

Youth Communication

Represent: The Voice of Youth in Care
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THE JUDGES

Mike Arsham
Child Welfare Organizing Project

Al Desetta
Founding Editor, *Represent*

Lynne Echenberg
Children's Aid Society

Giselle John
Voices of Youth

Jeremy Kohomban
Children's Village

Laura Longhine
Assoc. Editor, *Represent* magazine

Nora McCarthy
Editor, *Represent* magazine

Carla Spaccarotelli
National Court Appointed Special Advocates

Anne Williams-Isom
Administration for Children's Services

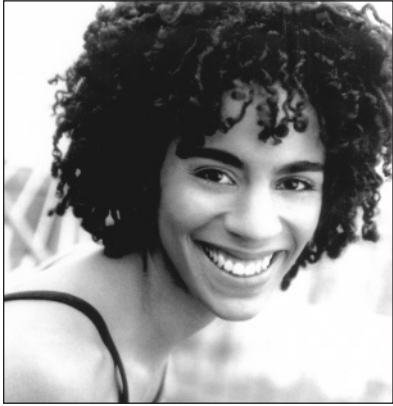
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

These awards would not be possible without the support of the Child Welfare Fund and the generosity of its anonymous donor. The Awards have also received support each year from Robert Danzig, a motivational speaker, former foster child, and former top executive at the Hearst newspaper chain.

The College Board generously hosts the awards ceremony. We would especially like to thank College Board President Gaston Caperton and Youth Communication Board member Chiara Coletti for their help in making this event happen.

Nora McCarthy and Laura Longhine, the editors of *Represent: The Voice of Youth in Care*, managed the selection process. Al Desetta, founding editor of *Represent*, edited the winning essays for this program. Youth Communication's administrative assistant, Diane Bullock, handled the program logistics.

THE WINNERS



Sharahn LaRue McClung

In August, Sharahn, together with co-adaptor Tamilla Woodard and Youth Communication, will present *Here. This. Now.* at the 10th anniversary of the FringeNYC. Sharahn has performed in *Valiant*, adapted by Lanna Joffrey, directed by Tamilla Woodard at the UNYVC and FringeNYC; *Question Love* directed by Hayley Finn at the FringeNYC; *American Myth Project* at Primary Stages directed by Andrew Lensye; *Women on Love* at The Culture Project and Six Figures Theatre Co. directed by Hayley Finn; *Linked* at Hypothetical Theatre Company; *Four* written by Christopher Shinn (Carnegie Mellon Showcase of New Plays); *Beethoven N Pierrot* (Denver Center Theatre); *War Story* (Mill Mountain Theatre); *Unreal City* (Epiphany Theater Company). Readings and workshops include: NGO Commission of the Status of Women, Lark Theatre Company, New Georges, Urban Stages, New Jersey Rep. Co., and Emerging Artists Theatre, and THAW. She holds a B.F.A. in Drama from Carnegie Mellon University

Grand Prize Winners - \$1,000

Kamel Cosgrove, St. John's Home for Boys

Vanessa Fuentes, Safe Space

Martin Garrett, Little Flower Children's Services

Ishmael Kamara, Good Shepherd Services

Dawnae Silvia, Administration for Children's Services

Special First Prize - \$600

Nelson Choi, Forestdale, Inc.

Shannon Couser, Leake and Watts Services, Inc.

Tenaja Jordan, SCO Family of Services

Laura Kirkland, SCO Family of Services

Ashley Williams, Jewish Child Care Association

First Prize - \$400

Leah Alston-Phillips, Good Shepherd Services

Betzaida Calaf, Catholic Home Bureau

ShaRhone Frost, Administration for Children's Services

Harmon Hossain, Seamen's Society for Children and Families

Lloyd Jones, Children's Village

Mariah Lopez, SCO Family of Services

Angel Neal, St. Dominic's Home

Naomi Robinson, Inwood House

Jediare Rogers, Jewish Child Care Association

Natasha Santos, mercyFirst

Hector Serrano, Catholic Guardian Society

Mary Thomas, Catholic Home Bureau

Grand Prize Winner

Seeing the Potential in Me

**Kamel
Cosgrove**

Age: 20

St. John's Home
for Boys

My whole life I've tried not to be a product of my environment. I've tried to take the negative and the positive (the little that's around) and use them as building blocks. For me, guns, drugs, and violence were nothing new – it was everyday life where I'm from. In my family, the career plan was to be a full-time criminal or a functional drug addict (or maybe the "combo deal").

