

Reaching Her Goals

This speech was presented by Shaquavia at AFG's October 5th "Cultivating Victories" event. She was one of three amazing young women who shared their stories at the event.

Hello. My name is Shaquavia. I'm 20 years old and I have been a resident of AFG's Shelter for almost 2 months now.

Growing up, life was good for me. I had a loving mother and three of the most amazing brothers. When I was four, my family and I moved to Tallahassee, Florida. That was the best part of my life.

A year later my grandmother got sick. We moved back to Michigan to only hear the bad news of her passing away. After that my mother struggled to take care of us because she had been financially dependent on her. We moved around a lot and changed schools quite frequently.

Birthday in the hospital

When I was 15, I found out my mother was sick.

She was diagnosed with kidney failure. With my mother's illness getting worse, I had a lot more responsibility around the house. That's when I decided to drop out of school.

By that time, I was tending to mother's every move. I spent my 16th birthday with her in the hospital, which was something I became all too familiar with. She was always in and out of the hospital for the next few months. Then January 10th 2008 rolled around, one day I will never forget. We got a call from the hospital, giving us the worst news ever.



The 10th of January my mother passed away. After her death I have been on my own. Since I was 16,

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Giving Women a Voice

New Choices Program celebrates two women who have taken charge of their destinies

"If it wasn't for Della, I wouldn't be here today. She made me realize that there were other people in



Della (left) and Darzell

this world who loved me by bringing me to AFG," shared Tina, another New Choices member. Tina was one of dozens of friends, family members, volunteers and staff who attended the New Choices graduation held on Monday, October 24th.

"This event is in celebration of the accomplishments of our New Choices Assistants," explains Alana Gracey, AFG Safe Choices Project Manager. "They have shown leadership and been role models for their peers, exiting sex work and remaining drug free."

The two women recognized at the event, Della and Darzell, have been involved with AFG's Safe

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Choices Program since 2003. Both women have taken on a leadership role within the program, and this event represented their “graduation.”

Discovering who they want to be

AFG’s New Choices Program works with girls and women who have decided to leave their lives of commercial sex work. It is a component of AFG’s Safe Choices Program, which is the only full-service program for girls and women engaged in the commercial sex industry in Detroit. Gracey explains, “New Choices gives women a chance to find their voice and recognize how important that is in taking charge of their own lives.”

Della, one of the honorees, has been involved with AFG since 2001. “The first time I hit the street, I was eight years old,” she recalls. “When my mother thought I was going to school, I was up on the block trying to sell something.” Della saw prostitution as her only way to escape poverty.

Leaving the streets behind

Then one day she met someone from AFG. She says that what really struck her was that Deena Policicchio, now AFG’s Outreach Director, never gave up on her. Della eventually left the streets to become a part of New Choices.

Della has learned many “hard skills” since joining the group, but she says that the biggest change she’s experienced has been increasing her self esteem. “I felt like I was wanted,” she says of joining New Choices. “They’ll help you if you want the help...Now, I have more respect for myself and respect others as well.”

She proudly declared at her graduation: “As I stand before you now, I am five years clean.” She is now living in her own apartment, and is enrolled in Wayne County Community College. She is still deciding what she wants to major in, but smiles as she says, “I like to create things out of nothing.”

Conquering addiction

Darzell, the second honoree, was also one of the first members of New Choices. At the ceremony, Darzell shared, “Through the storm of my

addiction, I was in and out of the program. But I didn’t give up.”

She had spent years on the streets battling her addiction. But when her phone was shut off because she hadn’t paid her bill, she knew that she had to change her life. “Since then, I haven’t missed a day of AFG or of school,” she states.

She has enjoyed being able to continue the virtuous cycle by reaching out to other women on the streets, many of whom she used to stand alongside. Now, she states, “I am responsible, dependable. Before, I was very irresponsible. I was just trying to feed my addiction.”

Darzell is now living in her own apartment and is a student at Henry Ford Community College. “I’m going to be a social worker,” she smiles. “I’m glad I’m in school and staying focused.” She is also the proud “pet parent” of a shitzu.

Planting seeds of empowerment

Both women say that they will miss the other New Choices members as well as doing street outreach. Della and Darzell have recruited many new New Choices members, many of whom attended their graduation. Darzell knows that not every woman she speaks to on the street will make the decision to leave commercial sex work and addiction, but she says, “I plant the seed to let them know we’re here.”

At the event, Della and Darzell were presented with graduation certificates along with new briefcases, signifying their new, professional lives.

Looking beyond her personal journey, Della has a larger goal for Detroit: “I hope that message gets across to the new boys and girls on the street that there is someone who cares about you.”

