



## Aim Higher 2014 Fellows

### Alabama

#### **Willie Reeves, 21, University of Alabama, Bachelor of Social Work, 2015**

If he could have any super power, Willie would "fly like the wind." Of course, super powers aren't real, but Willie has a real drive and desire to help other young people metaphorically fly like the wind to successful independent adulthood. He hopes to inform his career as a social worker with his own experience growing up in foster care, so that he make a difference in the lives of younger foster youth.

Aim Higher, he believes, is an effective way to reach younger students, help them understand the realities of postsecondary education, and motivate them to success.

#### **Andrew Thomas, 22, Jacksonville State University, Bachelor of Recreational Leadership, 2015**

As an avid sports fan with a talent for engaging young minds, Drew believes that he chose the perfect career field. He is excited about entering the workforce and as a rising senior has already started his job search.

Through the Aim Higher program, Drew hopes to hone the skills that will help him encourage and lead children and teens as they work to achieve their own dreams. He believes that postsecondary education is the key to achieving one's goals and having a successful life, but as a "huge Alabama football fan who loves to laugh and have a good time," he knows that fulfillment comes from being well-rounded with diverse interests.

### Arizona

#### **Zakeeyah Rajeeyah Habeel, 19, Arizona State University, Bachelor of Pre-Medicine, 2016**

Zakeeyah's ultimate goal is to become a pediatrician or family doctor, but her passion for helping people extends both ways as shown by the hours she spends volunteering at a hospice in her local community. The most important person in her life, she says, is her baby nephew.

Being a part of Aim Higher will allow Zakeeyah to help others and also develop the skills needed to achieve her personal and professional goals. She wants to share with her younger peers in foster care about the importance of college and the many doors it can open in your life. "I think it is all about presentation," she says. "I do believe teens in high school will listen because no one wants to stay in the same place; people always want to excel."

## California

### **Bette Maisel, 25, Notre Dame de Naumr, Bachelor of Art and Psychology, 2015**

Bette, who plans on applying for the Peace Corps after graduation, is outgoing and enthusiastic. She loves talking to people and hearing what they have to say - even the person in the next seat on an airplane, she says, because she knows every encounter is a chance to learn something new. Proof of this, for Bette, is the time she was in an accident and was hospitalized for eight days. She will never forget her nurse, who "took a special interest in me. Her invaluable advice about the importance of education and independence are a huge reason why I decided to quit living my life from dead-end job to dead-end job and start envisioning a brighter future for myself."

Bette is excited to be a part of the Aim Higher program and looks forward to talking with foster youth, social workers, and foster parents about the importance of postsecondary education. "Attending college has helped me find my purpose in life, and I am passionate about the arts as an outlet for self expression."

### **Gabriel Mendez, 21, Fullerton College, transfer degree, 2015**

Having just completed his first year of college, Gabriel is still uncertain of his future goals; he is looking at careers as diverse as firefighting and counseling. He has been taking advantage of his school's career center, researching the majors offered at four-year colleges, and talking with his advisor through the Educational Opportunities Program (EOP).

Gabriel believes that foster parents and social workers should make it a priority to communicate with foster youth about the importance of postsecondary education. As a foster child, he felt that his academic needs were neglected and he had to "learn the hard way" and find the resources and information that he needed to enroll, attend, and succeed in college. "I am grateful," he says, "to Foster Care to Success for giving me the opportunity to attend college and pursue my dreams."

### **Lilly Pan, 21, Saddleback College, International Studies and Philosophy transfer degree, 2015**

Upon graduation from Saddleback College, Lilly plans to attend the University of California to study law. She is excited to learn about the different facets of law to see what will suit her best and where her specific talents lie. Lilly is fluent in Chinese and has been learning Arabic; in fact, her Arabic teacher along with her father have inspired her to learn good habits and always do her best.