I'm from the Fort Greene projects located near downtown Brooklyn. By no means do I want your sympathy, because that's for someone who has failed or is failing, and I'm neither. I'm someone who has tried to make the best out of the hand I was dealt. But I was heading down a path where success was not on the menu. I was robbing hard-working people, fighting my neighbors, selling drugs to whoever wanted it, and going to school when I wanted to.

I moved around from one family member to another. They said it was because of my behavior. I said it was because of my parents. I've been in care my whole life. I lived with my grandmother the longest. She did the best she could. She told me a lot, but like any other knucklehead, it went in one ear and out the other. I just couldn't wait to hit the streets and do what I thought I did best. After some minor altercations with the law, my grandmother said I needed to be somewhere where I could be disciplined.

I was sent to St. John's Home for Boys in Far Rockaway. There were kids there who were in a similar situation, but I was only concerned about myself. You meet yourself at the group home. By that I mean if you want to drink or smoke, there are homies for that.

If you want to rob and make money, there are dudes for that, too. It's all there. I disregarded the group home rules I didn't agree with, and that was probably all of them.

Many people tried to reach out to me but it went in one ear and out the other. As time went on more and more of my crew went to jail or got hurt real bad, but I couldn't see things clearly. It couldn't happen to me – at least that's what I thought.

Just when I thought everything was going fine, I got caught up in some drama where I was looking at jail time. Staying at St. John's was up to my apartment supervisor and the staff. I knew I was leaving.

To my surprise, they let me come back. They told me I had one more chance, or I was out of there. During my "cooling off" period, many of the staff would have one-on-one sessions with me. They kept asking me similar questions, like "Do you care about your life?" and "You're not going to have forever to make a change." All I kept thinking was, "What could you know about anything I'm going through?" Little did I know that many staff had been in similar situations.

It was at those moments that I started to see things differently. I still had all the bad parts of Fort Greene in and around me, but the good people at St. John's showed me how to tap the unlimited potential I had. College was a funny joke a few years ago. I never thought I would be graduating this year. I am what I am today because other eyes saw my potential, which opened the world for me. ■

Grand Prize Winner



Overcoming Obstacles

Vanessa Fuentes

Age: 21
Safe Space

During my three years of living at Safe Space I faced many obstacles. First, it was hard not being able to communicate with both my staff and peers due to the language barrier. Second, I was discriminated against for being Mexican and a transgendered person. Third, it was hard to get a job in New York City with no education or training whatsoever.

When I came to Safe Space at 17, I didn't know how to write or speak English. Those days were very difficult for me because I couldn't get the support that I needed. Staff did not know how to communicate with me and I didn't know how to communicate with them.

I was very scared. I was afraid of the staff finding out about my legal status and being thrown out of the house for not being a legal citizen. Some of the residents were disrespectful, and said I should go back to my country or that I should never have come to the U.S. Other times they threatened to call immigration and have me deported. I ran away from Mexico because I was being harassed for being gay. I was afraid I would have to run away again and leave my home.

I later learned that my staff knew about my legal status and that they were willing to help me out. I met my lawyer at the Urban Justice Center. She and I worked on my case for several months, and at the end of the fourth month I received my working papers. I was very happy to find out I could start working without being afraid of being deported to Mexico. I knew it was going to be hard to find a job with no skills.

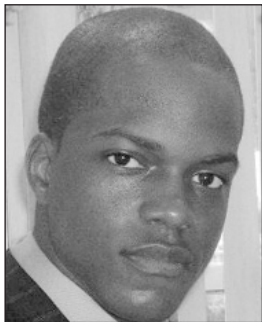
I knew of a program at the New York Language Center where I could learn to speak and write English. I talked to my staff and they agreed that I should attend. After 10 months I learned to speak English fluently. I also enrolled in a program where I could take the GED test, and after three months of hard work I received my GED diploma.

I decided to further my education and in January 2004, I applied and got accepted into the Borough of Manhattan Community College. I am studying political science with a minor in history. My ultimate goal is to attend New York University.

To satisfy my thirst for justice and learning I became involved with various programs while at Safe Space, such as HOPE and the Youth Leadership Council. I became a peer educator and organizer. I went to Washington, D.C. several times, met with state representatives, and talked about issues that affect youth, such as housing and health insurance. During my involvement I learned many skills, including public speaking.

