

# Voices of Youth: A Discussion on Resilience, Homelessness, and Hope

Date: Monday, June 17, 2013

Time: 10:00am-11:00am

Location: 2325 Rayburn House Office Building

The briefing “Voices of Youth” is a facilitated discussion among thirteen formerly homeless youth, who will discuss issues that made a difference in their lives, from education to housing to foster care to health care. The youth are students who received scholarships from NAEHCY/LeTendre Education Fund. Excerpts from their scholarship essays are below.

**Nicholas A. – Marion, NC:** “The reason I strive to do my best is purely selfish – because I want to be the best person I can be and I want my children to have a better life than I have had so far. I don’t want people to judge me by what they see on paper. On paper, you will see that I have a learning disability, that I have not lived at home since I was fourteen, that I have lived in one place or another. My biological father left my mother when I was two or three. My stepfather is in prison. When I was living with my mother, we lived without power and water for months at a time... During all of this time I was and am going to school, making A’s and B’s – rearing myself and doing well in school with no stable base. That shows how committed I am to my goals and to my education... I try not to blame everyone around me for what I was going through, but I chose to do better, to be a better parent than I had, and to have a better environment in which to rear my children.”

*Nicholas, age 20, graduated from McDowell Early College. This Fall, he will be a sophomore at the University of North Carolina-Charlotte, working toward a Major in Civil Engineering.*

**Cray B. – Johnson City, TN:** “Growing up, I moved more than seven times and went to fifteen different schools. I never really had an opportunity to do well in school because we moved around so much. My mom and I went from shelter to shelter to escape her abusive ex-boyfriends. I felt like I was always playing catch up to everyone else around me... I knew if I wanted to graduate and achieve my dream that I would have to dedicate myself completely to my education. I went to classes at Johnson City’s adult education program and graduated in May. I am so proud of the fact that I graduated and I made a 91 out of 100 on the reading section of my college entrance exams. For eighteen years, I have been searching for a place to call home. I have moved in and out of shelters and traveled from state to state. I lived a life that had no stability and I often did not know where I would be staying the next night. Every night, I dreamed of having a place that I could call my home. I say this so you will know how important the concept of home is to me. I have finally found a home at New River Community College and Virginia Sports Academy.”

*Cray, age 20, is studying at New River Community College, working toward a career in sports public relations.*

**Eunsoo C. – Vancouver, WA:** “You might picture a homeless person as a raggedy man on the side of the street asking for change. To me, I picture myself. A happy family was all I wished for, but as a thirteen-year-old girl, I had to watch everything break into pieces. My father had an affair and my parents separated, which caused my mother to sink into depression. Soon after that, she became very ill. Everything disintegrated and I felt left alone with many responsibilities to carry on behalf of my parents... My journey began alone as a homeless student, but soon it became a journey with so many people around me. When I eventually cried out for help, my teachers gave me answers beyond what I had asked for. They gave me shelter and so much love and care. Most importantly, they gave me a chance to learn and to live.”

*Eunsoo, age 20, graduated from Union High School. This Fall, she will be a sophomore at the University of Washington, working toward a major in Pre-Med.*

**Tina G. – Largo, FL:** “Growing up as a child stricken with poverty, substance abuse, and irresponsible parents, my outlook on life was still always positive. I soon realized it was wrong when I was more worried if my parents were going to return home safely from the store, or if the bills were paid, rather than focusing on attending the third grade. With over 25 absences, I managed to pass and go under the radar of neglect. Throughout middle school, I struggled to keep the secret of their substance abuse within the four walls of our temporary home. The instability was getting worse, as my mother sank into severe depression and drug addiction, and my father lost his battle to addiction, which inevitably led to his early death. To balance my life, I concentrated on obtaining a well-rounded education. I looked at school as an escape path, one that was necessary to succeed. I did all I could to escape my reality at home... Throughout all this, my school attendance suffered. Yet, I still maintained a grade point average of 3.5. I continued to stay focused on my studies and my drive to succeed.”

