

We Are All In This Together: First Hand Accounts

Michigan Dropout Prevention Leadership Summit
October 20, 2008, Lansing MI

The role of the Youth Panel is to provide participants with stories and faces that illustrate the challenges and work ahead for communities in addressing this issue. Karen Pittman, executive director of the Forum for Youth Investment, is moderating this panel of young people whose experiences connect to this issue from many different angles. Meet our panelists and their supporting agencies...

Bryan Amundson. Bryan is an 18 year old junior from Bay City Public Schools Wenona Center Alternative High School. Bryan is in his third year at Wenona School. Bryan currently lives with his girlfriend and her family, however, his mother and step-father continue to be a supportive influence as they have been throughout Bryan's academic years. He hopes to graduate in June 2009. Bryan was a member of Wenona's basketball team last year which participated in an alternative high school league. Bryan is also a participant in a Workforce Investment Act (WIA) Youth Work Readiness Program through the Bay City Public Schools. Bryan is employed part-time as a server at Lumber Barons Restaurant in Bay City. Bryan was recently accepted into the Bay County Youth Leadership Program.

Agency Sponsor. The Wenona Center, a Bay City Public School education facility, operates a high school curriculum as an alternative education program for students who have been unsuccessful in traditional high schools. In addition to classroom offerings, Wenona offers a credit recovery program, employability skills, and community connections for its students.

Isidro Escot. Isidro Escot is a 23 year old from Holland, Michigan. Isidro attended high school through the 11th grade but did not have enough credits to graduate so was forced to leave school to help his family financially. Isidro is very driven to better not only his future through education, but the future of his family.

Sponsoring Agency. The High School Equivalency Program (HEP) is a federal, migrant, education program designed to meet the special needs of migrant and seasonal farmworkers in pursuit of the Graduate Educational Development (GED). The objective of HEP is to assist these students in preparation and successful completion of GED exams. MSU HEP will provide assistance for placement in universities, colleges, vocational institutions, military services, other post-secondary activities or career positions. The High School Equivalency Program is funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Migrant Education.

Robert A. Olivarez. Cadet Olivarez is 16 years old and was raised in Lansing, but will reside in Holland, Michigan after his graduation from the Michigan Youth Challenge Academy on December 7th. He has been named cadet of the week for Week 10. Cadet Olivarez is currently serving as President of the Student Council. He has held the Platoon Leader position for two consecutive weeks (weeks 8, 9). He was a Squad Leader during pre-challenge and during week 3. Cadet

Olivarez's GPA is 3.73, and his physical training score is 476 out of 500 points. Cadet Olivarez has been recognized three times for his excellent attitude and performance with positive incident reports. He sets the example for others to follow. Cadet Olivarez will be employed at North Shore Asphalt after he graduates from the Academy.

Agency Sponsor: The Michigan Youth Challenge Academy is a one-of-a-kind educational institution operated by the State of Michigan's Department of Military and Veterans Affairs and offers Michigan's high school dropouts or near-dropouts a second chance to earn their GED or improve their attitude and their academics in order to return to high school and earn the more-traditional high school diploma. www.ngycp.org/mi or 269 968-1203

Jessica West. Since the age of two Jessica was raised by a single parent, who was struggling with severe depression. Jessica was diagnosed in high school with depression, and anxiety, and was subsequently placed in Rivendelle, a residential facility located in St. John's for youth struggling with mental illness for 8 days as a result of suicide attempt. In addition to mental illness, Jessica also struggled with substance abuse issues as an adolescent, and was caught using on school grounds twice and was suspended. She skipped school a lot and was at risk of not graduating on time due to excessive school absence. After graduation, Jessica pursued higher education, but dropped out of three schools, WMU, LCC, and University of Phoenix due to distractions with mental illness and substance use. Three years ago, Jessica put herself into therapy, and her mental illness and substance abuse are now under control. Jessica is now attending Spring Arbor University and is scheduled to graduate in July of 2009 with a B.S. degree in Social Work. She has also employed through the Association of Children's Mental Health for the last month as a projects/youth coordinator, and stated that her job is exactly what she wants to do- she has the opportunity to work with youth who are facing similar struggles as she has had. She hopes that her presence in their lives will prevent them from having to face the same challenges she has endured.

Agency Sponsor: The Association for Children's Mental Health (AMCH) is a statewide organization of the Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health. ACMH provides information, support, resources, referral and advocacy for children and youth with mental, emotional, or behavioral disorders and their families.

Jamie Whipple. Jamie is a 16 year old student at Grand Haven High School. She has been a participant in the Journey 4-H Youth Mentoring since 2004. She has been matched with her mentor Michele for almost 3 years. Jamie's older brother struggled academically and dropped out of high school. Jamie has moved and changed schools every year of her academic career. She has lived with numerous family members and has experienced multiple periods of homelessness. She has witnessed her loved ones struggle with alcohol and drug use, the legal system and to maintain employment. Throughout these struggles, Jamie has remained in school, even when it has been incredibly difficult for her. She loves to read. School used to come easily for her but the various stressors in her life make it difficult to keep up with her homework and lessons. Jamie attributes her resiliency to her relationship with Michele and the Journey 4-H staff who believe in her and what she has to offer. Jamie has become a leader. She shared her story on a national webinar for mentor program staff working with at-risk youth, served on the planning committee for two community events and volunteers in her community with her mentor.

Agency Sponsor. The MSU Extension Journey 4-H Youth Mentoring program serves youth ages 8-17 in Ottawa County, Michigan by pairing them with caring adult mentors in an effort to reduce the severity and frequency of their delinquent behavior. All youth come to the program voluntarily and are referred by probation officers, therapists and other community agencies, but priority is given to those youth who are currently systems involved. Michigan State University Extension and the Ottawa County Family Court/Juvenile Services have a strong partnership, which has been invaluable to the success of the program. Participants and volunteers are screened, trained, matched and supported by 4-H staff. Matches commit to spend a minimum of two hours a week for one year in community mentoring endeavors, though many exceed these requirements. The program has been recognized nationally by the National 4-H Council as a Program of Distinction and by the Annie E. Casey Foundation with the Family Strengthening Award.

Marie Woods. Marie entered the foster care system when she was 9 months old. She was adopted by her great-grandmother on her father's side. At age 11, she was taken away from my great-grandmother because of abuse by her father. She lived with an aunt briefly, then went back to a foster home. At 14, she moved back in with her birth mother. She was removed 3 months later, and moved in with her current foster family. She started working for the State of Michigan in Aug 2006 where she remains employed. She graduated from Eastern High School, Lansing, in 2007 and started at Lansing Community College immediately, where she is majoring in business administration. She is living on her own and her long term goal is to own her own business.

Agency Sponsor. Child & Family Services, Capital Area's mission is to strengthen and support children, families, and individuals as they evolve and grow in a changing community. Our goal is to help individuals and families build, strengthen, and repair their personal and family lives by providing an array of comprehensive and affordable services, including: temporary foster care; family reunification; adoption; counseling; substance abuse treatment and prevention; and advocacy and support for child abuse victims and nonoffending parents.