I cannot express with words how much these programs have helped me, in both my personal and professional life. It is because of Safe Space's programs that I learned to advocate for myself and my peers. ■

Grand Prize Winner



Martin Garrett

Age: 19

Little Flower
Children's Services

Runaways Don't Get Far

"Calm down. Can you please stay in one place with your brothers, so we can keep an eye on you until it's time to go?"

I walked over to the window, looking at the fire escape. I rested my palms on the windowsill. I could easily have gotten out.

But I knew from the moment the social worker arrived that I wouldn't actually run. Runaways don't get far. Even if the cops don't catch them, life does. I thought about the image running would present to the foster care agency — that I need to be in a group home, under constant supervision. And I thought about the image that running would present to my family: that I would just run out on my brothers and leave them behind.

But sitting down and doing what the social worker said would be letting the foster care system have total control over my life until I was 18 and kicked out on the streets.

I felt the need to get back at these individuals, because at the time I had no real power against the foster care system. I was only 14, with two younger brothers that I had to care for. In the foster care system they don't care if you've adjusted to a new home. It's just a matter of a van coming to snatch you to the next place.

When I raised concerns that were important to me, they were overlooked or just put off for long periods of time. When I called the agency and asked to see a dermatologist, my social worker told me the agency would "look into it." I'm still waiting.

But I learned to speak calmly with authority figures. It shows I can control my emotions and that I'm in control of a little bit of my fate. Being calm when I'm not expected to be calm surprises people in power. They lose their calm, and some of their power over me.

Yet, I have also had people who were there to support me and help me build my future. Cathy Bowman has helped me develop my reading skills and get higher scores on the SAT. The Children's Defense Fund has been a major influence on me since I was given the "Beat the Odds" Award in 2003. Since then I have gained hands-on experience by working for other organizations.

My future is something I worry about. I do not have a support system. Going away to college was hard and going back is going to be harder. I need assistance in paying for school and in making housing arrangements.

I've learned a lot since that day the social worker took me away to another home. I'm glad I didn't run. I was mad at the agency because I didn't have power, but with people's help I was able to become a better person. My foster care agency has helped me gain scholarships and supplies for college, without the hassle I had grown to expect. Foster care helped me realize there are good individuals out there who can help me with my future goals. ■

Grand Prize Winner



Educating American Youth

**Ishmael
Kamara**

Age: 20

Good Shepherd
Services

Since experiencing a civil war in Sierra Leone and being exiled in Guinea, helping people has been my passion. I have used my bitter experience to educate thousands of American youth. I have been a guest speaker in many college and high school classrooms, as well as for the United Nations. I have traveled to Vancouver and Ohio to be part of panel discussions on war, conflict, and displacement. But the event that stands out the most was my visit to Horace Mann High School in the Bronx.

In 2001, I joined a group of 12 refugee youths from Europe and Africa through an organization called the Global Action Project. As refugees, we decided to use our experience to make short videos of our stories to educate the American public. But our main focus was American youth. We wanted them to be aware of what youth from other parts of the world face every day. We wanted them to acknowledge how privileged they were. They could call phone numbers if they were being abused, and there were people and laws that could protect their rights. Youth in other parts of the world did not have these privileges.

Therefore, when I was invited to Horace Mann, I was delighted. It was the right place to begin my mission. My peers and I spoke to two groups of 50 students each. We shared our testimony and allowed the students to ask us any questions they had. The question and answer period was amazing. The students asked us all kinds of questions, and this made us believe that they listened to our presentations and were thinking about what we had said.

I remember that two blue-eyed and blonde-haired girls came up to us and told us we were brave to stand in front of all those students and share our tragic stories. They said we were heroes for those who were still facing tragedies every day in their lives. We were happy to know that our peers were listening to us and that we were making a difference in their lives.

Because of this, we visited more high schools and colleges, speaking to young people about the war. We protested against the war in Iraq. We made three short movies based on our experiences and developed a website to reach out to other young people around the world. Each day we received emails from youth and adults in response to our stories. ■

Grand Prize Winner



Dawnae Silvia

Age: 19

Administration for
Children's Services

Forgiving My Mother

Out of all the challenges I faced in foster care, my biggest challenge was forgiving my mother. All my life I believed she was my hero and I was hers, until I discovered this wasn't the case. She had found something that replaced all the love that I was giving her. I was no longer that special something that gave her joy. Drugs were.

When I found out my mother had HIV, I was devastated. Even though I was mad at her, I didn't believe that she deserved to be burdened by such a horrible disease. Having found out this information, I had a choice—I could be mad at her for not loving me in the way I deserved to be loved, or I could forgive her and help her make this transition to her new life.

