

Tuesday, May 4, 2010

Foster Care Leadership Conference focuses on educational potential

By Dan Bodene, contributing writer

In an effort to help inspire foster children to consider college, the 2010 Foster Care Leadership Conference will be held at Oakland University on Saturday, May 8.

The all-day program, entitled "Rising Above the Odds Against Me," is intended to inspire youths to seek higher education by showing them what resources are available to help them obtain a college education.

About 250 current and former foster care and juvenile justice system youths between the ages of 14 and 20 are expected to attend, along with foster parents and area agencies.

Keynote speaker is Alduan Tartt, Ph.D., the "People's Doc." Dr. Tartt's topic is "You're Supposed to be Successful." Other speakers include Cherie Dotson, Ph.D., of the University of Michigan, who will present "How to Be Successful in the Face of Adversity." In addition, clinical psychologist Gail Parker, Ph.D., of Bingham Farms, Mich., and the Rev. Mark J. Lyons of the Second Baptist Church in Ann Arbor will continue the theme with "Cuz You're Worth It."

According to census data, less than 3 percent of youths in foster care go on to earn a college degree. Foster care youths attending the conference will have the opportunity to participate in activities to encourage them to develop a plan for achieving their goals.

The program is the brainchild of Cherish Thomas, who had more than 20 home placements and attended 15 schools during her own time in the foster care system. Thomas now is a candidate for a Masters of Social Work from U-M.

Thomas, who grew up in Georgia, said she began to develop her educational ambition through attending conferences featuring motivational speakers. "It changed my life, because there was so much information – it really gave me a different perspective on life," she said.

Later, in college, Thomas joined various organizations and did community service work, which further motivated her to help others. But it was a meeting with activist and comedian Bill Cosby that helped form Thomas' vision of a conference for foster children. In April 2009, the first conference was held in Ann Arbor.

"Through one of my mentors, Dr. Gail Parker, I was invited to a lunch, and was asked to help reproduce the conference at Oakland University," Thomas said.

Key members of the committee at OU who also helped organize the conference are Reginald McCloud, director of pre-college programs, and Kalynn Potter, K-16 seamless education coordinator.

The 2010 Foster Care Leadership Conference committee received support from many partners, including OU, Catholic Social Services of Oakland County, Childhelp, Oakland County Circuit and Probate Courts, Oakland County Community College, Oakland County Department of Human Services, Oakland County Youth Assistance, Oakland Schools Tri-County Educational Center, Parker Counseling and Consulting Services, and St. Francis Family Center. Charitable and corporate sponsors included Baskin Foundation, Best Buy of Southfield, Beverly Hills Club, Bordine's, Childhelp, Dentistry by Trinity, Dunleavy and Associates, Easter Seals, Jack and Jill, Oakland County Youth Assistance, Parkwest Foundation and Second Baptist Church.

Any agency staff person or foster teen 14 years old or older who is interested in attending the conference may e-mail Rachelle Rowell at rowellr@michigan.gov or call Mary Schusterbauer at (248) 858-0055.

SUMMARY

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