

## **Amarya Ward-West**

*Hopkins High School*

*Nominator: Carl Yancy, Special Services Department Lead*



It was the summer before her 9<sup>th</sup> grade year. Amarya Ward-West was enjoying a full life with her family and friends and was an exemplary student who involved herself in academic groups and programs like Urban 4-H and Girl Scouts. Then July came, and within a few seconds her life changed forever. Amarya's father had driven their car into a ditch, the impact of the accident injuring her brother's leg and breaking Amarya's neck. Amarya's father left the scene of the accident.

Doctors immediately placed Amarya into a medically induced coma, and for the next three and a half months Amarya would remain in the hospital, connected to breathing and feeding tubes. Eventually she began the process of relearning functions that previously were instinctive. "My life functions went from autopilot to manual driving," Amarya says. She was released from the hospital that fall with a diagnosis of quadriplegia. In other words, Amarya was paralyzed from the neck down.

Amarya has confronted both physical and emotional challenges arising from the accident. She is entirely dependent upon technology and the adults around her for her care, and her injury physically prevents her from participating in many of the activities she once enjoyed. She has experienced loving support from many members of her family, she says, but has been abandoned by individuals she once called her friends. The loss of friendships has made some days feel very dark. And yet, despite odds that her nominator, Carl Yancy, says "would have made a lesser individual crumble," Amarya's bright spirit and ambition remain intact. Today, Amarya has a cumulative grade point average of 3.98, which includes her Honors and AP coursework. She serves as a mentor for students in her school's multiple needs population, providing friendship, leadership, and guidance to others.

Amarya will graduate in the spring of 2018 with honors. She will be the first of her family to attend college and has shown interest in pursuing a career in medicine or psychology. As Amarya prepares for the next stages of her life, she draws inspiration from a Lemony Snicket quote that concludes, "...what might seem to be a series of unfortunate events may in fact be the first steps of a new journey."

## Ben Gardner

*Roosevelt High School*

*Nominator: Molly Sheahan-Spector*



Ben Gardner was seven years old when he started noticing that his family was facing problems. His parents had been high school sweethearts and gotten married, but his father's alcoholism and drug abuse prompted conflict at home. Ben and his brother took to sleeping in the basement to escape their parents' fighting. Soon thereafter, Ben's mom sought a divorce, and Ben's relationship with his father diminished.

Just a few years later, Ben reconnected with his father under traumatic circumstances. His father had been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. Ben witnessed the pain he suffered from chemotherapy and says, "It was hard for me to watch my dad slowly die over the next six months." His father's death "destroyed" his mother, Ben says. She too had struggled with alcoholism, and the loss of her former husband sent her into a downward spiral. Her alcohol abuse intensified, and with it came criminal activity and both mental and physical abuse of Ben. Ben says that "By the age of 14, I found myself in the unique situation of being the parent to my own mother." On more than one occasion, Ben and his older brother had to take her to detox centers, though her treatment never proved successful. By the time Ben was in 11<sup>th</sup> grade and preparing for junior prom, his mom disappeared across the country. Ben was soon arranging for the sale of the family home and experiencing only limited contact with his mother.

Even when Ben was up all night caring for his mother during these challenging times, Molly Sheahan-Spector, his English teacher at Roosevelt High School, says he was always on time to school. "It seemed the worse his home situation was, the better he did in school," Molly says. Indeed, Ben has participated in the International Baccalaureate curriculum in his last two years of high school. Ben says school has been an outlet for him. He also says that it is his mother who has inspired him to excel. "You're in charge of your own future," she told him. And education is the way to a successful future.

Today, Ben has a stable life at home with his uncle and his uncle's girlfriend. He counts them, his grandmother, stepfather, and brother as key supports, along with friends and teachers. Ben says he refuses to let his past hold him back. He looks forward to attending college next fall and plans to become a criminal prosecutor in the coming years. "I have so many dreams and ideas of what I want to do in this life," Ben says.

## Early Caruso

*High School for Recording Arts*

*Nominator: Alia Jeraj*



“I had everything set up for me to fail,” says Early Caruso. Born in New Orleans and brought to Minnesota as a young child, Early’s years in Louisiana and Minnesota were spent with his mother, who struggled with drug addiction. Early cared for himself at a young age, stealing food from the local corner store in order to have something to eat, heating soup on a space heater and boiling water for baths. When Early was seven, his mother’s home was raided by law enforcement out of suspicion of criminal activity. Following this traumatic incident, Early was sent to live with his father. It was only a few years before Early’s stability was uprooted again, however, and for much of his teenage life Early was homeless, either couch-surfing or sleeping outside, and bargaining for survival. Early began to face addiction, too, just as his mother had.