Forgiving her was the hardest thing I ever had to do in my life. It took many tears and many late night conversations with my best friend. After I let go of all the anger I felt like a better person. A tension was released from my body and I was able to be my loving, caring self again.

After forgiving my mother, I began to visit her and help her with everyday chores. I cleaned the house and went grocery shopping once a week. Sometimes she would have a good day and be normal, and some days she was so weak she couldn't even make it to the bathroom. I cleaned up vomit and made sure she ate before she took her medicine. It was hard for me to see the person I once looked up to lose total control of her life. I always knew that when she got older I would have to take care of her. I just didn't think it would be this soon.

My mother fought the disease for a year and a half, until it finally consumed her on Sept. 22, 2003. She died alone in her apartment and was discovered by the neighbor next door. I wish I could've been there for her so she didn't have to die alone. I hope she knew that she wasn't alone in spirit.

My mother's death came as a shock to me, even though I knew it was going to happen. It was hard for me to accept the fact that she was really gone. But she put up a hell of a fight to live. I admired the fight in her. I'll use her example to achieve my goals in life. ■

Special First Prize Winners (Excerpts)

Living My Own Dream

Nelson Choi, 22, Forestdale, Inc.

I was in the middle of 7th grade when I went into foster care. My father was the only person taking care of me. I trusted him, but he was very difficult to live with. He abused me whenever he thought I did something bad. He expected a lot of things from me, as do most Asian or Korean parents. When you're Asian or Korean some people automatically label you as being "smart." I was kind of the opposite. I couldn't wait to get away from him when I got older. My father wanted to believe that I would become a lawyer or doctor. All my life I was always pressured to be perfect.

When I was put into care my confidence was very low. It was more than being alone and depressed. I felt like I didn't want to live my life anymore. There weren't too many people who really understood what I was going through as an Asian person, since there aren't many Asians in care. I was frustrated and puzzled because I didn't know what to do or how people could help me. I could have run away and not listened to the social workers, but I decided to listen to those people and let them help me, because I knew there was something better for me out there.

Today I go to college at the Parsons School of Design. I'm in my senior year and graduating soon. I will age out of foster care and be living my life on my own terms. The things I went through in foster care weren't easy, but I made sure to keep my head up and keep going. I made sure I was living my life and not my father's dream or anyone else's. I'm really glad that I didn't run away or get myself into trouble in foster care. All the things that I did—good and bad—are what make me who I am today. ■

Refusing to Be a Statistic

Shannon Couser, 21, Leake and Watts Services, Inc.

In April 2002, I gave birth to my daughter. The joy of parenthood came to me instinctively. At 16 years old, it was up to me to prevent history from repeating itself. I felt there was already a strike against me because I was in the system. Being torn away from your parents is one of the worst experiences anyone could face, and I was no exception. The challenge of becoming a mother had snuck up on me—it made me realize that I would be responsible for my own actions. It would no longer be only about me. I had to find a job that would enable me to support my child. I refused to become a statistic—an unwed mom working at a fast food joint and living in the foster care system. To fail was not an option.

But who could I turn to? My mom and dad still had their own problems to work out. My resources were limited and I was considering packing my belongings and heading to a shelter. Without hesitation, my aunt reached out to help me. That was the turning point in my life. Leaving all the drama behind, I found a new path in kinship care.

Under the guidance of my aunt and with continued support from Leake and Watts, I rediscovered my life. I thank my social worker, Samantha Askew, for her hard work and dedication in handling my case. Also, Mark Ahanaku and Ms. Tavares from the IL program, Liliana Hernandez from the Legal Aid Society, and the ACS. While pregnant with my second child, I received a diploma in childcare at CTI and graduated with honors. I was on the Dean's list and was president of my class. My two girls are now four and one. I have a two-bedroom apartment and am still working at the Manhattan Nursery School. From being a ward of the state and going AWOL, I've matured and gotten a second chance at life. I've risen above many challenges to become a champion. ■

Special First Prize Winners (Excerpts)

An Advocate for My Peers

Tenaja Jordan, 21, SCO Family of Services

I have always considered myself an advocate for my peers. When I entered high school, I took SPARK Peer Leadership courses on my lunch breaks and graduated as a trained peer mediator. After I moved out of my parents home, I started going to the AIDS Center of Queens County, partially to help make safer sex kits, but mostly to meet friends. But it wasn't until I started attending classes at the Harvey Milk School that I began to think more proactively about how I could advocate.

