

Shamaria Jordan

Edison High School, Minneapolis, MN

Nominator: Sharon Cormany,

National Board Certified Teacher, Edison High School



Despite challenging circumstances, Shamaria Jordan has excelled in school and shown commitment to improving the lives of those in her community. She counts advanced writing, math, and physics courses among her academic accomplishments, and her name appears regularly on the A/B honor roll. She has been a member of student council, captain of the track team, and a member of Link Crew, helping to orient new students to high school. Shamaria has completed service projects, including volunteering with Feed My Starving Children, and spent a summer serving as a camp counselor at Trout Lake, sharing her faith and working with younger children.

Shamaria could have taken a very different path in life. As a child, her family members battled addiction and struggled to meet basic needs. Raised alongside her two sisters, brother, and mother's younger sister, the family moved frequently, living in homes with no heat and no water. But Shamaria says that her challenging experiences have inspired her to "want to make it in this life" for her family, to make her mother proud, to give hope to her younger siblings, and as an example for other struggling children. Her experiences have fostered a sense of independence and leadership. Her nominator, teacher Sharon Cormany, echoes this sentiment and credits Shamaria's success to her "motivation to challenge herself."

"You have to want it for yourself. You can't do anything without your own perseverance," Shamaria says.

Shamaria plans to major in social work and minor in youth ministry. She hopes her ability to rise above a troubled childhood will inspire others. "You don't have to be part of the cycle. You can stop it where you are if you make the right decisions in your life."

Sebastien Lannelongue

Southwest High School, Minneapolis, MN

Nominator: Joan Schoenecker,

AVID/Honors Chemistry, Southwest High School



Strength. Determination. Fortitude. These are the words Sebastien Lannelongue's nominator uses to describe his character. Looking back to his early childhood, Sebastien wouldn't have anticipated having to overcome tremendous challenges and needing to develop and rely so heavily on these traits.

Sebastien and his fraternal twin, Paul, were born into a loving, stable, and economically secure family in Mexico City. But at six years old, Sebastien would say good-bye to his father when he passed away unexpectedly. Years later and struggling to raise two boys alone in Mexico City, his mother would move the family to the United States.

Though sad to leave home, Sebastien adapted to a new lifestyle, culture, and language in the U.S. He thanks his mother, who ensured her children were enrolled in a good school and helped them learn English. During his sophomore year, Sebastien learned he would have to say good-bye to his mother, too, when she was diagnosed with terminal pancreatic cancer.

When many teenagers would be spending time with friends, Sebastien became busy shuttling his mother to her medical appointments and his brother to his extracurricular activities. With his mother too ill to work, Sebastien took on multiple jobs to help support his family: golf caddy at Minnetrista Golf Course, cashier at Great Harvest, and shift supervisor at Bruegger's Bagels. His mother's medicine was expensive, and the family struggled to make ends meet; they enrolled in general assistance. In the summer of 2015, Sebastien's mother passed away.

Throughout high school, and despite difficulty at home, Sebastien continues to succeed academically. He maintains a 3.4 grade point average, speaks three languages fluently, played football and lacrosse for three years, and participated in STRIVE, a community mentorship program providing students with real-life career experience.

Sebastien now excels for the mother he lost: "After losing my mom, I told myself that the last thing I could do was ruin my future by failing at school. Being well educated and going to college was what my mother considered success. I knew how hard my mom had worked for me and how bad she wanted me to succeed," he says. College is in Sebastien's future, and he plans to pursue a career in business.

"There's no way of changing the past... What's ahead of you is what really matters, and you can change that and make it as positive and as successful as you want it to be," Sebastien says. He is a living example.

Domenic Johnson

North Community High School, Minneapolis, MN

Nominator: Kate Anderson, Social Worker, North Community High School



While Minnesota legislators and administrators work on recommendations for improving Minnesota’s foster care system and out-of-home placements, North High School senior and Beat the Odds scholarship winner Domenic Johnson provides a first-hand look at the system he calls “harsh and unforgiving.” Domenic and his sister spent several years in foster care after the state determined both his mother and his father were unfit parents. He experienced instability and abuse. He sums it up simply as “not a good experience.” Domenic cites participation as a child in a CDF Freedom Schools® program as the highlight of his childhood.

