

McFadden's spirit inspires hope in others Russak

By Claribel Ortega

From infancy, Ronnell McFadden was "in and out of foster homes." He had little knowledge of his biological parents and, at age 6, he went to live at The Children's Village, the residential treatment center in Dobbs Ferry.

"I didn't have any parents, so Children's Village was the only option," the now 24-year-old told The Enterprise. "It's tough times, especially around holidays and things like that, and when you're around a group of boys you have to be tough. It's a rough way to grow up."

Though the environment at CV was not always easy, McFadden explained, "It's all I know, so it's normal for me actually, living there and not having any parents."

At age 18, McFadden aged out of CV and moved to Yonkers. He was working at Chemka Pool in Hastings when he was introduced to the Village's superintendent of public works, Michael Gunther, who hired him as a seasonal laborer. In 2007, after a year of working for the DPW, the position became full-time and McFadden has been there ever since.

"I love my job and I'm very thankful I have it," he said. "I'm proud to be working there and I enjoy seeing the people on my route."

Gunther described McFadden as having a "good work ethic" and a "good head on his shoulders."

"He had it tough, but fared through it," Gunther said.

In recognition of his success, McFadden was selected to receive this year's Spirit of Hope Award, which is presented by The Pajama Program, a nonprofit run by Irvington resident Genevieve Piturro

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that collects pajamas for children in need. The award honors an individual who has overcome a troubled past to become a role model for children. McFadden will receive the award during a ceremony today, Nov. 19, at Concord Road Elementary School in Ardsley. The event is the culmination of a weeklong pajama and book drive.

McFadden had mixed emotions when he learned about the award a few weeks ago. "I really don't like stuff like this, I'm not a flashy kind of guy," he said, adding with a smile that, "Somebody had to convince me to do it actually."

Though he doesn't relish the spotlight, he is grateful for the recognition, especially if it helps others. "Growing up in places like Children's Village, as a kid you can feel hopeless," he said, "but if me receiving this award inspires somebody to do the right thing, then I'm happy."

While McFadden hopes to serve as a role model, he is quick to point out that he is not a victim, and that he has found strength in his struggles.

"Even though I had a rough past, I feel like the world doesn't owe me anything," he said. "I feel that everybody goes through trials and tribulations, mine were just a little different than other people's. I don't ever want to feel like

somebody owes me something, I don't want to put that mentality in my head."

McFadden was picked to receive the award, not only for overcoming his difficult past, but also for his compassionate nature and fighting spirit, according to Piturro, the founder and executive director of The Pajama Program. The honor, she said, shows "There's a lot of hope for these kids if they feel support from the community. Sometimes they don't know that, but this is a good example of how the community can support someone."

Three years ago, McFadden's aunt, who he described as a "mother figure" to him, succumbed to a long illness. After her death, he began raising his younger brother, Malik Smith, who is now 13. "He didn't have any place to go and I didn't want him to go down the same road I went down as a kid — in and out of group homes and foster care — so I took him in," McFadden said. The experience, he added, has "definitely been a struggle, but we're making it. I'm proud of him."

At age 24, McFadden has a stable job, his own apartment, and what he describes as his own "little family," which also includes his Italian Mastiff "Kash." Aside from working, McFadden enjoys watching SportsCenter, "hitting the gym," spending time with his brother, and being at home. "I'm a simple guy," he said, "I don't go out much. I'm a homebody."

Thought he's come a long way from his days at CV, McFadden described his story as far from over. "I have a lot of goals," he said, "I'm very ambitious and I want to make strides to better myself and better the future for my family."

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sionally someone who could take them to the doctor or grocery shopping." Russak would also like to have a list of volunteers to call on if one of the seniors needs assistance, as well as "people who have ideas for a program they think the seniors would be interested in, that would be great too." A wellness class taught by peer trainers, where volunteers would teach other seniors with chronic health problems, is another one of Russak's initiatives.

Russak believes that "Seniors now would like to be active. They love the yoga program and just being active and involved. Right now they're talking to me about an aerobics program." She is also, "hoping to work with them to implement programs they'd like to have."

This month, in honor of Thanksgiving, a free turkey luncheon is being held for seniors on Nov. 21, at 12:30 pm, at the James Harmon Community Center. Russak is planning to hold similar events throughout the year that will bring the community together to "give back to them a little." Russak believes the community can also benefit from their senior residents stating, "They have so much to offer, and they have so much life experience."

Russak is living out a lifelong desire to work with the senior community, and she is looking forward to the road ahead. "I'm trying to get to know the seniors and I think we're developing a relationship. Everyone's been very encouraging and helpful. So far I've had a very positive experience. I enjoy my job, and I hope to be an asset to seniors and to the community."

If you're interested in volunteering with the seniors, call Russak at (914) 478-2380.