*Tina, age 20, is a junior at Salem State University in MA, where she is majoring in Business Administration with a concentration in Human Resource Management.*

**Tia J. – North Wilkesboro, NC:** “The many years of living within the chaotic environment of my parents’ home taught me many important life skills, such as the meaning of hard work, independence, and perseverance. For as long as I can remember, I have tried my hardest to truly be independent and self-sufficient, although there have been many occasions throughout life that I have had to rely on the aid of friends, teachers, and various others around me to help provide simple necessities such as transportation, school supplies, meals, and sometimes even a place to stay... Throughout life, school and especially mathematics have always been my escape. It was the one stable thing in my life that I could always rely on to remain constant. Becoming a high school math teacher has been a goal that I have been passionate about for as long as I can remember. My desire to attend college, not only to further my own education, but to hopefully further the education of others, is a lifelong dream of mine that I would soon like to make a reality.”

*Tia, age 19, graduated from Wilkes Central High School in 2012. She will be starting her second year at Meredith College in Raleigh, majoring in Social Work and minoring in Mathematics.*

**Savina L. – Kent, WA:** “After school in May this year, I came home to a strange note on my computer. My phone rang and my worst nightmare came true. My mother overdosed on pills and was in a hospital holding room. My mother, my nurturer, the one who raised me, who I just saw that morning, tried to commit suicide. That night I couldn’t stay home, so I slept over at a friend’s house. My family and friends urged me to miss school, but I couldn’t; I had a test... Recently, I’ve been volunteering with the King County Teen Link, which is a help line that teens can call when they are feeling overwhelmed, or considering hurting themselves. Something I like about this program is that it is for teens, by teens. Teenagers are the ones picking up the phones, or going to schools to tell students that they are not alone, that there is hope. If I could achieve anything by getting this scholarship, I want it to be a reminder to students that homelessness is not a road block, it is just a rougher road that leads to a better future.”

*Savina, age 19, graduated from Mt. Ranier High School in 2012. In the Fall, she will transfer from Chaffey College to Riverside Community College in CA, where she will continue pursuing her degree in English.*

**Swami M. – Bolingbrook, IL:** “My experience with homelessness began when I was eight, when my mother became unemployed, and we couldn’t afford rent. We were forced to live in shelters for two years until my mother found employment. Life was somewhat peaceful for a few years, until the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) came into my life and ripped me apart from my mother, as a result of reports of abuse and neglect. I was 12 years old when I was placed into foster care with people who did not know or care about me. I had approximately seven foster care placements during those two years, and about 700 horrifying memories to accompany those placements... From an early age, I learned that going to school was the best way to a secure future. I have stayed committed to getting an education throughout my homeless life. When I lived in

shelters, I fought for my right to attend the same elementary school, though I was out of district. I maintained straight A's while staying in shelters."

*Swami, age 19, graduated from Bolingbrook High School in 2012. In the Fall, he will begin his sophomore year at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, double majoring in Molecular & Cellular Biology and Global Studies.*

**Spencer M. – Sun Prairie, WI:** "I grew up in what is deemed an unstable environment. My mother suffers from bipolar/depression disorder and my father is an alcoholic. Verbal abuse was a natural part of my life. This was life as we knew it for my siblings and me. I vowed at an early age that I would not be like my parents. I also vowed that I would live my life as positively as possible... I kept up my good grades, completed assignments, and turned in everything on time. I was still fully participating in school athletics, the drama club, band, show choir, the PALS program, the National Honor Society, and school in general. I wanted to pursue a career in the sports medicine field as a doctor because I enjoyed my anatomy courses so much and I loved being involved with sports. Because of my career choice, school became even more important to me in order to fulfill my dream career, and I realized I had to work as hard as possible, do my best, stay involved, and prove my parents wrong that I would be a complete failure."

*Spencer, age 20, will be a junior at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, where he is majoring in Exercise & Sports Science and minoring in Biology.*

**Raven M. – Erath, LA:** "After living with my foster mom for close to six years, she adopted me and my younger sister. Then, not even a year later, and three days after my eighteenth birthday, my adopted mom kicked me out of the house. She was physically, emotionally, and verbally abusive to me for years. However, her throwing me out on the street was still a bit of a shock... I know someone was looking out for me at this low point in my life because, quite by accident, a person from the school system rescued me. With tearful eyes, I described the entire situation to both my guidance counselor and a representative of the school system. I was desperately hoping that the school system could prevail where the foster care system had failed... To say that my life was chaotic in those first few months of homelessness would be the understatement of the century. Yet, I never let that get in the way of my schoolwork. I know that education is the only way out of a situation like mine. If I had let my schoolwork suffer, I would have been letting my future go down the drain. I was determined then, and still am today, not to let that happen."

