

NAEHCY Scholars - Statements

The briefing “Hidden in Plain Sight: Homeless Students in America’s Public Schools” features a facilitated discussion with twelve young adults who experienced homelessness during their preK-12 years, and who are currently in college. The youth received scholarships from the NAEHCY Scholarship Fund in 2014. Excerpts from their scholarship essays are below.

Miranda Featherston – Holland, MI: “Being homeless in my life not only once, but two separate times, I have learned to deal with adversities not many my age have had to deal with—giving me a distinct view on life. When I was in elementary school, my mother took my sister and myself and left—left our father, our home, our school, and our friends. With nowhere to go, the three of us ended up staying in numerous shelters. I soon realized the only control I had in my life was over my education, so in hopes of some stability, I focused everything I had on school. I hid my home life, so the other kids only knew of the Miranda in school—the girl with good grades. As I grew, my life at home disintegrated... I got through most of high school like this; however, tragedy struck and I am once again homeless. My father died, leaving my sister and me alone, for my mother does not participate in our lives any longer. This event shook the foundation I had built for myself, for I had to make the choice of how I would handle my education. I choose to work hard on my education so that I can achieve a better life for myself, a life that was never given to me—and never will be, for it is evident I will have to work for it. Homelessness has proved to be among the many obstacles I have had to deal with in my life; however, I have not let it be an end to my might. Graduating high school will be the new foundation I will build for my life, for off of that I will attend college, and after that I will move into the workplace.”

Miranda, age 19, is studying Human Resources Management at Ferris State University.

Bodacious Graves – Miami, FL: “The second year of high school was probably the most difficult year for me because that year, a month before my 16th birthday, I found out that me and my mom had nowhere to live again and had to go back to live in a shelter. This time being older and wiser, I knew the shelter wasn’t a fun place to be. This shelter was different from the one I stayed in as a child. Almost every day I saw or heard people in the shelter fighting, getting physical, cursing out each other and staff members, and stealing other people’s property. The first couple of weeks of going back to school, and being homeless again, seemed like a waste of time to me. I felt depressed and lost the interest in learning or getting an education. After some time of being in the shelter, I started involving myself more in school clubs and activities which kept my mind off of being sad. I joined this club called FBLA (Future Business Leader of America) and managed to place in the district competition for the job interview category. That same year I was awarded best student for the computers category at my school.... I don’t want to be homeless again because I know how frustrating it is not to have a place of your own to call home, to have to get permission from a case worker to stay out, and eat food you don’t like. My dream is to go to a fashion college of my choice, to get a bachelor’s degree in fashion merchandising, and become a fashion buyer for a big department store like Macy’s. I would like to purchase a house that I can always call home and never have to worry about being homeless again. This dream of mine, I am determined and ready to make it reality.”

Bodacious, age 19, is studying fashion merchandising at Johnson& Wales University- North Miami Campus.

Eric Mangum – San Angelo, TX: “I bounced around friends’ couches as much as I could. I still attended high school, because it was my senior year and I was not going to drop out so close to finishing. I walked to school some days, to the nearest bus stop...Another old teacher that taught me in elementary school had heard of my troubles and wanted to open her home to me and let me stay with her and her husband and sixteen-year-old son. I was overjoyed and accepted immediately and soon I had permanent home again, provided I attended the local high school, which I was all too eager to do. I threw myself into my schoolwork, happy that I had been protected from a longer homeless experience. I kept up my 4.0 GPA and even started tutoring other students to make some extra money. However, despite all my luck at finding a new home, I was in for another shock. The husband of the house died unexpectedly in what was the most tragic happening in their recent family history...There wasn’t room for the three boys in the house so I fell into the ‘crack’ and was asked to move out. So once again I found

myself homeless, hopping from couch to couch to friends' houses. Still I went to school, still I planned on graduating... I plan to pursue my career in Culinary Arts because it is what I love. I have already been homeless twice in one year and still made it through. What could possibly stop me from having a career? The impact of being homeless made me strong and brave. I was afraid, yes, I was afraid of what I would eat and where I would sleep, but bravery isn't the absence of fear, bravery is the conquering of it."

Eric, age 21, is studying business at the University of Phoenix.

Jaime Miranda – Aberdeen, WA: "Most kids' earliest memories are happy. Not mine. Barely making ends meet, or just struggling for somewhere to sleep, is how most of my life was growing up. My mom found us homes a lot, but it was hard for her to pay the bills a lot of the time. So if we couldn't find anywhere to stay, we would just live in the car for awhile... While in the fourth grade, we had to move to Mexico because my uncle got deported. My mother couldn't afford to pay for us to go to school. So every day for about two months, we went to the border and went to California trying to find a job with my mother.... After my mother passed, my brother and sister I had nowhere to go so we stayed with my aunt. We only had each other now; no one had custody or was even our legal guardians. I felt lost, but my brother, sister and I have decided to come up on the other end of life and be successful. So I will use my past of broken homes and a broken family as my motivation to succeed in college, and my future will make my mother's hard work worth something by becoming that success she always thought we could be. My effort and education has gotten me so much further than I ever thought. Education is important to my family, and by me going to school, it shows my younger siblings they can do it. My biggest goal is to help and give back to my community by helping kids like me. I want to be a detective or just a police officer, and I want to go above and beyond for kids to show them that people can be good and they want to help them succeed."