At Harvey Milk I found myself part of an active, vocal community of young people. I learned that my experience of being kicked out of my parents' home was not unlike the experiences of many Harvey Milk students, and that some of them had not fared as well as I had. Some of my peers grappled with STDs, mental health issues, and educational obstacles, on top of homelessness or unstable living situations. But through our adversity, we agreed upon one thing: we wanted to make sure that we could help other young people avoid having experiences like ours. And the only way to avoid these experiences was by providing support.

At the Hetrick-Martin Institute (which houses the Harvey Milk School), I participated in internships to increase my knowledge of risk and harm reduction techniques. I used this information to facilitate safer sex and HIV/AIDS prevention workshops in New York City public high schools.

This experience has inspired me. I work for SCO Family of Services as a unit secretary in community residential programs. As a former resident I mentor current residents in any way possible. I coordinate an internship that helps residents gain job experience and placements. I also work in the aftercare and permanency department, helping residents transition smoothly out of their placements.

I'm currently enrolled in college, and when I graduate I want to be a foster care caseworker. ■

Returning the Favor

Laura Kirkland, 19, SCO Family of Services

I realized I had a lot of help and support in my life, and I was determined to return the favor. I joined the SADD Club (Students Against Destructive Decisions) at my school. I became vice president of the club. I was responsible for many of the programs we held. I scheduled events in the schools and community. I went to the local middle schools to talk about destructive decisions. I hosted a Thanksgiving food dance.

Unfortunately I changed school districts, so when I joined SADD again it was a totally different club. It focused solely on drunken driving. I wasn't against this, but teens do more than drive drunk. What about decisions such as drugs, sex, and violence? I stayed in SADD and participated in plays for middle school students during Drug Awareness Week. I joined the Peer Counselors Club, to teach my peers how to handle stress, conflicts, and other things. And my peers taught me that my horrible life wasn't so horrible.

Every Christmas and Thanksgiving my friends and I adopt a family. In 11th grade we had a family whose house had burned down. So my best friend and I personally made their Thanksgiving dinner. At Christmas we bought them the basic necessities they would need when their house was finished being rebuilt. Last year I spent time with fellow Peer Counselors feeding the homeless in New York City.

I have so many plans this year on how I want to help out the foster care system. I don't know where to start. I think I'm going to talk to my agency director about starting a peer counseling group in my agency. ■

I Got Her Back

*Ashley Williams, 14, Jewish Child Care Association
(Pleasantville Cottage School)*

I remember one time when a close friend of mine named Kelly had a big black and blue bruise on her neck. I knew that something was wrong, so I asked her if she would talk about what happened. She told me that her boyfriend got mad and hit her. Now, when I say this man hit her, he hit her bad. He flung her around in broad daylight like a rag doll. I asked her why she didn't leave him, and she said that she loved him. I didn't raise my voice when I asked her that, because I know what it feels like to love someone who mistreats you. That's the relationship I had with my mom, and that's why I'm in foster care.

I gently asked if he loved her, then why would he hit her? She understood, but I don't think she really believed it. She said that he would never do it again. That's what I used to think about my mom.

I told her that it would happen again, but that she could break away if she wanted to. I even told her that I would go with her to talk to her staff and that even if she cried I would be there with her all the way.

The next day I was with her when Kelly told her boyfriend that it was over. He looked at her like he wanted to kill her and I quickly grabbed her. I hugged her and we left his sorry looking behind right there.

I'm not going to tell you it was easy. Kelly cried and was very sad for about two weeks, but I was always there for her. She eventually moved on and now she is happier than ever. I also realized that Kelly could help me. When I'm down, I ask for her advice. She even told me to start writing down my thoughts and that one day I could publish a book. I am motivated to do the right thing and not stay sad for too long. Now, when I have a hard decision to make, I turn to Kelly. She's got my back, and you already know that I got hers. ■

First Prize Winners (Excerpts)

Answering Questions No One Ever Asked

Leah Alston-Phillips, 22, Good Shepherd Services

The biggest challenge I faced in the foster care system was adjusting to living with so many other residents. To be with 19 other girls from all different walks of life, beliefs, and backgrounds was very difficult for me. I was rebelling against the program's point system, which is how they measured our actions and behavior as a way to calculate our curfew and allowance. My social worker at the time, Brenda Tully, would not tolerate my negative attitude. She said, "It isn't who you are."