Domenic and his sister eventually went to live with his grandmother, who he says loved them but believed in corporal punishments that weren’t much different from the abuse they experienced in foster care. Domenic accepted his grandmother’s discipline as normal behavior, but as he grew up he became more aware that it was not acceptable. “It’s not how you show love,” he says. Domenic began running away from his grandmother’s house. He admits he wanted to be with his mom or get attention from his dad. But, he would eventually just end up back in the same situation. When he was in the ninth grade, Domenic got kicked out of his house and realized he had no place to go. He found an open garage that he could crawl in to keep warm and wondered what he was going to do. Domenic describes that night as a pivotal point when he knew he had to take charge of his own life.

After bouncing around from one friend’s house to another, Domenic finally landed at his aunt’s house, where he began to turn his life around. One of the first things he did was to find a job so that he could help support himself. The second thing he did was turn his focus on his education. He no longer thought of school as a distraction or obligation. He viewed school as his way out. He was no longer content, he says, to settle for less. He had a dream to further his education and achieve his goal to become a nurse, and he was determined to make it happen. In addition to improving his grades, Domenic began joining groups and working to make his school a better place for all students. He joined the Student Council and Student Activities Committee. He began attending the Gay-Straight Alliance Club to meet new people and to learn about other lifestyles. He also thrived at his job and helped other students find work and resources. He attributes much of his turnaround to the staff and students at North High. “North High is more than just a school,” he says, “it’s like a little family.”

In spite of the obstacles and family breakdowns Domenic has faced in his young life, he shows great insight and understanding of the frailties of his family. He doesn’t “bash” any of them. His mother has mental health issues, and his father has issues stemming from not having his own dad around. He understands, too, that his grandmother cared for him but didn’t know how to show it. “Every mistake comes with a lesson,” he says of all he has learned from his family situation.

As he looks at his future, Domenic has applied to several schools, including Bethel University and Minnesota State University Mankato. He plans to get his degree in nursing or another health profession. He also plans to eventually open a program to help kids like him. “There will be only one rule,” he says, “you have to go to school.”

Christopher Oquist

Roosevelt High School, Minneapolis, MN

Nominator: Michael Bradley, Principal, Roosevelt High School

Experiences as a young child in the child protection system have inspired Christopher Oquist's determination to become a social worker to help children like him "who had bad beginnings turn their futures into something brighter."

Christopher remembers being four years old and watching wrestling on TV with his brothers and cousin when he saw flashing blue and red lights and heard the crashing of police breaking down the back door to his childhood home in the Little Earth community of Minneapolis. The police were there because his parents were dealing drugs. He remembers the smell of drugs and people going in and out of his home, but he didn't know that what his parents were doing was wrong until the police came that night. They took Christopher and his two brothers from the home and put them into the child protection system. Tenets of the Indian Child Welfare Act successfully ensured Christopher and his brothers were placed in a loving family where they would be surrounded by their American Indian culture. Christopher's adoptive father is Anishinaabe and has taught Christopher about his culture and engaged him in his American Indian community at Sun Dance, lodge and Pow Wow ceremonies.

Christopher says, "My only option to succeed is through education. I cannot and will not be like others before me who gave up on their dreams." Working hard toward his dreams, Christopher gets good grades and takes rigorous honors courses at Roosevelt High School in Minneapolis. Additionally, he plays baseball and soccer, competes on the school's debate team and is a grass dancer. With an array of college options across the country, Christopher looks forward to continuing to study hard.

His academic success, he explains, is fueled by his desire to help others. Like many other young people who beat the odds with the support of caring adults and public and private support programs, Christopher was inspired by his social worker's help to study social work and psychology himself so that he can offer support to other children with similar experiences. Christopher's nominator, the principal at Roosevelt, believes "Chris will forge a career that benefits many, many individuals."



