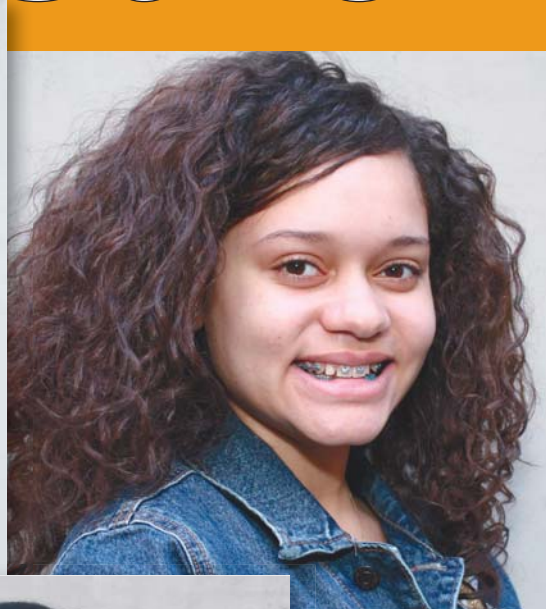


TWENTIETH ANNUAL

# Awards for Youth in Foster Care



## YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE WRITE ABOUT:

- Finding My Power
- Helping Others

**The Co-Board**

May 30, 2018 • 5:30-8 p.m.

**It's All About Me**

# ABOUT YOUTH COMMUNICATION

**Youth Communication** helps marginalized youth strengthen the social, emotional, and literacy skills they need to succeed in school, work, and life. We do that by providing educators with uniquely compelling teen-written stories, supported by lessons and professional development. We also publish *Represent*, the only national magazine by and for youth in foster care ([representmag.org](http://representmag.org)). Youth Communication has published anthologies and curricula featuring true stories by teens, including the *On My Way* career readiness program, the *Real As Me* program on girls' empowerment, and the #trending program on social/emotional skills for middle school youth.

## Youth Communication

*Represent: The Voice of Youth in Care*

242 W. 38th St., 6th fl.

New York, NY 10018

212-279-0708

[youthcomm.org](http://youthcomm.org)

Virginia Vitzthum

Editor, *Represent* magazine

Keith Hefner

Executive Director

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## About the Contest

New York City youth in foster care were invited to answer questions about seeing past stereotypes and a time they helped someone else. The 15 essays excerpted here were selected by the judges listed below. Congratulations to all the winners.

## THE JUDGES

Mary Gaitskill, author

Gail Gordon, Loews Corporation

Nancy Humphreys, Citibank (retired)

Alan Momeyer

Max Moran, LMWS

Kate Napolitano, Tiger Foundation

Bob Ouimette

Isabel Sloane, J.P. Morgan

Evette Soto Maldonado, Esq.

Carmen Rita Wong, Malecon Productions

## FINANCIAL SUPPORTERS

The Sunny and Abe Rosenberg Foundation

The Tin Man Fund

Bob Danzig

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The **College Board** generously hosts the awards ceremony. We would especially like to thank College Board President David Coleman and the volunteers from the College Board staff for all of their help in making this event possible.

Virginia Vitzthum, the editor of *Represent: The Voice of Youth in Care*, managed the selection process and edited the winning essays for this program.

Special thanks to **NugentAlison** for donating the printing of this souvenir program.

Administered by Youth Communication and the staff of *Represent: The Voice of Youth in Care*.

On the cover: clockwise from top left - Grand Prize Winners  
Jalisa Allen, Tamya Golson, Paola Mena, Gabrielle Rodriguez, and  
Jzhamaine Parson.

# SPEAKER



## David A. Hansell

*Commissioner, Administration for  
Children's Services*

Mayor de Blasio appointed David A. Hansell Commissioner of the Administration for Children's Services in February 2017.

From 2009 to 2011, he served as Acting Assistant Secretary and Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for the Administration for Children and Families in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. At HHS, Hansell helped oversee a division with an approximately \$50 billion annual budget. His responsibilities included child welfare, economic support, early childhood education, and special population programs. Hansell helped implement the "Fostering Connections to Success Act" to improve services for older youth in foster care and enhance educational continuity.

For New York State, Hansell was Commissioner of the Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance, where he helped achieve a historic level of household participation in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) through the Working Families Food Stamp Initiative, and helped reform New York State's child support programs to heighten compliance and increase payments to custodial parents and children.

During the height of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, he was the Director of Legal Services and Deputy Executive Director of Gay Men's Health Crisis. He is a former aide to two U.S. senators, and began his career as a sixth-grade teacher.