Would you like to help our Street Outreach team? AFG is looking for volunteers to help with street outreach and in our Resource Center. To learn more, contact our volunteering department at (313)361-4000 ext. 280 or visit www.Alternatives-ForGirls.org. We are also looking for a new van for street outreach. If you or someone you know is interested in donating a van, please call (313)361-4000 ext. 223.

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was 16, I have been moving from house to house, sleeping on either the floor or a couch. Without the education I needed or a job, I found it hard to make ends meet. That's what made me turn to Alternatives For Girls.

Future music producer

I know being here at AFG will help me better myself physically and emotionally. Also it will help give me the boost that I need to continue to achieve my goals in life. I am learning to deal with my anger, instead of just harboring it inside.

Also I am learning to be more productive. I am back in school and am already planning out my goals for college. Working towards my career is what I want to focus on. I have so many things in life that I want to do, and so many things I want to become. One being a music producer. I absolutely love music.

Recipe for Success

AFG's new cooking class teaches Shelter residents how to prepare delicious, nutritious meals

"Oh, those potatoes! I don't even know what to say about them except 'yum!'" exclaims Briana, one of the young women taking "Cooking with Kate," a new part of AFG's Transition to Independent Living curriculum. The young women in the class light up as they describe the delicious dishes they have been cooking up lately as part of the class.

The new class is led by AFG volunteer Kate Williams, a woman whose experience is just as impressive as those potatoes. After studying food science at Michigan State University, she attended New York's French Culinary Institute. She later moved to Chicago to become sous-chef at Wolfgang Puck. She is now the Executive Chef at Rozin, a new restaurant opening in Midtown this December.

Cooking with Kate

Kate was already a mentor at AFG when she decided to teach the cooking class. "I was really moved by the work the organization does," she remembers. When she was looking into other

Crossing the bridge over endless boundaries

I want AFG to help me cross the bridge over endless boundaries so that I can move forward. I have more faith in myself than I have in a long time, just after two months of staying here at AFG. I'm not just doing this for me, but for my mother as well. I know she will be proud that I am taking this step to better my life.

If it was not for AFG, I don't know where I would be or what I'd be doing. Speaking truthfully, I probably wouldn't even pursue furthering my education. Working a dead-end job would most likely have been the outcome. I believe that I deserve better than just working a job that I am not happy with. I have been looking and waiting for an opportunity like this to come along, and I am going to take full advantage of it. I have procrastinated for so long about getting my life together, and wanting better for myself. Now I am ready to do what it takes to reach my goals.

volunteer opportunities at AFG, she noticed that cooking was not a part of the Transition to Independent Living (TIL) curriculum. TIL is a series of courses given to young women who are part of AFG's Shelter program. Kate came up with a structure and curriculum for the course, and Cooking with Kate was born.

"The idea was to produce easy, inexpensive, healthy meals," she explains. The class is held once a month for three hours.

Healthful meals on a budget

In her time teaching the class, she says that she has really enjoyed "Getting to know the girls and spending time with them. They have fun with it. They want to learn." In fact, one young woman recently told her, "I really want to learn to make soufflé!"

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Briana prepares to cook some greens



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Save the Date

2012 Role Model Dinner

Boundless Possibilities
Thursday, March 29th, 2012
The Fillmore, Detroit
5:30 pm-9:00 pm

Briefing Room

Prevention Halloween Party

Prevention's annual Halloween Party was held on Friday, October 28th at AFG. Over 150 attendees were expected. Each year, AFG's Halloween Party provides a fun and safe way for Detroit youth to dress up and have fun.

Holiday High Tea

Save the date! The Holiday High Tea for AFG will be held at the Townsend Hotel on December 4th, 2011 from 12 pm until 3 pm. For more information or to buy tickets, please visit www.AlternativesForGirls.org.

AFG Blog

Would you like to hear directly from our staff, volunteers, and the young women we serve? Check out our AFG blog! Each month, we'll feature a different writer who wants to share their story. To read the blog, visit www.AlternativesForGirls.org/AFGBlog.

Want even more news? Sign-up for the Alternatives For Girls monthly e-newsletter. If interested, please email munderhill@alternativesforgirls.org.

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And the young women in the class are certainly enjoying it. One class member, Marisole, explains, "It was a really nice experience. I want to minor in cooking, and now I know how to dice vegetables. She made healthy chicken taste better."

Another class member, Shaquavia, explains, "I don't know how to cook, so it gave me a chance to learn how to cook and make sure it's healthy." As these young women move out of AFG's Shelter and start their independent lives, they will be able to use these skills to ensure they can prepare healthy, scrumptious meals on a budget.

Would you like to join the AFG volunteer team? Visit www.AlternativesForGirls.org or contact (313)361-4000 ext. 280 or volunteering@alternativesforgirls.org.

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