Jaime M., age 21, is studying Sociology at Central College in Iowa.

Eliana Perozo – Mobile, AL: "I left my home halfway through my sophomore year due to depression, poverty, and neglect. My mother was to be in enrolled in a rehabilitation facility and I needed to begin finding homes for my two younger sisters along with myself... Once I left home I knew my job and my grades were the most important thing in opening doors for my future. Goals that had before seemed unattainable, I couldn't wait to conquer. I threw myself into sports, clubs, international baccalaureate program, work, and friends. The darkness that has crept into my soul started to vanish every time I reached a new goal. As this light began to shine, my confidence came back. I felt compelled to inspire. I realized how important it was that I receive an education while in high school and also how essential good grades and involvement would be in attaining scholarships for my education. I have taken advantage of every opportunity given to me over the past three years and I am beginning to reap the benefits of my hard work.... In many cultures, education is a luxury. My family is from Venezuela and my father was unable to receive a high school education. More often than not, people cannot afford to attend a university because survival is their main goal. After witnessing this first hand while visiting my family over the years, I want to make a difference and break the chains of poverty in my family.... I would like to open my own business in translation and work very close to the Spanish community, specifically single mothers and runaway children, by providing them with English courses and other means of education."

Eliana, 20, studies international and global studies, and Spanish, at Sewanee: The University of the South.

Machella Raymond – Endicott, NY: "I have spent most of my life moving around. I can remember living in 22 different places throughout my life.... One morning, during my eighth-grade year, I woke up to find my father had overdosed. I could not wake him up, so I called 911. A friend of his let me move in with her that day. While I lived with her, I began to get heavily involved in church. I became particularly close with one family.... My dad's friend kicked me out in October of my tenth-grade year. A family from my church took me under their wing and let me stay there until October of 2013. At the end of October, I became homeless again. During this time, I heard of a program called 'Teen Transitional Living Program,' for homeless and runaway youth. I put in an application and heard back a few days later. They have helped me ever since. In fifth grade, I realized that I did not want to live like my father. I started to become interested in school, especially math. I made a commitment to myself, to work hard in school, go to college and get a good job.... While I lived in the group home, I started going to a

counselor, she still helps me today. She showed me that I want to help other kids like me break the cycle, too. While my life continued to be stressful and hectic, I buckled down in school. I took accelerated classes, I began looking into college and I continued to hold my head high. I started getting involved in clubs and church. I gave back to my community because I enjoyed helping people. I am majoring in psychology, to reach my goal of being a psychologist. This is just the beginning of my educational goals.”

Machella, age 20, is studying Psychology at SUNY Potsdam.

Candace Smith – Milwaukee, WI: “The life I grew up with was not a stable environment and it was a struggle to handle school work and extra activities after school. [In 5th grade] we moved into a shelter called Hope House for about two years.... My freshman through sophomore year, we were in the Salvation Army and my family split even more.... After my father passed, we lost that house and had to move into another shelter with my mother this time. We only stayed in the shelter for a few weeks because my mother wasn’t able to arrive before curfew and my little sister liked to storm out of the shelter in the middle of the night. As the pattern of my life became apparent, I began to realize the benefit of education and how it would lead me to a career that would help me escape this situation. In our times of struggle, I realized there was hope and that I didn’t have to live like this for the rest of my life. So I began to work hard and my grades began to reflect this effort. I learned to get my work done in school because it was a lot easier to focus. If I couldn’t finish it there I would walk to the library. No matter the stress at home, I never let it impact my work ethic because I knew it was only a matter of time before I would be able to go off to college. In spite of all this crazy stuff going on around me, I have managed to hold a 3.5 GPA, made time to volunteer, won an art contest, and participated in after school activities such as the musical, sports and clubs. I am a story of hard work paying off and I will succeed at anything I put my mind to.”

Candace, age 20, is studying Social Work and Spanish at The University of Wisconsin, Whitewater.

Elizabeth Jamie Talley – Lubbock, TX: “By the time Elizabeth was in 5th grade, she had already been to seven different schools, living in places nobody would even dream of entering. To Elizabeth, homelessness had been not knowing where one’s family was going to sleep or whether mom would be able to buy groceries. Now to Elizabeth, homelessness is being a junior in high school and taking on the responsibilities of an adult completely alone. To Elizabeth, homelessness is losing the only family she has and wondering why nobody cares enough to help take care of her.... This is my story and I experienced homelessness first hand. When I had just turned seventeen, I was pushed out into the world and left to survive on my own. In the beginning, I had lost hope. I thought that I had no choice but to forget about school and try to find a job that would enable me to care for myself. Thankfully, there was a special teacher in my life. She showed me that I did not need a family or parents to make me someone special. I know attending college and obtaining a Bachelor’s degree in Education is the best way to overcome the homelessness I once lived. My goal in life is to become a teacher and guide students the way multiple teachers have guided me. Without teachers, I would have fallen into the same pattern as the rest of my family, none of which have graduated high school or attended college. Now I have one year and eleven weeks to go before I graduate from college and separate myself from the family I was born to. To graduate from college, better my future, and the futures of students, will be the greatest accomplishment I hope to achieve. I am attending college, not just to become a teacher, but to change somebody’s life the way Mrs. Roberts changed mine.”