Hansell has served as a consultant to several non-profit, government, and philanthropic organizations on a diverse array of health and social services policy and advocacy issues. Just prior to coming to ACS, he was head of KPMG's Health & Human Services Center of Excellence. Commissioner Hansell is a graduate of Yale Law School and Haverford College. □

# THE WINNERS

## Grand Prize - \$1,000

**Jalisa Allen**, Edwin Gould Services for Children and Families

**Tamya Golson**, New York Foundling

**Paola Mena**, New York Foundling

**Jzhamaine Parson**, SCO Family of Services

**Gabrielle Rodriguez**, HeartShare St. Vincent's

## Nicholas Scoppetta Prize - \$700

**Hawa Balde**, Little Flower Children and Family Services

**Tayia Day**, Administration for Children's Services

**Anastasia De La Mota**, SCO Family of Services

**Nigel Hutton**, SCO Family of Services

**Gustin Jacques**, New York Foundling

**Emily Villarroel**, MercyFirst

## Al Desetta Prize - \$500

**Marcus Diego**, Edwin Gould Services for Children and Families

**Rain Sebreth**, Seamen's Society for Children and Families

**Sarah Slater**, SCO Family of Services

**Shaianna (Sky) Viera**, St. Dominic's Family Services



# Grand Prize Winner

## FINDING MY POWER

### *Pushing Through the Pain*

**Jalisa Allen**

**Age: 18**

*Edwin Gould Services  
for Children and  
Families*

Every great superhero has an origin story that defines why they do what they do, how they acquired their powers, and how they overcame the obstacles placed in their way. This is the story of how I discovered my power, and continue to develop it every day.

The first time I used my power, I was 9 years old. I had just been through one of the worst experiences of my life to this date. In a tiny two-bedroom apartment in Brooklyn, I had been held captive by a woman I considered my mother. She left me in her room for a week straight, no food, no water, no bathroom, no talking. I woke up to the sting of a beating with a leather belt, and I went to sleep with that belt wrapped tightly around my ankle and the loose end gripped firmly in her hand. For a week I endured mental and physical abuse at the hands of someone I adored and cared about. Every day, I smiled and asked if I could get off punishment now.

A week later on a cold October day, my “mother” walked in and told me to get out. I left her room. She followed behind me as I walked into the living room where my older brother was folding clothes. I greeted him with a smile. He looked at me but he didn’t return the smile. From behind me her voice rose again, this time commanding me to get my stuff and get out. I looked down at the outfit that I had worn for a week: plaid shorts, a tank top, and brown house shoes.

I looked at her and I looked at my brother. I didn’t understand what was going on, but I knew that I should obey or else the conflict would escalate. So I walked out of the apartment and into the street.

The rest of the night has turned into a blur of ACS workers, police officers, ambulances, and friendly neighbors offering to help. One thing I vividly remember from that night is one of the police officers asking me how I still had a smile on my face. I was greeting everyone who came to talk to me with a smile. I was even laughing. Some people may write it off as a form of PTSD and say that I wasn’t adequately coping with what had happened to me. But that was the moment I discovered my power: the power of resilience.

The definition of resilience is the capacity to recover from difficulties. At 9 years old, I did not understand that power, but looking back from age 18, I can see how much I used my power to propel me further. I could have fallen victim to the abuse that I received. I could have become just another statistic inside the system. I instead chose to become victorious.

To this day I have never let that smile fall from my face. I learned that with my power I can accomplish so many things that were never meant to be mine. Despite moving from foster home to foster home, I managed to not let those upheavals deter me from continuing to live my life. Even if I went home to a new bed each night, I knew that life would continue on, and so would I. There was no point in letting one pebble turn into a mountain. □





**Tamya Golson**

**Age: 16**

*New York Foundling*

# Grand Prize Winner

FINDING MY POWER

## LGBTQ Superhero

Many superheroes have a physical power. Then there are regular people who don't have powers. But can a person who is regular have a power that isn't exactly physical?

If so, does that make them a regular superhero?

Nowadays the world is filled with categories: black, Asian, tall, short, skinny, fat. I would say I fit right into the LGBTQ category. When I was growing up, others didn't think that liking the same sex was bad, but they did think it just wasn't "normal."

But I had my own form of "normal" that I decided to keep to myself. Seeing men dressed up in feminine clothes or seeing females dressed in male clothes didn't bother me. Sometimes I even liked dressing up as a tomboy myself. That didn't make me a "boy." It just made me a girl who likes dressing in boys' clothes from time to time. At a young age I would often watch videos about a person who was afraid to come out but felt great when they did. But I didn't know what to call myself. It was hard to come out if I wasn't sure what I was coming out to be.

When I turned 13 I wrote a letter to a girl in my class about how much I liked her. That letter got in the wrong hands, and another girl in my class read it out loud to the whole class. It was embarrassing having the whole class look at me with disgust and confusion. I cried and felt worthless. For a few days after that I kept my head down and walked through the halls with so much guilt. My parents found out, and they weren't too happy.

If it wasn't for my grandmother, I'd probably still be in the closet. My grandmother was more than a best friend; she was more of a best grandma. She sat down and explained to me what every letter in LGBTQ meant, and I finally found out what I was: a lesbian. I was excited because I didn't have many questions. I knew that I liked girls and wasn't much fond of boys, so being a lesbian was a match.

After that conversation, I went back to the girl at school. I said, "Look I may be skinny and I may be weird, but I like girls. Now if you wanna pick on me, that's fine. Just know I won't go down without a fight because I love being a lesbian. Because being a lesbian is who I am."

I didn't think I would talk to her like that. I honestly thought I'd back down, but I'd made up my mind and I needed her to understand. Of course the class was shocked and giggled, but I was proud. I had stood up and really understood what I was standing up for. It also gave me the chance to educate myself and my friends. If I was speaking to someone in a situation like this, I'd tell them SPEAK UP and never be afraid to express who you truly are. □



**Paola Mena**

**Age: 16**

*New York Foundling*

# Grand Prize Winner

## FINDING MY POWER

### *Moving On With My Broken Heart*

Entering foster care changed my life drastically, but then I found a family I thought would have my back forever. This family nurtured me and made me feel welcome.