Lilly knows that although sometimes teenagers are too caught up in "issues they think matter that aren't really part of the big picture" to listen to advice, "foster youth need to understand that college is serious business and there are real consequences if you don't fulfill your responsibilities." She believes

that the Aim Higher experience will teach her how to share her skills and talents to help others achieve their educational dreams.

## **Colorado**

### **Mercedes Taylor, 20, Colorado Mesa University, Bachelor of Criminal Justice, 2016**

After graduation, Mercedes hopes to join the Mesa County Sherriff's Department. Eventually, she would like to become an officer in the K-9 unit and ultimately, become a detective in the special victims unit. If she could have any super power, it would be the ability to speak with animals - perfect for her chosen career as an officer in the K-9 unit and ultimately as detective in the special victims unit!

Mercedes is excited about the Aim Higher program's peer-to-peer vision of motivating foster youth to pursue postsecondary education with a realistic outlook. As a high school student, she says, "I hated being lectured to by adults." Listening to and connecting with peers, she believes, is easier for teens. She is committed to using her own experiences to encourage foster youth to pursue their dreams and wants them to understand that postsecondary education offers many opportunities.

"Attending college has changed my life. This experience has showed me that I really do have ability to succeed and achieve great things in my life!"

## **Illinois**

### **Nicole Everett, 18, Kentucky State University, Bachelor of Social Work, 2017**

Originally from Colorado, Nicole Everett lives in Illinois but attends Kentucky State University. She aspires to use her degree to become a probation officer or counselor within the juvenile court system. She wants to use her career to "make people feel more appreciated. Sometimes it's not about what you buy someone or what you can do for them ... sometimes all it takes is a simple conversation and a change in actions."

As a former foster child, Nicole encountered negative assumptions and low expectations; she is committed to changing these perceptions for her younger peers in foster care and she knows that Aim Higher can help to do this. "I believe in helping youth build solid foundations that will allow them to lead positive and fulfilling lives."

## **Maryland**

### **Lacresha White, 23, Frostburg State University, Bachelor of Human Services, May 2014 graduate**

Lacresha has been accepted into the University of Maryland's Master of Social Work program, which she will be starting in the fall. Congratulations! She hopes to ultimately become a licensed clinical therapist with a private practice, and also to volunteer her services in her community.

Lacresha is happy to be a part of Aim Higher because of the professional development and networking opportunities it will provide. She is also excited about motivating her younger peers, because she believes that postsecondary education is essential to building a successful and satisfying future - "College," she says, "has been invaluable in my own personal growth and journey to improve myself."

## **Missouri**

### **Christian Bolding, 21, Ozark Technical Community College, Medical Administration, transfer degree, 2015**

Christian plans to transfer to a four-year school to pursue a bachelor's degree, with the ultimate goal of working in a medical prison facility.

Christian has had mentors in his life, and says that two of the people he looks up to most are his grandmother and his FC2S coordinator, who has a "motherly nature and always lets me know when I am slacking off!" Still, he admits that many teens "blow off" the advice of their elders and he is very excited to be a part of Aim Higher, because he believes that the videos, created by peers, will motivate and inspire younger foster youth. "I want to be sure that young people in foster care understand that postsecondary education is essential to finding a good job and having a fulfilling career."

### **Torri Lippold, 20, Missouri State University, Bachelor in Elementary Education, 2016**

Although Torri has great ambitions - to be an elementary school teacher or to open a daycare center - she also believes in appreciating the small moments of one's life because, "it is easy to be rushed and forget some of these important things." This characteristic surely will help make her an outstanding caretaker and role model for children.

Without Foster Care to Success, Torri feels that she would have been lost in college. She values the funding that FC2S provides but also appreciates the support and information that staff offer to their students. "Thanks to the support of FC2S and others," she says, "I have been successful in college and am on track to accomplish my educational and personal goals."

Through Aim Higher, she hopes to impart some of that same support and information to younger foster youth. She is also excited both to learn from the other Fellows and share her own commitment and enthusiasm with them.