Mela Nguyen

Great River School, St. Paul, MN

Nominator: Teresa Hichens-Olson,

Director of Programs and College Accessibility, Great River School



For much of Mela Nguyen’s life, safety has been an infrequent amenity. While poverty, drugs, and violence made her childhood neighborhood in North Minneapolis unsafe, domestic abuse made her home dangerous. Her mother believed they had no escape from her abusive relationship. In this environment, the future often seemed hopeless. Mela struggled with depression and the weight of the responsibility to protect her mother and little brother.

“I wanted to be that change in my family,” Mela recalls, “especially to make my mom proud. I wanted to help her get out of her abusive relationship.” Fearing for her family members’ lives, Mela refused to live with her mother until she removed herself from the situation. After eight years of abuse, Mela, her younger brother, and her mother finally moved into a shelter, and acquired a restraining order against their abuser.

However, her mother suffered from such severe physical abuse that she sustained a traumatic brain injury, and was soon fired from her job due to this disability. With her mother unable to work, Mela had to balance working a full-time job, helping raise her younger brother, and completing her schoolwork.

Mela refuses to allow her continually adverse living situation to inhibit her academic and extracurricular achievement. She has managed to make the honor roll all four years of high school, and will be graduating at the top of her class. In addition to leading in the classroom, Mela is a recognized leader in her community. Through her participation with organizations such as the National Youth Leadership Forum in Los Angeles, the Nobel Conference as a student delegate, and Youth Farm (which she co-founded), Mela has already established herself as a driving force in the non-profit world. Her role as president of the Peer Mediation team at her high school, in which she assists and inspires her peers to work through conflicts, further reflects her commitment to helping others.

Despite her traumatic past, Mela considers herself lucky. She finds solace in knowing that her mother is alive, her brother is safe, and that she attends a high school that motivates her to push herself. Ever humble, Mela is quick to credit her family, friends, and teachers for supporting her along the way.

Mela knows she will change the world and is committed to finishing college. Mela plans for a career in graphic design. Though she thinks she has already beaten the odds, Mela says she will continue to do so by believing in herself.

Hennessey Carlbom

Takoda Prep, Minneapolis, MN

Nominator: Thomas Lonetti, History/Math Instructor, Takoda Prep

Hennessey Carlbom spent the first ten years of her life living on White Earth and Red Lake Indian Reservations. The youngest of five children, Hennessey had moved to Minneapolis with her family by the age of 13, when a terrible accident left her older brother Jordan dead, and Hennessey stricken with grief. Her pain multiplied when several months later, Jordan's newly born son—and Hennessey's nephew—passed away, too. The heartache over her family's tragic losses was too much to bear and took its toll on young Hennessey. She stopped going to school and ran away from home. The following year, she was expelled from school for fighting.



Despite the challenges Hennessey faced in middle school, there would soon be light on the horizon. As high school rolled around, Hennessey came to realize that she had choices, and it was time to choose herself, and in turn, her education.

At Takoda Prep, Hennessey says she got back on track. She enrolled in the Additional Studies Program and began to make good grades. Soon, the young woman who had given up on academics to the point that she was skipping school was consistently receiving the quarterly attendance award. Teachers, such as her nominator, Thomas Lonetti, came to admire her ability as a student, not just her knowledge and contribution to classroom discussion, but “her passion for knowledge, a yearning to want to learn...” Hennessey says that as she strives for success in school and in life, she relies on the support of two important people: her mom, and her best friend and classmate, Leann. Her mother pushes her to do her best, and Leann, with whom Hennessey shares similar experiences and struggles, is the positive, encouraging voice that lifts her up when life feels heavy.

Hennessey can't wait for her family to watch her achieve success. She plans to go to college in Minnesota and will pursue a career in law enforcement with the goal of becoming an FBI agent. Her nominator has already decided that “Hennessey will succeed in whatever she chooses to pursue.” She has already proven that she has what it takes.