One summer, we began to have little arguments, but they were always resolved. I thought, every family has its issues. My foster mom began to have problems with her husband, and she and I also bumped heads a lot. Still, I longed for the feeling of a family, so I wanted to remain in the home.

Then one summer day, my foster mom told my social worker she should start looking for another home for me. Hearing this brought back the feeling of betrayal that I experienced earlier in my life. I was supposed to get adopted by this family.

Things got even worse when my foster mom brought her 22-year-old daughter back to live with her. Every time her daughter messed up and did horrible things to her, she always took her back with open arms. I envied that mother-daughter bond.

One afternoon, the daughter and I got into a heated argument. My foster mom called an ambulance and took me to the hospital. I figured out that she was going to leave me there. I tried convincing her to take me home, saying I would make amends with her daughter. She stayed with me until the doctors came, and then she got up and said, "I'll see you later." I watched her walk out the door with tears in my eyes.

The doctors said I could go home that same day, but leaving me at the hospital was my foster mom's way of letting go. She never called or came to see me. She had picked her daughter over me, even though I was willing to do anything for her love.

I was in the hospital that weekend crying myself to sleep because once again, someone had given up on me. On Monday my social worker came to drop me off at my new home. My foster mom was outside waiting for me with my clothes. I began to cry because I loved her, and I wanted to be a part of their family more than anything in the world. I gave them a hug and left.

My heart was torn. For a while I kept in contact with my old foster family, but things weren't the same and we all knew it. Sure enough, my foster mom's daughter hurt her once again. All I could think was that if she had chosen me she wouldn't have gone through that. I knew how it felt to have nobody and I would've cherished every moment as her daughter.

I posted something on social media and they all felt it was directed to them, and we never spoke again. I began to think that I just wasn't meant to have a family. For a while the pain was overpowering. But I picked myself up.

Now I've realized that I'm strong. I'm an honor roll student and determined to become a lawyer. I've learned that some people will never be able to realize how unique you are. People you love may never come back, and it's hard to let things go.

But perhaps this is where empowerment comes from, when we can still stand up for ourselves regardless of whether the people we've lost come back or not. I realized that my happiness was in my hands and that I was worth it. This is where my power comes from. □



# Grand Prize Winner

## HELPING OTHERS

### *The Power of Forgiveness*

**Jzhamaine  
Parson**

**Age: 20**

*SCO Family of Services*

My childhood was robbed from me by my mother's alcoholism and abuse. When I was 13, I woke up one night to the sound of screams from the kitchen, and my siblings crying. I got up to see what was going on. The hallways reeked of alcohol.

My eyes fell upon a scene of blood, police, and my agitated mother. My father was nowhere in sight. I didn't know what was going on. The next morning, I walked my siblings to school in awkward silence.

I later learned that my mother attempted to stab my father, but no charges were made. The police let it go. Living in the Bronx, their main focus was gangs and drugs.

My mother's rage shifted to me. "You b-tch! You slut! You are NOT my daughter! You're ugly, just like your father!" Hearing these words pierced my soul. If I wasn't loved by my parents, who was there to love me?

At middle school, I trusted my childhood friend Natasha with the truth. She would later share my painful, most private details with a group of girls she wanted to impress in high school. To the entire school, I became the daughter of an alcoholic mother. I was teased, pointed out, and harassed.

I was beaten up by a group of girls. When I went home with a black eye, my mother said, "It's because you are the high school slut."

Then she grabbed a broomstick and served multiple blows to my body, angry I'd lost. "I'll teach you how to fight!" she yelled as she hit me. When she was done, I quietly slipped out of the apartment, and asked my younger sister to pack my belongings. I met her in the lobby for a quick, emotional goodbye. She didn't question why I was leaving.

All of Brooklyn became my new home. I slept in subway cars, staircases in the projects, and abandoned buildings. I cleaned myself up in a Popeyes bathroom. When I was hungry, I stole hot dogs, bologna, and Pop-Tarts from a local supermarket. One day, I stole a cell phone from a sleeping subway passenger and sold it for \$200. I bought a blanket, water bottle, washcloth, and a Happy Meal. I survived.

Months went by and I became sick. I was caught stealing cold medicine from a pharmacy and locked inside the store by the owner so that the authorities could arrest me. I feared my mother's retaliation, so I fought the cops. I was arrested for assault and robbery and went to Rikers Island for six months.

When I was released, I told the judge I didn't want to go home. The courts told my mother, "place her in foster care or get charged with neglect." I told the judge that I would rather go to foster care.

In my new home, I had to take anger management counseling. Two years passed, and I began to wonder how my mom's alcoholism affected her parenting. Was her abusiveness due to her struggle raising eight children? Was it because she had her first child at 18? I overcame my pride and gave her a call.

Her voice was sober and sincere. We talked about the painful memories of my childhood. She tearfully apologized for the abuse, and I discovered my own power of forgiveness, which gave me power over my future. I once again could trust and have faith. That night, forgiveness set me free. □



**Gabrielle  
Rodriguez**

**Age: 21**

*HeartShare  
St. Vincent's*

# Grand Prize Winner

## FINDING MY POWER

### *Role Model of Resilience*

When I entered care, I thought it was the end of my life. I was 16.