It was at age 15 that Early decided he didn’t want the same fate his mother had experienced. Early says asking for help was critical in moving forward, and that the free Internet at the library saved his life. He enrolled at the High School for the Recording Arts, where he is now able to nurture his interest in filmmaking and access a support system that includes housing advocates and a counselor. He notes that his father and his father’s family have been a rock for him, too. “There are resources, but you have to go find them,” he says, adding that “People are meant to move... if you don’t move, nothing’s going to happen.”

Despite the challenges Early has faced, he is thriving in school and is passing his love of learning on to others. Early has given drum lessons to other students and co-conducted the school’s jazz band. His nominator, counselor Alia Jeraj, describes Early as among the most reliable of students, compassionate, and dedicated to his work. Early is also transitioning his gender, something that poses obstacles for many but that Early is meeting with grace.

Early is not bitter about his past, but in fact hopes to use his hardships to his advantage. He plans to pursue a career in filmmaking, creating movies that showcase both the challenges and beauty of life and that inspire empathy for others. Early may have been set up to fail, but he has conquered every obstacle with perseverance. “Every day is a blessing,” he concludes.

## Misky Salad

*Central High School*

*Nominator: Nathan Flanders*



Misky Salad says that for many of her friends, high school will be remembered as the time of their lives. But for her, it will always be the time she had to grow up too fast and face challenges that few adults, let alone children, have had to confront. “I dealt with things that no child should ever see or experience,” she says.

Raised by her mother and stepfather, Misky has had to play parent not only to her younger half-brother but also to herself. Misky’s mother struggles with alcoholism, leaving Misky to manage many basic and emotional needs on her own. High school has been marked by this challenge, in addition to the trauma incurred by her best friend’s death. “[He] passed away during school just a few feet from where I was,” she remembers. Just before the loss of her friend, her mother had gone missing, too.

At first, Misky says, she didn’t let on that anything was wrong. “I put a smile on my face at school and kept my family business to myself.” But the compounding effects of her friend’s death proved to be too much to handle alone. Misky reached out for support at school and “let it all out.” Soon, she was also working with law enforcement to track down her mother and help her escape from a trafficking operation. Misky’s work led not only to her mother’s return, but also to the termination of classified advertisements in certain publications known to lure women into dangerous activities.

Asking for help was a turning point for Misky, with counselors providing an important outlet for her feelings, as well as support and guidance. Misky still faces obstacles at home today, but places her energy on her studies and is enrolled in post-secondary education. She also participates in Girl Scouts. Misky has concluded that, while she can’t control her mother’s choices, she can control her own. “You can only control what you do today. At the end of the day it’s your life, your decisions. Keep your head up. Control what you can.”

That’s why Misky is taking charge and planning a brighter future for herself. She says she refuses to let her past ruin her chances of success in the future. Misky is applying to schools nationwide and intends to become a nurse practitioner.

## **Zarina Sementelli**

*Como Park Senior High School*

*Nominator: Ashley Kronwall*



Four days before Christmas during her sophomore year, Zarina Sementelli and her family were evicted from their home. Facing homelessness, Zarina made the difficult choice to split up from her mother and sisters in order to accept an offer from her basketball coach to stay with her and her family. Zarina says that a two-week stay turned into six months, but then she was searching for a new home again and spent the coming months moving from one place to the next, relying on the generosity of family and friends. Without a stable place to sleep at night, and lacking reliable transportation, just getting to school and being able to focus proved challenging. That's when she found Booth Brown House, a transitional living facility for teens. "This was a blessing for me," Zarina says.

While Zarina has always been a good student, she says, "Stability allowed me to focus on school without having to worry about where I would be sleeping that night." Today she is ranked in the top half of her class and has a 3.06 grade point average. She balances school along with work, basketball, and community service, including through her participation in the St. Paul Youth Commission, Girls in Action, and Dare 2 Be Real. Zarina has also founded and continues to run a women's group at her school called Empower Me, which is now 20 members strong and includes a curriculum Zarina developed herself.

Zarina's nominator, Ashley Kronwall, says Zarina is "one of the most resilient and independent students" she has ever met and is struck by Zarina's commitment to improving her community. Zarina says she has never given up on herself. "I am passionate about making a difference that will affect generations to come," she says. "I refuse to allow everything I've learned from my journey to go to waste."

This fall, Zarina plans to attend college and pursue a career in law.