*Raven, age 20, graduated from Delcambre High School in 2012. She is currently working toward a career in pre-med.*

**Casey P. – Lewiston, ME:** "Toward the end of freshman year, a week before finals, I was kicked out of my mother's house. I slept on friends' bedroom floors from night to night, and then stayed with my Dad. About two weeks after the start of school, everything went downhill again. My father was arrested and went to jail for domestic violence after an argument with my step-mom, and three days later my step-mom decided that it was not up to her to provide for me. While I lay awake night after night, I did a lot of thinking as to what my future was going to be like. I knew that I didn't want to have to depend on others to survive my whole life, and I didn't want to have to live paycheck to paycheck, worrying about what obstacle I would have to overcome next, like my parents did. Mary, who is the homeless liaison at the high school, filled me in on a program called Volunteers of America (VOA) that helps homeless youth get back on their feet and into their own apartments. Both my Digital Electronics and Engineering Design teachers really noticed my improvement and dedication on each assignment, and my boost in confidence and cheerfulness. Finally having my own apartment was, and still is to this day, the key to my success."

*Casey, age 19, graduated from Lewiston High School in 2012. In the Fall, he will be a sophomore at Syracuse University, pursuing a degree in Civil Engineering.*

**Zabia P. – Sorrento, FL:** “I was so envious of other kids who had a house and a family who were able to provide for them. I always felt such anxiety about when I would get to shower again, or if I would ever get new clothes, or when I would eat again. I have been diagnosed with high blood pressure this year, and I am sure this is related to the stress that I have lived under my entire life. I vowed to myself that I would get stronger and smarter so that I would never have to live under these conditions again. Since I changed schools so often, I fell behind in English and was informed that I would need to take an online class. Neither my Uncle or mom had internet access in their homes, so one of my friends offered to let me live with his family and this is where I am today. I spent the entire past summer working on this online class and was able to finish and receive an A. Even with all the instability in my life, attending eight different schools and moving eleven times, I have been able to maintain a B average. I long to have my own house and my own family, but realize I can’t do this until I have a stable job, which a college education will provide. I am determined never to live in despair again.”

*Zabia, age 20, graduated from Mount Dora High School in 2012. He just completed his first semester at Lake Sumter State College in Leesburg, FL.*

**Irene S. – San Antonio, TX:** “Regardless of how much I moved, throughout middle school, I would earn high honor roll recognition. I felt proud of myself for being able to keep up my grades. During sixth grade, I lived in a shelter downtown, named the Dwyer Avenue Shelter, for a whole year. After the year was up, so was our time on the North side. My mom had a great job in the shelter where we had resided, causing me to believe that we were actually going to settle down. I’d just begun high school at Thomas Jefferson when my mother fell ill and was hospitalized. On top of worrying about my mother’s health, I had to find a place to stay. The doctors said she wouldn’t be able to work anymore because she was too ill; that’s when I pushed myself even harder. Due to the fact that I lived in a shelter, along with the help of the Transitions Department at my school, I was allowed to attend Thomas Jefferson as a ‘Federal student.’ I received straight A’s throughout my freshman year, sophomore year, and junior year. In my junior year, I was nominated to join the National Technical Honor Society and later became the co-secretary. My senior year, I was ranked number seven in my class, yet I still endeavored to do better.”

*Irene, age 19, will be a junior at Texas State University, where she is studying Social Work and Anthropology.*

**Heather W. – Fort Worth, TX:** “I have had to manage my main priorities: school and work while being homeless as well as disabled. No matter if I had to study on my breaks at work in the noisy break room at my job and after work until 2:00am, I did what I had to do to keep my grades up. Although it is exhausting working 30 or more hours a week plus going to school full time, and sometimes I could hardly stay awake in class, I still did my best to make it to school every day, with the thought in mind that school was going to be my way out of the lifestyle I have been forced to live. I am deeply aware that my children would never have to sleep in a car or move from house to house as I had to do for most of my life. Sometimes I would lack sleep because my hunger would keep me awake throughout the night. But this hunger has grown and shaped into something brand new – it has turned to passion, the desire to always want more for myself no matter how good things seem and never settle for less. I want to have a nameplate on my desk with a title that reads ‘Dr. Wilson’ so I can look at it and remember everything I had to go through to get there. Then I believe I would be able to truly appreciate my life in every aspect possible.”

*Heather, age 20, is a junior at the University of Texas at Arlington. She is studying Social Work.*