I felt powerless and alone. I didn't know anyone in my situation. I was in an abusive relationship. I went to a school with no support for youth in care and kept my status a secret.

When I applied to college, I wanted to get as far away from New York as possible. My plan was to run away from the caseworkers, the lawyers, the family drama, everything. I ran to the only out-of-state school I got into, in Massachusetts.

This place definitely deserved its "party school" reputation, but it was not inclusive. Coming from a predominantly white school in New York, I thought I knew how to handle diversity. I was very wrong. I wasn't used to being the only Hispanic person in my building. I was not used to people laughing at everything I said, even when I wasn't trying to be funny.

I fell into a depression. I barely made it through the first semester and decided it would be my last. I dreaded coming home to a place that I didn't want to be, with no job, having flunked out my freshman year of college, while all of my friends were on social media celebrating their success.

The first month being home was hard. I was broke, alone, and still trying to overcome my depression. Eventually I found a job, working 40-plus-hour weeks and then got another job in an office. I was working seven days a week.

Having money meant being able to provide for my family. The feelings of failure began to dissipate. I got out of my three-year-long abusive relationship. I started reconnecting

with friends. Things were starting to fall back into place, and a cloud of hope hung over me.

Although having money granted me some power, I didn't want to break my back to get a check. I applied to Queens College and got to live in the dorms for free. This time I was determined to throw all of my energy into school. I quit my jobs and became a full-time student.

Although it was a hard first year, I finished with the highest GPA in my program. One day, while visiting my 6-year-old sister, she said to me, "You always get 100, Gabbie. I want to be like you."

It was then that I regained my power. Being the oldest of three means I should be someone they can look up to and be proud of. Being a role model makes you feel powerful. This baby sister, who I nearly raised, realized that if I can do it, she can too. We come from the same place. Aside from representing Latina women, and all the power we possess, I was also a symbol of everything foster youth can accomplish. It felt powerful to represent people like me.

I learned that there is nothing more powerful than being the change you wish to see and showing others where hard work can get you. I learned that when it feels like everything is falling apart, that is just resilience's mating call. Because of my experience the last three years, I can confidently say that I have the power to change the stigma surrounding foster youth. I am changing the statistics that portray foster youth with a college degree as outliers. Power is standing tall in the face of defeat and never giving up. □



# Nicholas Scoppetta Prize Winners (Excerpts)

## FINDING MY POWER

### Power for, Not Over, Others

*Hawa Balde, 20, Little Flower Children and Family Services*

Life gives and takes in ways we aren't always geared to handle. When my precious Aissaha was born, so was a sense of urgency and power that I'd never felt before.

My daughter became the cornerstone of my beliefs and turned my fears into strength. Upon the discovery of the power my daughter gave me, I was compelled to succeed for the both of us. I vowed she would be better off than I am when she reached my age.

My first child, Aissaha unlocked something new within me. I had to teach myself motherhood while devoting myself to school rather than to my social life or popularity.

I struggled, fighting hunger, sleep deprivation, and pain both emotional and physical. I endured seemingly endless nights of crying and ridicule as a teen mother, even from those closest to me. My motivation was love for and from Aissaha.

My perception of power derives from my humble upbringing. Power taken into my hands allowed me to gain an insight into ways I could achieve my goals: by helping others in a sustainable way.

Used for infamy rather than for righteous reasons, power can be one-sided, frightening. Power used badly consumes others, and in turn, consumes the negative holder.

I knew that to thrive, I must empathize with my little Aissaha. Love was my power. Nothing could stop me from making sure her childhood was not like the dreadful experiences of my own.

Aissaha needed a mother fueled by love and bent on progress. Not only is the sky the limit, but so is my faith that I can help my daughter smile infinitely bright, for as long as I can influence her being.

Previously the realm of motherhood was a bittersweet idea to relish. Never did I think that the lure of parenthood would pale in comparison to its reality. But I've learned how power can alter or create its own customizable form. Overcoming various obstacles wouldn't have been possible without power from within.

Never have I wanted to cultivate power over others. My power surges when it's powered by my desire to help and to achieve a tranquil balance. My power is obtained and expended at the same rate that it is manifested. I have gained "control" not over others but over my life. □

## FINDING MY POWER

### Beautiful in My Skin

*Tayia Day, 17, Administration for Children's Services*

I was bullied about my looks, and for a long time I believed what people said about me. It started in middle school, when new "friends" told me, "you're bald," and "you have no eyebrows," and "your body looks weird." It hurt.

In 8th grade, I got my first weave, and I felt prettier. After a month, it had to come out, and then I felt ugly again. It got worse in high school. People harassed me about my looks, and I had suicidal thoughts. No boys ever liked me, and my friends even judged me.

Then I started wearing makeup, and everybody told me I looked prettier and better. People started to be nicer to me. I stole eyebrow pencil so I never had to go without it, and then I started stealing hairpieces and chemicals to make my hair grow. The chemicals didn't work, and weaves didn't help. When I put braids in, people told me I looked like a little boy.

Then people began to bully me about my body: They said I had no curves or boobs and that my legs and arms weren't nice. My "friends" said I could never be pretty because I was black, not Spanish. I began to hate the color of my skin. I wondered, "Did God not love me enough to make me pretty?"