## **New York**

**Latara Bell, 21, the State University of New York at Cortland, Bachelor of Humanities and Pedagogy, August 2014:**

Pedagogy - the science of teaching - fascinates Latara who plans to attend graduate school to specialize in literacy studies. She wants to become an expert in the field of language and writing, to teach and write books for children and young adults. She's a great communicator, with a story and joke for every occasion, and is thrilled with the opportunity to share her passion for scholarship and academic excellence through Aim Higher videos.

"Though some might consider my foster care background to be a disadvantage, my life is a testament to the fact that your past doesn't have to hold you back. Through hard work and dedication, it is possible to achieve great things!"

**Xi Ye, 22, Rochester Institute of Technology (NY), Bachelor of Biomedical Photography, 2016**

Xi came to the United States from China as an unaccompanied minor when she was 16 years old. As a teen in the NYC foster care system, she worked in a restaurant while attending high school. Her inspiration, she says, comes from the dishwasher, a man who "would not recognize me in the street." "You always wore a black heavy apron that covered your feet, washing dishes with your red wrinkled hands. I watched you from a distance and could tell how hard you worked to support your family. You made me realize how lucky I am that I still have the opportunity to go to school and study what am I passionate about. Every time I want to quit, I think of you."

Xi has strong feelings about the importance of postsecondary education and wants to encourage foster youth to focus on school. "I want foster youth to have information about going to college. Completing your program of study will result in positive outcomes and brighter futures."

**Angelique M. Salizan, 22, Binghamton University, Bachelor of Psychology, 2015**

Angelique plans on joining the navy upon graduation next spring, and later will apply to the nursing program at Binghamton University. She is committed to helping people through many avenues, including currently as a member of a school organization, JUMP Nation that brings "at-risk" eighth graders to her college campus every April to inspire them to pursue postsecondary education and create mentoring bonds.

Clearly, Aim Higher and Angelique are a perfect match, and she is extremely grateful to have been given this opportunity to share her insights and experiences with postsecondary with youth in foster care. "I want foster youth to know there are people out there who care about their futures. I am a positive role model and living proof that dreams do come true when you work hard and never give up."

**Shavonn Wheeler, 21, John Jay College of Criminal Justice, Bachelor of Culture and Deviance Studies, 2016**

Shavon's degree will prepare her to interact effectively and compassionately with people from vastly diverse cultures and backgrounds, a skill she plans to use when she opens her own daycare center. She also hopes to become a foster parent one day. She feels that she would make a good mentor and support for children and teens because she would pass on the lessons from her own mentor, who "taught me to GIVE when I can , smile even when I don't want to , listen to those who care to help and never give up!"

Shavon is grateful to have been selected as an Aim Higher Fellow. "This is an amazing opportunity for me. I have never traveled outside of New York and I am the first of my nine siblings to graduate from high school degree and attend college. I want to be a positive influence in the lives of my siblings and other youth in foster care who may feel hopeless about their futures."

**North Carolina**

**Isaiah Dorty, 19, Winston Salem State University, Bachelor of Mass Communications, 2016**

After graduation, Isaiah plans on pursuing a career as a professional photographer and travelling outside of his home state of North Carolina. He knows that a college degree coupled with internships and the connections they create are the way to achieve career success. He is pleased to be a part of Aim Higher because in his experience foster youth are not encouraged to attend college or other postsecondary programs after high school. His older sister, the first in his family to go to college, had a very hard time in school and her experience motivates him to never give up.

For these reasons, he is excited about sharing information about the importance of postsecondary education with his younger peers involved in the foster care system.

**Jason Robinson, 24, the University of North Carolina Greensboro, Bachelor of Biology, 2017**

As an older student - he joined the army after high school graduation and served his country for four years - Jason is an avid proponent of the value of an education. "I firmly believe that knowledge is power, and that the more knowledge you possess, the more power you have to use to better the lives of those around you." Jason plans on attending medical school and eventually practice in the field of neurology.