When an older, Caucasian woman like Brenda spoke about knowing a young black girl from Brooklyn, it sparked my interest to see what she thought she knew. However, she had such a positive attitude about everything that she made me open to change. She helped me "talk the anger out of my heart." She took the time to ask me questions that no one had ever asked me. She challenged me to think about who I was as a young lady and how my actions made others feel. She slowly but surely taught me to respect my own feelings, as well as everyone else's.

After spending some time writing my thoughts in a journal that Brenda gave me, I started going on walks in the neighborhood with her and the other girls in the house. We talked about what we liked, didn't like, and things we enjoyed. The feeling of being part of something made it very easy for me to be more understanding of my situation. Brenda's effort means more to me than words can express.

Today I'm a supervisor at U.P.S. I just bought a condo. I spend my free time giving back to the agency that took such good care of me. ■

No Strings Attached

Betzaida Calaf, 19, Catholic Home Bureau

I can remember helping others since I was a young lady. For instance, at every home I've lived in, I have helped my foster mother by doing the cooking and cleaning, and giving advice when called upon. By the same token, I have had the unique privilege of growing up with two sisters and four brothers, and throughout my life

they have been instrumental in helping me through my endeavors. I crave the opportunity to help them, asking for nothing in return, no strings attached.

I have a younger brother named Gabriel ("Gaby"), who is 13. I help him with his homework. I help prepare him for tests. I want to help him succeed and work toward fulfilling his hopes and dreams.

I apply this principle to everyone I am close with, whether it be my inner circle of friends, my siblings, or my foster mother.

A few months ago my friend's sister, Jasmine, needed help with a cover page for a religion project, so I helped her as best I could. Evidently she was elated with my help, for she walked away with a brilliant cover page, a grade of "A," and a smile on her face that was priceless. ■

It Doesn't Hurt to Say It

ShaRhone Frost, 18, Administration for Children's Services

I helped my little brother celebrate his 15th birthday. That might not seem like such a big deal because sisters and brothers are supposed to have each other's backs, but unfortunately some families have to grow to that stage.

My brother and I are close in age, but we don't really communicate with each other. We don't always say, "I love you." We have our occasional arguments and then we have our moments where it's just pure fun. But there's more to the story.

There are times when my brother feels that no one loves him. He feels that way because he was raised in a different home for most of his childhood and when he came to live with my cousins and me, he didn't feel comfortable. Because of his discomfort, we excluded him from our activities and he became distant. I take responsibility for that, but I try to conduct myself better now that I'm older.

His birthday was approaching, but I didn't mention it to him. I knew he would think that everyone forgot, but my point was to show him that his big sister would always be in his corner. When I got home at about 7 p.m. I gave him his gift. I knew for sure he would like the gift, because I know how to shop. I was surprised the next morning when I saw my card standing up on his night

First Prize Winners (Excerpts)

table. I guess it really meant something to him.

I know it's the small things in life that count, but I never thought that a gift and a card would bring my brother and me together the way it did. We know the love is there, but we both learned that it doesn't hurt to say it every once in a while. ■

The Entrepreneurial Spirit

Harmon Hossain, 15, Seamen's Society for Children and Families

One day I was riding in the car with my program's supervisor, and I asked her if we could plan an overnight trip to Hershey Park for the 14 teens in the program. When she said that the trip wasn't in the program's budget, my entrepreneurial spirit took over.

That same day I was on the computer for about two hours and I typed up a proposal to raise the money. I stated that I would sell pastries, juice, soda, cookies, brownies, donuts, and other delicious goods. I arranged a meeting with the CEO of the Seamen's Society and I was granted four days to raise the money.

I started on the 4th floor of my building selling my goods, and eventually ended up in the lobby. I was amazed when I raised \$517 in just four days.

Unfortunately, that was not enough money to take an overnight trip to Hershey Park, but it was enough to take a day trip to Dorney Park in Allentown, Pa. ■

Setting a Positive Example

Lloyd Jones, 17, Children's Village

I suffered a devastating loss when I was 11 years old. My father died and my family fell apart. I became a ward of the state and was placed in a residential facility. I was torn away from my mother and sisters. It was not a preferred situation, but along the way I met people who helped me become the young man I am today.

The definition of help is to give assistance to another in time of need. I haven't always done helpful deeds in the past, but I understand life much better now. I've seen how good deeds have helped me. Now I feel the need to

help others.

I have begun by volunteering in my community. About four months ago I helped out in a local store when the supervisor was low on staff. I washed the cooking utensils, swept and mopped the floors, wiped down counters, and assisted customers. Another time I helped at a youth hip hop event, where I set up chairs and took them down afterwards.