I couldn't afford to dress up to make myself look better. My mom said there was no reason for teenagers to wear \$100 shirts and that I should worry about my grades, which were bad. I stole clothes and was arrested for shoplifting.

With no nice clothes, no eyebrows, and no long hair, I was depressed and wanted to kill myself.

Then I discovered my own power—the power to be different than others. I didn't have to have long hair or eyebrows like everyone else. I did not have to be Spanish for my body to be pretty. I was changing my looks and stealing to impress people who aren't important. If my "friends" were really my friends, they would tell me I'm beautiful just the way I am.

I found my own power of being beautiful in the skin I'm in. I did not need to fit in; I fit in well with myself. □

# Nicholas Scoppetta Prize Winners (Excerpts)

## FINDING MY POWER

### Hard Work and Forgiveness

*Anastasia De La Mota, 19, SCO Family of Services*

My power was hidden behind a veil of shame and discouragement. I loathed how being a victim felt, so I fought back.

My journey started in a poverty-stricken part of Miami. My grandma, who my brother and I lived with when we were little, protected us and gave us everything she could. My brother and I saw our mother on the weekends. She showed a professional front, but at home she took out her rage at her circumstances. I fought at school, longing for a glimpse of affection from my mother.

My grandma passed away on my 13th birthday. What were we going to do? Who would I turn out to be? My mother had suffered from diabetes for years, and I gave her her insulin. Then, two months after my grandmother passed, she experienced her first stroke. It's hard to have a sick parent and be a caregiver at that age. At school, I lacked friends but found comfort in getting good grades.

My mother then moved us to New York with no money and no house, and we had to go into a shelter. I missed five months of school and took refuge with my brother and his father. I realized slowly that I was meant to achieve more and be who I am, not who my mother wanted to be: a nurse.

Then I went into care. For the next two years, I focused on my education, because I wanted to succeed and to know who I was.

My foster parents said cruel, unnecessary things to me just as my mother had done. I used education as my power, my confidante, and my guardian. I went to night school and summer school. I also admitted that I was neglected, stopped putting myself down, and focused on graduating.

When I told my mother I was graduating, her face lit up. She was happy for me and congratulated me. I still had to find the strength to support myself. I applied and got into a dorm program for youth in care.

By putting me, Anastasia, first, I regained my voice. I found this voice by going through hardships with my mother and foster parents and by learning to forgive. And now I am a student in college, using my power to succeed. □

## HELPING OTHERS

### His Name Is Mason

*Nigel Hutton, 17, SCO Family of Services*

Being placed in the home where I live now was a blessing. Right when I believed that I was destined to always be moved around from one bad place to another that was even worse, my luck changed for the better. So when I got the chance to help change someone else's luck, I didn't hesitate to help out.

On my 17th birthday, I went to my agency and overheard a conversation about them having to move a kid who stayed at my house for a week during spring break to another home. They didn't give a reason, but even though I didn't know why he was being moved I didn't care. I knew he needed the same thing I needed: a home where the people would love him unconditionally and wouldn't dare give up on him.

So I told the agency staff that we had a lot of space and all he needed was to come live with my foster mom and me. At first, they were hesitant. When he stayed with us in the spring, he gave my mother a few problems, but what kid doesn't? My foster mom said OK, and the next day he moved in with us.

It took some time adjusting to this kid who had become my little brother. He needed a lot, such as being taken to see his mom twice a week and being taken to therapy. He was a little behind for his age—he didn't know how to do things such as bathing himself, but it was OK. If sacrificing some of our time would help him, we were going to do it.

Every day I look at him and he reminds me so much of myself at his age. I know if I had had what he has now, maybe things would have been different for me. I also felt like I had to help because no kid should have to be moved around from home to home. He didn't do anything wrong, so why should he be punished by being put in a bad home?

On July 7, 2017, a 6-year-old moved into my house, and I got a little brother who I love and who I get to see grow up. □

# Nicholas Scoppetta Prize Winners (Excerpts)

## FINDING MY POWER

### Spurred on by Results, With Help

*Gustin Jacques, 16, New York Foundling*

In my early years, school was easy. I didn't study and I still got good grades. High school, however, wasn't so easy.

I didn't think that being relocated from my mom's to my sister's home affected me that much, but my grades showed something different. I had a lot going on internally that I didn't even realize was affecting me so much. My grades dropped along with my mood. It also didn't help I was at Brooklyn Tech, a specialized high school.

I found myself almost always melancholy, and my thoughts ranged from not being wanted to not having a future. Freshman year, I failed four classes. My sister noticed and started to pay some attention. However, I didn't feel I had the power to do better.

Sophomore year, I started to get familiar with both my new home and my new school. I made new friends and did things I thought were pointless before, like hanging out and homework. The first semester, I only failed trigonometry. Early in second semester of sophomore year, I was offered a tutor and accepted reluctantly.

I met with my new tutor, Jake, once a week, and my schoolwork improved. Jake knew I could do better, and he motivated me. It was different to have someone who wasn't family or a friend believe in me. I started to believe in myself more academically, and my social life helped me actually look forward to school and to the future.

At the end of my sophomore year I had a decent average and passed all my classes and finals. My confidence spurred me forward. In the fall of 2017 I was scheduled to take the SAT. Jake and I prepared all summer, and I was shocked to score a 1400 on my first try. I got praise from teachers, friends, family, my tutor and his agency. I recognized my own power to overcome my internal and external problems and succeed with some help from others.

