



## **The Experts Speak: Youth Add Their Voice to Pre-College Conference**

*ANN ARBOR, Mich., Nov. 16, 2015* – Earning a high school diploma or planning a college career can be challenging for many teens in schools today. But add to that scenario homelessness, mental health issues, or maneuvering foster care and these typical life milestones can seem unattainable.

Led by Michigan's Children Vice President for Programs Michele Corey, a panel discussion at the [2015 Michigan Pre-College and Youth Outreach Conference](#) brought together a handful of youth with inspiring stories of overcoming daunting odds to work through the demands of high school and seek a better future with a college education. Their stories and advice riveted a roomful of service providers, counselors and educators who applauded them for bravely speaking out to spotlight system shortcomings and needed improvements in schools, community services and higher education.

Sara Reynolds of Jackson struggled with social anxiety beginning in middle school and into her college years that left her skipping school and being afraid to eat in the crowded school cafeteria. Even in college, she would throw up before attending class because of her illness. She pleaded for educators to learn the signs of mental illness in youth and for community resources that would help.

"No one really got the mental health issues I was having," said Sara, now a volunteer with the Association for Children's Mental Health. "I didn't have any self-care skills whatsoever. You can teach someone how to study and take notes for class but not how to care for themselves."

Amari Jenson, a junior at an Ypsilanti High School, got into trouble in his freshman year and saw the lure of a life on the streets "with drugs and being a criminal." Instead, he found something that gave him focus "so I could have a better life for myself." Working out with the high school football team and becoming a quarterback, he found motivation to do well in his coursework and look ahead to college.

Brittney Barros, a Canton Township high school senior in foster care, detailed her struggles to continue to get to school when her mother was consumed by drug addiction and the family was living in their car. "I had a lot of mental breakdowns," she said.

Identifying students who wear the same outfits day-to-day or noticing those who keep their heads down to avoid eye contact are signs a teen needs help, she said. Support from a caring teacher, donations of food and blankets from community groups, and transportation to get to school were the "biggest help to help me get through high school," she said.

These young people were supported by the Association for Children's Mental Health, who is championing the voices of young people with behavioral health challenges; the Communities in Schools program in Ypsilanti, that provides intervention services and after-school programs to help students graduate; the Student Advocacy Center, that provides support to young people and their families who have been excluded from school through suspension and expulsions; and Ozone House, a shelter and support center for at-risk

and homeless youth. For Michigan's Children, encouraging youth voice is essential to its mission to ensure policymakers prioritize the needs of the most challenged children and their families.

Prestine Spratt attends Jackson Community College today but recalled when she was nearly expelled for fighting in high school. An afterschool program helped turn things around for Prestine. Sara Reynolds, likewise, said an after-school program helped her develop "youth voice" and gave her a second chance to finish high school.

### **Mentors Making a Difference**

Prestine gave credit to school mentors who helped her get back on track and back to class. "That was the biggest help – someone to look up to," she said.

Brittney said a social worker served as her mentor, accompanying her to her band concerts, and offering rides to other school activities.

Krissy Dristy, today the statewide coordinator for the Youth Peer Support Project, joined the panel to share her story. The Project engages youth who have experiences in the mental health system to work with other teens. Without the support of a "great school counselor," Dristy said she wouldn't have been able to deal with overcoming her anxiety disorder or finish her school coursework and go to college. She not only graduated high school, but was named class valedictorian.

Dristy said youth today need behavioral health and mental health support at school, or should be directed to community-based programs if there are none available at school. "And we can't wait until things get too bad. I had a lot of self-defeating behavior. I hope youth in the future don't have to go through that."

Amari agreed. "You should have more resources for everyone . . . to keep kids out of the streets," he said.

### **Surviving College Takes Planning and Support**

Once youth from challenging backgrounds get to college, there are some tips to help them be successful, Dristy said. Students should be encouraged to reach out to professors with questions and guidance, particularly if they're struggling in class. It's also critical that they have access to help to apply for scholarships and financial aid in order to make informed choices and avoid costly mistakes.

Dristy said students who are struggling with many of the issues represented on the panel need preparation for what college is really like and how to choose a course of study that will make a good career fit. "It's hard and it's expensive," she said.

"I heard it helps you become the person you are suppose to be," added Brittney, who plans to become a social worker and work in music therapy.

Prestine told the audience she nearly dropped out of college after her first week when complications in her housing assignment led to her missing a week of classes. Worried and stressed, she emailed each of her professors to explain her predicament and seek help. Only one responded. "I just wanted to give up and not go to college anymore," she said. "If I hadn't heard back from that one professor, I would have quit."

"The first year is the hardest," Prestine said. "It helps kids if the teachers know your struggles. "