I hope to set a positive example for others, in the way that people have been positive role models for me. If we all did a little something for someone, life would be wonderful. ■

An Activist Since Age 13

Mariah Lopez, 21, SCO Family of Services

As far back as I can remember, I have always hated to see others suffer. It didn't matter if they were refugees on TV starving from famine, or people here at home struggling to have their voices heard. I've always believed that it is the job of those who see suffering to do all they can to alleviate injustice, even in the smallest ways.

I have been an activist since age 13. I have done work in the field of HIV/AIDS. I have demonstrated against police brutality and the criminalization of "survival crimes" by transgendered women.

The issue closest to my heart, though, has always been other youth like myself— young people who encounter violence, mistreatment, and systematic discrimination simply because of their gender identity or sexual orientation. I know far too well how it feels to be lonely and frustrated beyond words— not being able to dress as you like or to show affection to the one you care for.

A lawsuit that I filed against ACS regarding discriminating dress code policies was made an Article 78 proceeding, so that the outcome would benefit all youth in foster care. We won the right to dress in clothes that make us feel comfortable, regardless of gender. ■

First Prize Winners (Excerpts)

A Leader, Not a Follower

Angel Neal, 18, *St. Dominic's Home*

While upstate at the Highland Residential Center, I was considered one of the best residents on campus. I had made up my mind that I wasn't going to be a follower any more. I was going to be a leader. I started helping other kids who came to my unit. I helped them get through their schoolwork when they had trouble in a subject. I helped kids in their group counseling assignments. I helped kids see how it was better to follow the rules while they were at Highland.

After I was released from Highland, I was discharged to a group home in North Babylon. During my two years in the group home I was a role model who everyone looked up to. I helped kids understand that this was just one point in their lives, and that they would grow from the experience. While at the group home, I played basketball at North Babylon High School. I always gave my teammates positive advice, either about school or on the court.

I also did volunteer work at a nursing home every weekend. I would help bring the elderly residents to the activity center for coffee and donuts. I would talk to them and make sure everything was alright with them. Now I volunteer at the Bellport Middle School, in sports and dance programs for kids.

So for me, helping others is very important. It can mean the difference between someone being on the streets and someone being safe. Or it can be the difference between life and death. ■

Teaching an Adult to Read

Naomi Robinson, 17, *Inwood House*

My most memorable experience was helping a mother of six children learn how to read. She had trouble with reading because she only finished junior high school. At first she was ashamed she couldn't read, so she didn't want to learn. But she slowly began to open up to me. Teaching her how to pronounce words was easy. She quickly got the hang of it, and her accomplishment made us both proud.

After reading little books, such as *James and the Giant Peach*, we worked on her comprehension. At first it was a

bit difficult for her, but she quickly began to understand books. After about three months, she developed good skills. She also showed an interest in reading books on her own.

I decided to try to read *Lord of the Flies* with her. At first she was skeptical, but we began to read the book and to my surprise she understood the symbolic meaning of the characters.

After about a week I decided she didn't need my help anymore. I lost a student, but gained a friend. ■

Helping the Elderly

Jediare Rogers, 18, *Jewish Child Care Association*

When I was living on Long Island, I volunteered in a nursing home. I made arts and crafts with the elderly, such as beads, necklaces, and cards. It was such a joy to experience them being so happy to see us. Every time we walked into the room, I could hear the elderly ask what we were doing today, and when we left they asked when we were coming back.

At Christmas we made them cards, sang carols to them, and gave them gifts. Sometimes we went to their bedrooms, held hands, and prayed for them to get better. I've attended three funerals of people I've gotten close to. The tears came even more when no family members were present. When I think about it, I've been through a lot, but there are people who have been through a lot worse than me. ■

A Question for Alexis

Natasha Santos, 18, *mercyFirst*

"What the hell is she doing in the boy's bathroom?" asked Mr. Van, one of the teachers.

"I don't know. She's just another kid with a problem, but it's not my problem," said the head teacher.

I turned to look at the girl. Her name was Alexis and she was about 4 ½.

When I looked at her, I saw myself at 6—a girl who felt the world had already given up on her. Everyone felt I wasn't their problem, so it was left up to me to defend

First Prize Winners (Excerpts)

myself against my uncle.

For weeks, as a volunteer in the classroom, I had watched her strange behavior – touching the boys, sneaking into the boy’s bathroom, the way she played with dolls. Her behavior seemed unnatural and understandable at the same time.