Jason is excited about building his communication skills during Aim Higher training, and using it to offer the support and information to younger foster youth that he could have benefited from in high school. He wants to emphasize the importance of college and how completing a program of study can lead to a successful career and a comfortable lifestyle.

**Daniel “Lee” Vandenberg, 21, Appalachian State University, Bachelor of Chemistry, 2015**

Lee will not be finished with school next May; he plans on pursuing a Ph.D. and becoming a chemistry professor to impart his love of the subject to college students. He is grateful to his foster mother, who insisted he get his college applications in on time even though he originally planned on postponing school to work for a few years first. "You're going to school," she said, "there's no getting around that!"

Aim Higher is an exciting opportunity for him to communicate his passion for education with younger foster youth. He believes that are more likely to listen to peers with whom they can identify, and he has a message for them - "Postsecondary education isn't just about getting a decent job. Going to college will help you become a well-rounded individual with the potential to make positive and meaningful contributions to society."

**Ohio**

**Eric Gbur, 22, Youngstown State University, Bachelor of Computer Science, 2016**

Eric plans on pursuing a career as a software developer, and knows that internships and an excellent portfolio are the key to getting a good job. A good job, he believes, is important because it enables a person to be independent. "Self sufficiency," he says, "is key to both self-respect and respect from others."

Eric is excited about the opportunity to enhance his public speaking skills through Aim Higher, and to network with his peers. He wants foster youth to understand that receiving a degree will help them to achieve their long-term goals. Eric hopes to share this important message by talking about his own experiences and the supports that are available for postsecondary education. "Foster youth need guidance, information and support so they can attend college. It helps to hear that message from someone who has actually been where they are."

**Shuana LaRae Jones, 21, Wright State University, Bachelor of Theater Studies, May 2014 graduate**

Shuana aspires to become a professional comedian. She is excited to be a part of Aim Higher, because through the media of video she can use her special talents to share the important message of the importance of a postsecondary education and the realities of pursuing a degree or certificate. With her outgoing nature and her youth, she believes that teens will listen to her message.

Shuana says that many people influenced her education; a "collection of people who inspired me to keep going and striving for better. Between friends, family and even strangers, somehow I've always encountered people who give me a word or energy that I need at that time specifically." It is Shuana's

hope that it might be her "message from a stranger" that inspires one foster youth to dream bigger and go on to college.

**Megan Tipton, 22, Ohio University, Bachelor of Integrated Social Studies, May 2014 graduate**

Megan plans on teaching social studies at a local high school, and, like one of her own high school teachers, inspiring them to achieve great things. "Her general concern for my well-being made me feel that I mattered and had a purpose in life."

Megan is committed to "giving back." She has received many opportunities in her life and want to share her knowledge and experiences with others. Through her participation in the Aim Higher program, she plans to learn a lot and looks forward to talking about postsecondary education with youth who are still in foster care. "Everyone deserves the opportunity to succeed - no matter what your circumstances may be. Foster youth need to use the tools and resources available to them so that they can realize their full potential."

**Washington State**

**Gabriel Kruse, 21, North Idaho College, Bachelor of Business Leadership, 2017**

After college, Gabe plans on using his degree and his previous experiences with entrepreneurship to run his own company and manage various real estate assets. He has already founded a non-profit organization, Warrior's Way, to "change what foster care providers and organizations helping with at-risk youth offer to the children in their programs."

Gabriel is excited to be a part of Aim Higher and is committed to helping youth who are disadvantaged to reach their goals. He believes that he can inspire them to strive for positive and productive futures by sharing his own journey. He knows how difficult it can be for students to find the motivation needed to persist in postsecondary education.

"In high school, I competed in high-ranked sports. One of the lessons that I learned was that you have to push through, even when things get difficult. The same applies to college –you have to work hard but it will pay off for you in the long run when you have a successful career and the life you always dreamed of."