I applied myself even more and got a 90 average in my first semester of junior year. I began to believe I could get into college. To this day, realizing my power inspires me to apply myself to tasks—and to helping others recognize their own power. □

## FINDING MY POWER

### Pushing Beyond My Limits

*Emily Villarroel, 21, MercyFirst*

It's spring 2015. I'm a senior in high school, and I am not graduating with my friends. I have no encouragement, no inspiration, just a dreadful feeling of disappointment.

I had failed my English Regents for the second time with a score of 63. Just two points held me back, which made me feel I hadn't tried hard enough.

I took the exam again in summer school and passed by one point. In my heart I had failed again, but I enrolled in college. My first semester in college, I took five classes. I started off fairly well, but then fell behind. I had homework, tests, and assignments in every class, and the classes were hard. I felt like a child lost in a maze.

I passed two courses with a C minus and failed the other three. I was told that my GPA had fallen enough that I would no longer get financial aid.

I was furious. I had to pick up two jobs to pay off the tuition for the courses I had failed, then had to save the money for my upcoming courses. Paying for school out of my own pocket made me obsessed to succeed. I didn't want my hard labor to go to waste. I found a strong willpower that focused me and let me push myself beyond my limits.

I subscribed to a study service called Chegg that breaks down homework questions and provides answers to many textbook questions. I stayed up late studying, arrived to class early and went to the tutoring lab. I went from being a victim of my actions to taking charge to accomplish my goals.

I realized that once I put my mind to something, I could exceed my limitations. Working to pay for classes that I failed plus courses to raise my GPA showed me how much I'd taken financial assistance for granted.

Nothing great will ever come easy. It took a drastic failure, which caused me frustration, tears, anger, and anxiety, to get where I am: my third year at Monroe College, pursuing a bachelor's degree in Health Services Administration. I'm on the dean's list with a GPA of 3.7.

I wouldn't have gained knowledge and wisdom if I hadn't gone through those hardships. I proved my ability to accomplish anything. □

# Al Desetta Prize Winners (Excerpts)

## FINDING MY POWER

### Rising Above the Rudeness

*Marcus Diego, 21, Edwin Gould Services for Children and Families*

Being in foster care for 13 years now, I realize yelling or being rude won't get you anywhere. Showing kindness will get you further.

When I was 17, I ran away from my agency. When I returned to foster care, I encountered a rude worker. He told me he had heard stories about how I was disrespectful. Agency workers told him, "Marcus Diego will get you fired and he will curse you out." People see the case, not the person.

After my 18th birthday I had to get all my documents. I went with the rude worker to the Social Security office. He cursed me out just to intimidate me. I thought, "Please, you don't scare me! You think your life is hard? You don't even know what being scared really is."

The lady in the booth asked the worker why he would talk to me like that. The worker answered, "Mind your business; this is my job." I signed the form and asked that my Social Security card be delivered to the agency. The rude worker and I left the office and he said, "Everything you have belongs to the agency, remember that, you f-ck."

I was about to cry so I called my aunt and explained my situation. She said, "Marcus, don't let anyone take away your happiness. You have too much going for you. Don't let him destroy you."

After the rude worker was gone, I walked back into the Social Security office to the nice young lady who took my paperwork. She smiled and said, "I knew you would be back." She told me she'd had a son in foster care, so she understood what I felt. She smiled and said, "Let's change that address, shall we?" So I arranged for my card to go to my foster mother's house, not the agency.

Two weeks later, the rude worker called and said, "We haven't received your card." I was petty and laughed, "Yeah, I know. I have it."

It's my Social Security card. It doesn't say "ACS" or the agency's name. It says my name. Why would I trust someone who was rude to me and almost made me cry and judged me by my case file? I kept my cool and I kept my document. □

## FINDING MY POWER

### From Dream to Home

*Rain Sebreth, 20, Seamen's Society for Children and Families*

In foster care, I was always dependent on an agency or a host family. I didn't have a job throughout high school, so everything I had was given to me by someone else. I began to abhor the fact that I couldn't provide for myself, especially when switching homes. There was always a new person with new policies and a new personality that you had to learn.

In my freshman year of college, I moved into the dorms and started working crazy hours in retail around my class schedule. I got a taste of independence and what it meant to watch, manage, and maintain myself. With the help of my scholarship funds, I put myself through my first year of school and did a damn good job of staying alive.

But immediately after my first year of college, I moved into a kinship home and spent the next six months out of school and back in the system. I knew my stay in the kinship home would expire, no matter how sweet it was going at the time, so I began exploring housing options.

I looked at apartments and rooms, compared my income to the rents, and put in applications for supportive housing and NYCHA apartments. I measured the distance from potential living spaces to my workplace. I made my appointments and got interviews and took notes during information sessions. Since May of 2016 I've worked to get my own place—and it finally paid off.

On a grey day not long ago, I sat in my warm room, looking out the window with a mug of tea. Breathing in peppermint steam, I remembered my first set of keys. Keys that opened doors that always welcomed me. The memory was fresh, but still felt like a dream.

I wondered how I managed to get to this point: from imagining my own room in my own home to sitting in it, from fantasizing to realizing. It seemed I had dreamed of an autonomous existence, and my subconscious manifested it. It was like magic—except for all the work I'd done to earn those keys. It seemed like I'd been dreaming lucidly.

