

TAYLOR KUENG

Patrick Henry High School

Nominator: Katie Hindman, College Possible

Change has been the only constant in Taylor Kueng's life. Born the eldest of a young, single mother, Taylor and her three siblings were separated and placed in the foster care system when Taylor was seven. She was shuffled between homes, at times enduring physical abuse from foster parents, and shifted schools as often.



"Nothing in my constantly changing life could keep me from loving school and learning new things," says Taylor. Her nominator, Katie Hindman, says that Taylor actively seeks out challenges. Indeed, Taylor has pushed herself academically, always achieving above a 3.67 GPA, even when taking into account her post-secondary coursework. She has also managed to work part time and participate in three Varsity sports: track, soccer, and cheerleading. Taylor's drive to take on—and surmount—challenges isn't limited to her personal life or to academic pursuits, however. Taylor wants to challenge entire systems. To that end, Taylor has taken college courses in feminism, race, and class. She has confronted—and won—a ruling by her school against her choice to wear a traditional African turban to class, a choice that until Taylor's advocacy was considered a dress code infraction. Taylor is interested in social work and activism. She says that "being able to reform the system [she] once was a part of would be the ultimate reward for all of the obstacles [she's] faced."

As of this winter, Taylor had applied to a handful of colleges. "[Attending college] would give me the opportunity to break the cycle [to which] many who are born into broken homes fall victim. With a college education, I could go out and achieve every goal I have set for my personal life and career." Katie Hindman adds, "Taylor is determined to change the world... I believe she will."

KENNY WALTON

Thomas Edison High School

Nominator: C. Max Athorn, Thomas Edison High School

When Kenny Walton saw a classmate with holes in his shoes earlier this year, he knew how it felt to be the one wearing them. After his baby brother's accidental death, Kenny's world turned on end. Though just four years old at the time, Kenny, who had been the only one in the room when his little brother choked on a piece of food, was handed the blame and his parents' ensuing anger and abuse for the loss of his brother's life. In the years to come, Kenny's family moved from Wisconsin to Minnesota for a fresh start, but his father, and in turn the family's economic security, ultimately left. His sisters followed and then his mother. Kenny, now a teenager and alone, found it difficult to concentrate on academics when faced with uncertainty about where he would stay each night and what he would eat.



Amid this turbulence, Kenny had an epiphany: "I deserve better." His nominator says that Kenny "values education intrinsically and he knows its power." So, Kenny started staying after school and getting help from his coaches and school counselor. He began taking challenging International Baccalaureate courses, especially enjoying English literature, and he found additional success in visual art. YouthLink helped Kenny find his first job, and football and basketball filled in the remaining hours. Kenny believes keeping busy is key to overcoming challenges and also advises youth in similar situations to reach out for help. Kenny knows college will help him get ahead, and he's planning to do what it takes to get there.

Kenny's nominator calls him "a deeply empathetic and caring man." It is no surprise then that Kenny gave a few pairs of his own shoes to his classmate in need. Seeing the student's face light up made his heart happy, he recalls. Kenny hopes to give back to others in the future, too, and names counselor, nurse, and dentist among the occupations that interest him. "With just a bit of help, support and a small push, I can do much more than 'Beat the Odds,' " he says.

MAX BAILEY

North Community High School

Nominator: Kate Allen, North Community High School

At just one month old, Max Bailey became the youngest of 12 children when a family adopted him and his three siblings. Instead of finding a safe, nurturing home, however, Max was led to believe that he didn't deserve to have his basic needs met, including food and clothing. "Enough was enough," says Max about the day he ran away from home 14 years later. Max had plans for his life, and a home that had now become violent couldn't sustain them.



Max spent time sleeping on friends' couches until a school social worker pointed him to The Bridge for Youth. Education is important to Max because he knows it will help him have a better life. He had been getting good grades in school, but maintaining a strong GPA while homeless was a combination he calls "suffocating." At The Bridge, Max has been able to focus all of his energy on school—and a list of other endeavors. He participates in debate, Student Council, the Student Activities Committee, robotics, track, and wrestling. He has tutored middle school students in math, and as the first openly gay male at North Community, he leads the school's Gay Straight Alliance. He has taken on two jobs and also volunteers, both at The Bridge and food shelves around the city. Today, Max is ranked an impressive 16th in his high school graduating class.

