

Voices For Children: It Takes A Village Program

FROM FOSTER YOUTH TO COLLEGE GRAD

In some ways, Denise McArthur was a typical student at Miami Norland Senior High in 2011. Like many teenagers, she enjoyed listening to music, dancing and performing spoken word poetry. She even had dreams of going to college.

But unlike most of her classmates, McArthur was a foster youth and was about to “age out” of the system. She was turning 18 and would soon be considered a legal adult. Realistically, that meant that attending college might just remain a dream. In fact, only three percent of foster care alumni complete a bachelor’s degree by the age of 25.

However, McArthur was determined to make sure that didn’t happen to her. And thanks to the “It Takes A Village” Program at Voices For Children Foundation, it didn’t.

While the mission of Voices For Children Foundation is to ensure that every abused, abandoned and neglected child in Miami-Dade has a court-appointed Guardian ad Litem as well as access to resources, they recognized a need to help children after they turn 18. It Takes A Village program (ITAV) was established in 2012 to help aged-out foster youth successfully attend and graduate from college. The program is generously funded by the Zyman Family Foundation.

“We are proud to support a program that helps people help themselves,” says Jessica Zyman Boyd. “Our goal is to graduate students. Education empowers them to become financially independent and take control of their own lives. Some of these kids have never had stability, and this program can help break the cycle.”

Just three years since its inception, the program already has sent 15 students to college. McArthur is pleased to be one of them.

As soon as she was accepted into Florida International University, she realized that tuition was not the only expense she had to worry about. She became discouraged and started thinking that her dreams of attending college may not come true. Then she found out about ITAV.

“I received some grants and scholarships to help with tuition, but that was not going to cover everything. ITAV helped me with housing, transportation, food and school supplies. They treated me like a family and took care of my personal needs and finances, so I could focus on school,” McArthur says.

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To ensure more foster youth in Miami-Dade can attend college, the Zyman Family Foundation encourages both individuals and businesses to support the program. “In addition to financial contributions for tuition, we need in-kind donations such as gift cards for grocery or retail stores, or discounts on apartment rentals,” says Zyman Boyd.

“ITAV stands out from other programs because it has full transparency. All funds go directly to the kids because there are no administrative costs. It is exciting because we get to know the recipients, form relationships and watch their progress,” she adds.

Thanks to the ITAV program, McArthur continues to make progress. Now 22, she graduated from FIU in December with a degree in communication arts and is living in her own apartment. She dreams of starting a nonprofit organization that exposes at-risk teens to the arts, such as music, dancing, art, and spoken word.

Denise McArthur’s future is very bright. While she has spent so much of her young life in school, one could argue that she actually learned her most important lesson outside the classroom.

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