Elizabeth, age 21, is studying at Wayland Baptist University.

Gladys Thompson – Lancaster, PA: “I came to a conclusion that the only way that I could be happy and stable is to move on when we got evicted for the 5th time in 3 years. At age 13, I wanted to see what life could give me, even if it meant living like a nomad and bouncing to house to house. It didn’t change anything, because I have been living house to house since I was 9. I moved out, and I figured that I’d just become another statistic of being a homeless kid, in the government system, or even a teenage mother following in the shadow of my family... Getting kicked out of the many friends’ houses I was sleeping at became emotional scars. I was so hurt that people would leave me in the streets. I cried for days and nights. How would I be safe and able to survive sleeping at parks and temporary houses? My one childhood friend found me walking one day, and asked me to sleep over her aunt’s house. She didn’t understand why I had my duffle bag full of my belongings. I broke down and cried, telling her why I was on the streets. Her mother came to pick her up from her aunt’s, and I was beginning to walk

away. That moment is when I believe God sent an Angel to me. Her mother, Lisa, said to me, ‘Gladys get in this car, you are not going to be wandering the streets!’ I got in and felt a blessing. She helped me enroll into high school through the homeless liaison program.... Already with a full plate, I took on the challenge of going for more rigorous classes and rankings.... I will go beyond in education, only because learning never stops.”

Gladys, age 20, is studying to be a Nurse Practitioner at Pennsylvania College of Health Sciences.

Elio Velazquez – New York, NY: “Growing up in the streets of New York to a single teenage Latina mother wasn’t easy. We were nomads, constantly moving in and out of homes and shelter systems.... It was the only lifestyle I had known. During elementary school, I had to miss weeks of school to take care of my sister because it was vital that my mother attend work. On many accounts, there was no electricity in my home, so my family and I went endless nights living out of a cooler. I would sit outside or under the hallway lights in my building to do homework. While I watched my mother cry over the phone about her financial difficulties, I realized I wanted more out of life.... As I jumped around family and friends’ apartments my sophomore year, I made sure this hurdle didn’t hinder me. At school I was the ‘New Kid,’ making it more difficult to accommodate to this lifestyle. It was hard to prevail academically when I didn’t know where I would lay my head each night. I had no control over my life at home, so I dedicated my time at seizing every opportunity. I joined various organizations and programs like Summer Search, Talent Search, Student Government, College Now, and even became a teacher’s assistant.... Nevertheless, as I continue on my life’s journey, I feel fortunate for these challenges I have encountered. It has made me into the man I am today and prepared me for any curve balls life may throw. It is because of this that I went from doing my homework on the staircase and eating out of a cooler, to becoming the Salutatorian of my 2014 graduating class. Albert Einstein once said, ‘in the middle of difficulties, lies opportunity.’ By taking the hardships in my life and using them as motivation instead of excuses, I have allowed myself to taste success.”

Elio V., age 20, is studying Business Administration with a concentration in International Business, and a triple minor in Global Studies, Philosophy, and Economics at Marist College.

Corey Whipple. – Los Angeles, CA: “At that time I had no other options and there was no money out there to help my situation. It was my determination to get to a university that made me look outside of my personal struggles. I have accomplished one of my early goals of getting into a university, I wanted to study in one of the world’s most prestigious universities without unnecessary stress. I know it takes diligence and resilience to be successful at the University of California, Los Angeles. I would not want fears of paying for my education to limit my academic performance. I would rather get the most out of this university. I did not want meal plans, insurance, housing and all the things I worried about in my past, to remain as daily obstacles. I would rather enjoy my time at this university rather than count my time remaining. With this scholarship I was more sufficient on my funds, and focused less on my finances and more on my institutional goals. Now that I have been on this campus for two years, I can recall the stress the scholarship has prevented. After I graduate instead of working to pay off hectic loans, I can focus on continuing my education, and earning the title, knowledge, and degrees necessary to accomplish my long-term goals and making an impact within my career. I have plans on studying Comparative Literature and pursuing law school or graduate school in the Comparative Literature Department. I have had my misfortunes in my life thus far, but I am still working to make positive impacts on others. I have a personal aspiration to make a change in my family through education. I will turn this family legacy of uneducated minorities into a legacy of successfully educated leaders. I also want to inspire many people beyond my own personal relations. With opportunities to pursue further education still available, I can gain the tools necessary to do as I desire.”

Corey is age 20, studying Comparative Literature, at UCLA.