I haven't woken up yet. □



# Al Desetta Winners (Excerpts)

## FINDING MY POWER

### Trusting and Talking

*Sarah Slater, 21, SCO Family of Services*

At my lowest point, I became the strongest version of myself. It was my sophomore year of high school. My grandmother had adopted my older siblings and me when we were younger. I had a physical altercation with my uncle, though, which led to my siblings and me being placed in foster care.

I hated it. My foster mother was always gone, my foster mother's children were involved with gangs, and my siblings were never around.

Before that, I'd always been on top of things. I was an A-student, encouraged by my grandmother. She always told my siblings and me, "You will get your bachelor's, master's, and your doctorate."

I was sitting in homeroom, four months after I went into care, when I got my first bad high school report card, with a D+ and a C. Tears filled my eyes.

I was tired, hungry, stressed, and depressed from distancing myself from my grandmother. I didn't want to burden my siblings with my emotions because I was sure they were feeling the same way, if not worse.

I realized that day that I couldn't do it alone. I went back to my foster home that night and I thought about who I could trust to talk about what I was going through.

I spoke with my siblings first, and they opened up to me in return. It was hard at first, because talking about our emotions was never encouraged growing up. But when I allowed them in, we bonded. I got their advice on my grades, and they recommended talking to the guidance counselor or a teacher who could help me get back on my feet.

The next morning, I talked to my homeroom teacher, Ms. Parks, who seemed like she really cared. She helped students out with extra school help and even money. Ms. Parks gave you tough love when you needed it, but nurtured you and believed in you.

"I know you can do better than this, Sarah," she said when she saw my report card. We talked, and I felt more empowered. I slowly got my life back together: I focused on my schoolwork, voiced my concerns with my case-worker, and eventually repaired my relationship with my grandmother.

Now I am a junior in college, working part-time. I learned that I am strong and in control of my life. □

## FINDING MY POWER

### I Faced Down My Anger

*Shaianna (Sky) Viera, 19, St. Dominic's Family Services*

I don't even remember what I was angry about. My sister was behaving like a normal, annoying 12-year-old, and I yelled at her, bullets for words shooting out of my mouth. I said something cruel my aunt had spit at me, and froze. I knew I needed to stop the cycle of abuse right there. I had to get help and change.

Growing up, I saw my family "solve" their problems with abuse, especially the aunt my little sister and I lived with. I had an eating disorder from age 11 to 15 and suicidal tendencies from a very young age. I would fall asleep in class, and act out in school for attention. I looked for validation and someone to be proud of me.

My aunt was usually angry at me, and I was often confused why I was being punished. When I was 15, I went to school with bruises. There was a teacher I spoke to about my problems, and finally she reported my aunt's abuse.

I was scared, but I didn't protest. When ACS came, they could tell my aunt was emotionally abusive. After two months of living with our aunt and going to meetings with ACS, ACS took us away.

The Children's Center was better than my aunt's house. My sister thought it was a camp. After two weeks, we moved into our first foster home. We moved to some not so great homes, but then we got placed with Sandra.

Sandra was the best. I was living with her for about a year before I realized I had anger issues. I would blow up on her or on my sister. It was like my aunt was in the back of my head puppeteering me.

When I blacked out on my sister and said those words my aunt said, I went to my social worker and asked her to put me in therapy. I wanted to learn how to deal with my anger, and I did. I learned how to understand it, and how to understand others so I could forgive them. I learned to control my anger and to figure out things about myself. My power was my ability to fight who I was becoming and learn to become better. □

# 2018 CHAMPION OF YOUTH VOICE

## Elise Gelbman



Elise with 2017 Award winner  
Abigail Johnson

Elise Gelbman has a long and illustrious career looking after and advocating for youth in care. In 1975, she became a "house mother" in a group home for teenage boys, and stayed for two years. Hope For Youth pioneered this concept, wherein the foster teens did not move in with the foster parents, but rather the "parents" moved in with the boys. This was not the shift work we see in today's group homes, but something much closer to a home for the seven teenaged boys.

After a nine-year hiatus to raise her own two children, Elise returned to the field of foster care in 1986, working as a caseworker at Forestdale until 1995. Moving on to Talbot Perkins Children's Services, in 1996, Elise was promoted to Educational-Vocational Coordinator. She relished that job until 2002, when Talbot Perkins closed. For the past 16 years, Elise has been Educational-Vocational Specialist at Good Shepherd Services, the agency that the *New York Times* called the "best run non-profit in the metropolitan area."

Between 1999 and 2017, Elise nominated 11 winners to the Awards for Youth in Foster Care, by far the most successful nominator in the 20-year history of the Awards. If she had her way, it would be even more; she fiercely advocated with the *Represent* editors for all her nominees.

