

Lifting our Voices



Emerging Star Award Winner Imani Harris

Native Detroiter Imani Harris spent the majority of her high school career at Renaissance High as a community organizer and youth activist fighting for education justice on the city's east side. Now 23, she continues her work as an education justice organizer at 482Forward, an education organizing group in Detroit, where she manages their communications and research teams.

Imani's educational justice journey began in her sophomore year when she passionately wrote an open letter about her experiences in Detroit Public Schools, then under the control of an emergency manager. The paper was shared on social media and picked up by the local Metro Times and the national media outlet, The Huffington Post. Her outspokenness on difficulties befalling students and teachers landed her before legislative committee meetings and she became a visible advocate in fighting to improve Detroit's educational system. She led local and state-level protests, fighting for gun reform, education reform, and the right for students to be involved in every conversation that concerns them.

Using her storytelling skills to fight for Detroit's most vulnerable youth, she wrote letters to senators and government officials that gained

national traction and enlightened people on student perspectives and experiences. Her written words continued to attract national acclaim and awards. She led a storytelling event in collaboration with Chalkbeat Detroit for students to share how they have been impacted by Detroit's tumultuous education system.

Imani recently graduated with honors with a double major in Journalism and Black Studies from Northwestern University, where she dedicated herself to working in the campus' Black community and becoming a member and subsequent president/coordinator of a student-led organization called the Black Mentorship Program.

Today, she remains heavily involved in the improvement of the overall school system in Michigan and is invested in publicizing and fighting for equitable education for Black students. She continues to fight for education justice at 482Forward, and she has also begun to dream about ways to specifically mentor and empower Black girls.

Her nominator writes: "Once Imani discovered the power of her voice, she has never stopped using it to make change. She is a powerful advocate and is excellent at making space without taking space. She has a huge passion for the youth in the city of Detroit and her life's dream revolves around making sure that Detroit youth, especially young girls, know the power of their voices."

Congratulations Imani Harris!



Emerging Star Award Winner Christian Randle

Christian "Chris" Randle's experiences as a youth in a foster care resident placement from age 13-17, paired with his affiliation with the advocacy work at Park West Foundation in Southfield, has made it possible for the Foundation to identify where real legislative change is needed for young people in and from foster care.

Upon entering his junior year, Chris realized with great disappointment that he had no credits earned during his placement, and was unable to properly enroll as a junior in a regular high school, losing out dual enrollment opportunities, as well.

Most teens his age would be traumatized by the news and hide in shame before considering whether to pick up the pieces and attempt school recovery courses. But Chris took that unpleasant discovery in a positive direction. He spoke with peers and encouraged many youth like him to re-enroll in high school. He talked publicly about his experiences and participated in forums before the Department of Education and leadership at the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services. Chris rose to the occasion and became a sought-after interview for Detroit's major media.

With the help of the Park West Foundation, he enrolled in high school and encouraged many other foster youths to also re-enroll in school. Because of his advocacy and courage, the state's foster youth stipend has increased by 20 percent, the first increase in 12 years, and the list of school-based foster care liaisons has been made public. Recently, state Rep. Stephanie Young invited a team of youth including Chris to review three bills she's proposing.

Today, Chris is 18 years old and the Director of Youth Advocacy for Empowering Foster Youth through Technology at the Foundation. Chris participates in weekly planning meetings and discussions for other planned events. He is doing his schoolwork and continues to identify barriers. He's moved out on his own and has discovered new challenges that require system change in foster care. Attempting to

gain independence and while still under DHHS supervision, he entered independent living with no money or food. His Bridge Card for food assistance was interrupted without warning, and benefits weren't reinstated for three months. The problem of food insecurity among youths from foster care like Chris was listed as the highest urgent need among youths from foster care by the National Youth in Transition Database in 2021.

Chris' nominator writes: "Chris' commitment to his education was also what propelled us to ask different questions to learn that the residential placement contract itself does not require Michigan Merit Curriculum or standard that can lead to a high school diploma or postsecondary opportunities. Chris' trauma of finding out he has no credits while he was working to advance academically helped all of us identify the source of this systemic inequity affecting thousands of children. His strong sense of self has allowed him to detail his challenges and barriers of navigating his education in the foster care system with many others who are facing the same challenges today."