Max wants for other youth facing similar challenges not to give up. It's his intention to go to college and become a lawyer so that he can help vulnerable people navigate the complexities of the legal system; having walked in their shoes, he feels will help make him an effective advocate. He has a passion for improving the lives of youth, specifically those facing abuse in the foster care system or experiencing homelessness, and wants to give back. Max is optimistic about what comes next: "There have been many obstacles that have hindered me in my past; however, they will no longer dictate my future."

KAYLA CROSS

Thomas Edison High School

Nominator: John Strand, Thomas Edison High School

Kayla Cross's optimism and impressive achievements don't let on to her turbulent childhood. Her early formative years were marked by an unstable home life, including an absence of caring adults. Kayla was raised as a young child by her mother and abusive step-father, and saw her mother's husband replaced by a series of boyfriends who rotated through her young life. She experienced abuse at the hands of her grandmother's husband, a fact that later would strain Kayla's relationship with her mother's side of the family. Kayla, her mother, and brothers moved 22 times, and Kayla attended 15 different schools. Despite her family's high mobility, Kayla managed to take refuge in her education and calls school a "sanctuary." But even the joy she took from learning couldn't fill a gaping hole in her heart, the one where she believed a relationship with her biological father, a man she had never met and was led to believe didn't want her, was meant to be.



In 7th grade, Kayla did what she now refers to as "the best thing I ever did for myself." With the help of a friend, she reached out to her birth father. In doing so, she discovered the nurturing and supportive adult she had needed for so long. Kayla transitioned to a life with her father and, despite its own challenges, found the stability she had been seeking.

Today, Kayla is an accomplished student, member of her school, and of her neighborhood community. In addition to excelling academically, Kayla participates in debate, robotics, and math team. She's a board member of her neighborhood association and president of her school's outdoor club. Kayla's nominator, John Strand, says "Kayla has looked squarely at the darkest side of the human condition and has chosen empathy and altruism. She has chosen to embrace life and goodness." Her empathy for others shows in her leadership skills. As president of the outdoor club, Kayla works to include others and to build a club that accurately reflects her school's diversity.

Kayla is passionate about both the outdoors and improving the world around her. She is preparing to be the first in her family to graduate from college and plans for a double major in environmental studies and political science. Kayla has set her sights appropriately high: "I really want to save the world," she explains. "I also kind of want to be president."

ASH FARAH

South High School

Nominator: Marie Hassell, South High School

Ash Farah says he didn't grow up "the kind of poor where you don't get Christmas gifts, but the kind where you learn to curb hunger with water." Born in a Nairobi refugee camp, Ash and his family escaped to Minnesota. His mother, once a child bride, went on to marry an older man who abused her and ultimately left the family, unwilling to accept Ash. Perceived as disabled by his family, Ash didn't speak until he was 7 years old, but he had made known to everyone that he identified as a boy, not the girl they believed him to be. His fundamentalist Islamic community and his family sought to "convert" him, a process consisting of weeks-long exorcisms and physical abuse. As a teenager, when he didn't renounce his gender identity, his mother would kick him out of the house. Finally, Ash demanded acceptance and left the house for good when it was denied.



Even when he was homeless, Ash chose education. "When Ash was homeless living under a bridge, he was still studying and doing homework," says his nominator, Marie Hassell. In part, Ash says, his drive was inspired by a desire to reject pity for his situation and to prove that he could be a success despite the obstacles he faced. Ash reached out for support from members of the community and found it. He also found a foster home. Today Ash has a 3.9 GPA, is ranked in the top 5% of his class, takes advanced courses, and fills the remainder of his time with two part-time jobs and extracurricular activities. He is an executive member of the Peace Tigers, his school's progressive leadership group, manages event planning for the Gender Sexuality Alliance, tutors students in the school writing center, and served as lead editor of South High's literary magazine. Ash is a Minneapolis Social Justice Fellow who canvassed for marriage equality and organized a rally to continue to include transgender people in the Minnesota Human Rights Charter, an event that led him to the foster parents he lives with today.

Ash encourages other youth like him to help themselves by reaching out for support. In the future, he hopes to give back in exchange for the support he has received by being a resource to others. After college, Ash plans to go to medical school and become a doctor, serving people living in traditionally underrepresented communities. Ash cites a Somali proverb: "You can be a mountain or lean on one." He asks, "Why not both?"