Elise retired this past February, after working diligently and joyfully for 32 years in the field of foster care. While she is enjoying her retirement, she misses seeing the smiles on the faces of the youth she helped get into college. □

## Congratulations! We are incredibly proud of the students from The Dorm Project and The Foundling's Road to Success Tutoring Program

**Anastasia De La Mota**, nominated by Nathalie Lindor

**Marcus Diego**, nominated by Frank Vesce

**Tamya Golson**, nominated by Katherine Hartling

**Gustin Jacques**, nominated by Jacob Backer

**Paola Mena**, nominated by Carmen Paola-Coco

**Gabrielle Rodriguez**, nominated by Nicole Wong

**Rain Sebreth**, nominated by Mitchell Conway

**Shaianna (Sky) Viera**, nominated by Jaclyn Holzer



**THE NEW YORK  
FOUNDLING**

# BEHIND THE PRIZES

## Nicholas Scoppetta

First Commissioner of ACS



Nicholas Scoppetta was born on the Lower East Side of Manhattan in 1932. The youngest son of Italian immigrants, he was placed into foster care when he was 5 years old and lived in various institutions until he was 12.

After serving two years in the Army, Mr. Scoppetta attended Bradley

University on the G.I. Bill and graduated in 1958 with a degree in engineering. In 1959 he began studying at Brooklyn Law School at night while working during the day in the criminal courts, assisting in the investigation and prosecution of cases in which children had been abused or neglected.

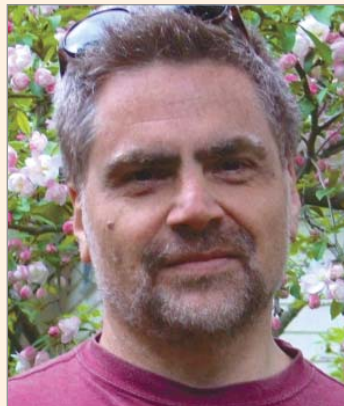
From 1969 to 1995, Mr. Scoppetta worked for the Manhattan District Attorney's office and in several other public legal jobs, was a law professor, and founded a law firm. In 1996, he became the first Commissioner of the new Administration for Children's Services.

As ACS Commissioner, Mr. Scoppetta listened to the voices of youth in the foster care system. *Represent: The Voice of Youth in Care*, had been founded just three years earlier; youth voices were new and sometimes unsettling. During his six-year tenure, Mr. Scoppetta met with *Represent's* teen writers more than half a dozen times. His personal and professional openness helped ACS become more responsive to the concerns of youth in care. While at ACS, Mr. Scoppetta founded New Yorkers for Children, which has focused much of its work on helping youth in care make a successful transition to adult life.

After leaving ACS, Mr. Scoppetta was New York City Fire Commissioner for eight years. He died in 2016 at the age of 73. □

## Al Desetta

Founding Editor of *Represent*



In 1993, Al Desetta was the founding editor of *Represent: The Voice of Youth in Care* (then called *Foster Care Youth United*), the first magazine written by and for youth in care. Mr. Desetta recruited and trained the first staff of teen writers, and worked closely with them to pull back the cloak of secrecy that muffled foster youths'

voices. The goal was to tell stories that would help young readers feel less alone and show how peers had managed the challenges in their lives. The stories were also designed to inform staff and policy makers about youth concerns and spur changes in policy and practice to improve foster care.

Mr. Desetta edited *Represent* for six years, during which time it achieved a national circulation of more than 10,000 copies of each bi-monthly issue. He also edited the first anthology of stories from the magazine, *The Heart Knows Something Different* (Persea Books, 1996). The teens' stories in that book helped convince Hillary Clinton to push for the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999, which doubled national funding for programs to help youth aging out of foster care. (Two *Represent* writers who had published stories in the book were invited to the bill signing at the White House.)

Mr. Desetta subsequently edited more than a dozen anthologies of stories by teens in care that are used nationwide in schools and foster care agencies. Mr. Desetta has an MA in English Literature from City College of the City University of New York, and a BA in English Literature from SUNY-Binghamton. During 1990-91, he was a Charles H. Revson Fellow at Columbia University. He is currently a writer based in Woodstock, New York. □

Thank You to  
the Adults Who  
Nominated This  
Year's Winners

**Jacob Backer**, New York Foundling  
**Stacey Castillo**, Administration for Children's Services  
**Mitchell Conway**, Seamen's Society for Children and Families  
**Giselle Di Genarro**, SCO Family of Services  
**Paula Garcia**, SCO Family of Services  
**Katherine Hartling**, New York Foundling  
**Jaclyn Holzer**, New York Foundling  
**Daphaney Jacquitte-Vante**, SCO Family of Services  
**Nathalie Lindor**, New York Foundling  
**Shajida McNab**, MercyFirst  
**Carmen Paola-Coco**, New York Foundling  
**Michelle Tarangelo**, Little Flower Children and Family Services  
**Frank Vesce**, Edwin Gould Services for Children and Families  
**Jeremy Watson**, Edwin Gould Services for Children and Families  
**Nicole Wong**, New York Foundling

Thank You to the  
Agencies That  
Provide Services  
to This Year's  
Winners

**Administration for Children's Services**, Tayia Day  
**Edwin Gould Services for Children and Families**, Jalisa Allen, Marcus Diego  
**HeartShare St. Vincent's**, Gabrielle Rodriguez  
**Little Flower Children and Family Services**, Hawa Balde  
**MercyFirst**, Emily Villarroel  
**New York Foundling**, Tamya Golson, Gustin Jacques, Paola Mena  
**St. Dominic's Family Services**, Shaianna (Sky) Viera  
**SCO Family of Services**, Anastasia De La Mota, Nigel Hutton,  
Jzhamaine Parson, Sarah Slater  
**Seamen's Society for Children and Families**, Rain Sebreth