Congratulations Chris Randle!



Emerging Star Award Winner Ryleigh Frisbie

Now a college student with a full-time job and her sights set on becoming a nurse, Ryleigh Frisbie has experienced more loss than the average child. When her biological parents were unable to raise her and her brother, her grandparents adopted the siblings and the newly formed family moved to a small northern Michigan town. As an adolescent, Ryleigh immersed herself in a community of children raised by kinship and adoptive families, and at an early age took on a meaningful role as a peer mentor to other children struggling with the trauma of the circumstances surrounding parental separation.

Over the years, Ryleigh has developed into a persuasive advocate for helping to create safe and welcoming environments for youth who have been in foster care, adopted, or raised by relatives. Since 2015, she has become

an outspoken and active youth advocate for the Adoptive Family Support Network. She's provided testimony during legislative advocacy events, promoted policy changes to improve the lives of kinship caregivers at forums, and assisted support groups and training. She's facilitated youth activities for children at retreats and adoption celebrations; staffed childcare services at these gatherings; and facilitated informational tables at events focused on kinship care and adoption.

Ryleigh is no stranger to the Capitol where she travels with kinship care coalition members to talk about the need for programs such as kinship navigators and the kinship advisory council. Her voice continues to bring clarity to the role kinship families play in the informal child welfare system.

Back home and around the state, she remains a model and mentor for other young people today. For youth from similar backgrounds, encountering a young person who "gets it" helps lessen feelings of shame and increases a sense of resilience.

Her nominator wrote: "I have had the honor to hear Ryleigh share her testimony to help advocate for changes needed in policy and practice to improve the lives of other Michigan kinship youth and families. Ryleigh has faced far more adversity in her childhood and as a young adult than most will ever experience, but her resilience has allowed her to channel those experiences as an advocate to impact change for other youth and families like her own."

Congratulations Ryleigh Frisbie!

Rising Star Award Winner Jeremiah Steen

As a young teen attending the University of Detroit's Jesuit High School, Jeremiah "Jeremy" Steen, now 22, saw a need for arts education when Detroit Schools cut programming due to the system's financial distress. Engaging others, he sought donations, collected art supplies, and started a volunteer program to teach art to city youngsters.

Jeremy, inspired by his high school's motto, "Men for Others," was only 16 when he started his own foundation. With trusted adults serving on his board, he helped raise \$25,000 for a mural project for high school and college-age young people, and the Foundation went on to support 100 youth with paid internships in the arts and culture. In his young life, Jeremiah has sought a wide range of opportunities to advocate for



the amplification of youth voice and equitable opportunities to counter underinvestment in communities and families. In 2018, he became the youngest Jane Goodall Roots and Shoots Fund II National Fellow, which provided him with the opportunity to work with Jane Goodall and strategically design systems to amplify youth voice in policy development.

Coming to the attention of The Skillman Foundation, Jeremiah was invited to join the board in 2022, becoming Skillman's youngest board member and gaining the opportunity to use his voice to advocate for the aspirations of Detroit youth. In a partnership between the Steen Foundation and Skillman, he helped develop Gen-Z Design Sessions, which allow Detroit youth the ability to advise leaders of major organizations — Detroit Pistons, Detroit Horsepower, City of Detroit's Neighborhood Department — and develop implementable strategies that will impact the future of their organizations. And last year, he was among the youngest speakers ever to present at the Mackinac Policy Conference.

Today, Jeremiah also serves on community service boards for the Friends of the Rouge and Detroit Audubon. Statewide, he has joined the Nonprofit Relief Fund Advisory Board for the Michigan Nonprofit Association, advocating for the distribution of \$35 million to youth-led and community-based organizations.

His nominator wrote: "Jeremiah Steen has an unwavering commitment to service, advocacy, and justice for all young people — especially Michigan's youth. He is constantly finding new ways to amplify youth voice across multiple industries and support the mobilization of youth power. He is the co-founder of the trademarked phrase Critical Youth Theory - the intentional resistance of a set of ideas that have historically and culturally stopped young people from holding positions of power by inspiring true innovation and ethical action with a lasting impact. Jeremiah is young, but he is powerful."

Congratulations Jeremiah Steen!