The other kids thought Alexis was strange and stayed away from her. The teachers ignored her raised hand and disregarded her tears. I tried to pay special attention to her. I smiled at her constantly and patted her head. But I felt there was something more I should do.

I took her into a room one day and asked, “Alexis, is there anything wrong?”

No answer. She just looked away with tears welling in her eyes.

I don’t remember how long I sat there waiting, but finally she said, “I wish I could go far away.”

“Why do you want to go away?” I asked, near tears myself. Six-year-old Natasha knew the answer, but 17-year-old Natasha needed verification.

But it wouldn’t come. She didn’t trust me enough. I couldn’t make her trust me. She simply said she missed her brother, who was upstate for the weekend.

“Oh,” I said, knowing how deeply I had failed her.

I told one of the teachers about our conversation, but he pronounced it “bullcrap” and walked away. I told Alexis’s mother, but whether I made a difference remains to be seen.

I hope I helped Alexis know there are people out there willing to help her, if she is willing to open up. Probably, though, she will forget about our conversation, until she’s 17 and happens upon another Alexis. And maybe she’ll be willing to help, when others are not. ■

Giving Back to the Community

Hector Serrano, 18, Catholic Guardian Society

One way I’ve helped people was at the Kingsbridge Heights Community Center. They were just starting a reading buddy program, to help elementary school kids learn to read better. We let the kids pick a book of their choice and we would read it to them, and then allow them to read. We helped them understand what they were reading and assisted them where needed.

The center faced budget cuts and the teen program was almost shut down. The teens of the neighborhood did not want this, so as members of the youth council we traveled to Albany for teen advocacy day. We talked to the politicians who could help the fate of our program, and spoke about how the reading program helped kids. Thanks to our joint efforts, the community center got the funding it needed. That’s one way I’ve helped the community I’m a part of. ■

Volunteering in a Homeless Shelter

Mary Thomas, 20, Catholic Home Bureau

I worked one summer as a volunteer at a homeless shelter in the Bronx. I did photocopying, stapling, sent faxes, and did filing. Sometimes I was asked to fill in as the receptionist. I also worked with kids at the shelter’s daycare center. The kids were difficult to handle and you had to keep an eye on them. I helped them with reading, writing, painting, and sometimes drawing. On Fridays we went to the zoo, which was very scary for some of the kids.

Volunteering gave me good experience which I can now use anywhere. It exposed me to certain things that I didn’t know about before. At the end of the summer they surprised us with a big lunch and a lot of presents. I also received a certificate from the agency for doing a good job. ■

Thank You to
the Adults Who
Nominated this
Year's Winners

Stephen Alexander, Jewish Child Care Association
Rev. Jeanne Baum, Old S. Haven Presbyterian Church
Laura Bell, Safe Space
Beatriz Carmona, Catholic Home Bureau
Lashauna Cutts, Jewish Child Care Association
Gabriel Feldberg, NYC Department of Education
Elise Gelbman, Good Shepherd Services
Delia Giunta, St. John's Home for Boys
Robert Gutschneider, Administration for Children's Services
Liliana Hernandez, Legal Aid Society
Rachel Javorsky, Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services
Joann Neal, SCO Family of Services
Mary Noto, SCO Family of Services
Ryan Pryor, SCO Family of Services
Beverly Robinson, Children's Village
Lynn Schnurnberger, Foster Pride
Victor Seltzer, foster parent
Vivian Troche, Good Shepherd Services
Melissa Velazquez, EARS
Edwina Webster, Legal Aid Society
Yolanda Webster, Inwood House
Jessie Wilson, Administration for Children's Services



Thank You to
the Agencies
that Provide
Services to this
Year's Winners

Administration for Children's Services: ShaRhone Frost, Dawnae Silvia
Catholic Guardian Society: Hector Serrano
Catholic Home Bureau: Betzaida Calaf, Mary Thomas
Children's Village: Lloyd Jones
Forestdale, Inc.: Nelson Choi
Good Shepherd Services: Ishmael Kamara, Leah Alston-Phillips
Inwood House: Naomi Robinson
Jewish Child Care Association: Jediare Rogers, Ashley Williams
Leake and Watts Services, Inc.: Shannon Couser
Little Flower Children's Services: Martin Garrett
mercyFirst: Natasha Santos
Safe Space: Vanessa Fuentes
St. Dominic's Home: Angel Neal
St. John's Home for Boys: Kamel Cosgrove
SCO Family of Services: Tenaja Jordan, Mariah Lopez, Laura Kirkland
Seamen's Society for Children and Families: Harmon Hossain

