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VOLUME 39, NUMBER 10 • MAY 30, 2014

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TIM LAMORTE/RIVERTOWNS ENTERPRIS

Darryl "D.M.C." McDaniels receives applause during his speech at CV.

Hip-hop icon champions foster care kids

By Carter Smith

Josiah A., Akelia G., and Darryl M. have a lot in common. All three are dedicated to helping others, all three have been in foster care, and all three were part of the Westchester County Foster Care Month celebration on May 23 at The Children's Village (CV) in Dobbs Ferry. Josiah, 17, and Akelia, 16, received awards, and Darryl, 49, also known as Darryl "D.M.C." McDaniels of the legendary hip-hop group Run-D.M.C., was there to give the keynote address.

In a powerful speech that demonstrated his skill with a microphone, McDaniels brought home all that he

shares with his audience of foster teens, their counselors and mentors.

"I hate when people say, 'I'm your fan,'" he declared. "I always stop them and I say, 'No, you're my friend who just happens to like what I do.' Because if you say you're my fan and I allow you to do that, that right away implies that I'm better than you or above you, which is not true. To all the young people in foster care, all of those kids in the group homes, all of those kids in the youth detention centers, all of those

kids in the shelters, all of those kids locked down, all of those kids with problems that come at them because our society does have problems, I want to let you know that I'm not better than you, I'm not smarter than you, I'm not greater than you, and I'm not more talented than you. I am you."

McDaniels connected with CV through his friendship with Kathie Davidson, the supervising judge of the Family Courts o

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New York's 9th Judicial District (Westchester County) since 2004, and it was Davidson who introduced him.

Together with co-founders Joseph "Run" Simmons and Jason "Jam Master Jay" Mizell, McDaniels and Run-D.M.C. are acknowledged as one of the most influential acts in the history of hip-hop music and culture. They were the first group in the genre to have a gold album ("Run-D.M.C. in 1984) and be nominated for a Grammy Award. They were the first to earn a platinum record ("King of Rock," 1985), the first to earn multi-platinum certification ("Raising Hell," 1986), and the first to have videos on MTV or to appear on the cover of Rolling Stone magazine. "Walk This Way," their guest of the Aerosmith classic featuring guest appearances by Aerosmith's Steven Tyler and Joe Perry, is credited for helping ignite hip-hop's crossover into the mainstream pop consciousness. In 2009, rapper Eminem inducted the group into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

In his speech, McDaniels revealed that it wasn't until he was 35 years old and world famous that his parents told him that he had been adopted out of foster care when he was 3 months old.

McDaniels stressed that he is an example of "what happens when you give a young person the opportunity to be and do what they were put here to do, regardless of their situation."

Josiah A. and Akelia G., honored at the May 23 ceremony, are similar examples. Josiah, who has resided at CV for three years, was in California with his foster family at the time of the event, but he had pre-

pared a special video message of thanks to the CV staff and his mentors.

On the day before he left Dobbs Ferry, he sat down with the Enterprise and ran through his many good works. On campus, he is a member of Strictly Business, CV's student council, and supports the LGBTQ community. Off campus, he is active in Youth in Progress, a New York State foster care youth advisory team, and mentors other youth at leadership retreats in public speaking and leadership skills. He is also a member of Youth Move, a youth-led advocacy organization for young people who, according to its website, "have lived experience in various systems including mental health, juvenile justice, education, and child welfare."

Josiah explained: "I've always had a passion for helping others. All the other kids would be playing outside. I would be in the nursing home, or reacting to little kids. Coming to CV opened the doors for more volunteer opportunities... [With Youth in Progress] we're working to create a Foster Care Bill of Rights. Right now there really are no statewide laws on what a foster child is entitled to, what they should have, what they're eligible for, what they can and can't do. Every county just makes it up as they go. In Westchester County, I can get my license — I can learn how to drive and I can drive. In Suffolk County you can't get behind the wheel."

Josiah says creating stability is a priority of the proposed bill of rights. "I've known people who have been to 13 different high schools in the last two or three years. That sucks!" he exclaimed. "So the bill of rights says a child has the right to stay at the school that he or she was already enrolled in. You have that right. You also have the right to feel safe."

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Josiah A. and his mentor Madeline Taylor

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Josiah is also working on the "Normalcy Plan," which he explained this way: "Being in care means if I want to go to a friend's house, the mother has to get fingerprinted, background checked... so much has to be done for me to live a normal life. The Normalcy Plan is treating foster kids like normal kids."

CV's mentorship program also aims to create some normalcy. For instance, Josiah's mentors, Madeline Taylor and Joe Schwartz, who live on Long Island, took him out for a celebratory birthday dinner — something he's never done before.

Somehow, Josiah finds time to volunteer with the ECAD service dog training program that CV hosts, and to intern at a local veterinarian's office on Saturdays. Josiah plans to attend college so that he can one day open his own animal shelter.

Akelia arrived at CV in December 2013, and by her own admission, had a difficult adjustment to life on the campus. "When I first got here, it was rough. It was hard to adjust, but I'm doing better now," she told the Enterprise.

As described in the program for the

May 23 celebration, "Over time, Akelia began to develop relationships with staff and respond to programs. She worked diligently to trust and articulate her needs." Five months on, she now participates in individual and family therapy. She is involved in Project Possibility, an off-campus arts and service learning program for youth in care, which she commutes to and from on her own.

"It's a group of teenagers in care," she explained. "We come together and we all want to make a change in the world. In November, we'll put on a show about everything we've been through. It's a story based off of our lives. It's really good. Like you never knew there were people like you, going through exactly what you're going through."

Looking to the future, she plans to attend SUNY Binghamton and major in nursing. "People tell me, 'Be a doctor, they make more money,' but the doctors don't spend as much time with the patients. The nurses get to spend time with the patients, know them more — that's what I'm into. I like helping people."

All told, CV houses roughly 150 foster children through various New York City, New York State and federal programs. The total resident population is about 250.