A Second Chance

Getting accepted to the University of South Florida was a day I’ll never forget. I had been at SRN for just five months, but in that time the program changed my life forever. SRN gave me a breath of fresh air I never thought would come. I never dreamed college was an option for me.

This past year was tough. I was working overnight shifts at my job, barely sleeping, struggling in classes, and I fell into a serious depression. I felt like giving up; I felt that I couldn’t do it anymore, that I wasn’t cut out for school. I told Ms. Vicki and that was all I had to do. She made sure that I had the support I needed. She brought me into the office to do school work and the entire staff was there for me. Vicki encouraged me to go to counseling, gave me advice, comforted me and most of all, believed in me. I ended up finishing the semester with 2 A’s and 2 B’s, a semester I thought for sure would not end well.

As an education major, I am persevering now so I can become the best teacher possible for my future students. I want to be for my students what the teachers, both at school and SRN, have been for me. The support, direction, and love I received kept me going when I was in a black hole. I am so grateful for this program. SRN was always there. It isn’t just some program. SRN is my family. I never could have made it without them and I am grateful for them everyday.

-Patrycja Monforton
SRN Graduate

A Note from the Chairman of SRN

School is back in session, but what a summer it was for SRN! Our entire 2017 senior class graduated high school, and they have all headed off to pursue their next educational goal (college or vocational training). SRN will continue to support them every step along their journey!

Watching the class of 2017 soar makes us even more excited for our next group of seniors and underclassmen. They too had a busy summer! As has become tradition, our students attended ANYTOWN, a workshop empowering teens to combat discrimination. Once again, it was a huge success. Our students returned from the workshop with enhanced skills, knowledge, and determination to make a difference in their community. Another summer staple, book club, was conducted twice a week. Staff and students bonded over The Alchemist, Paulo Coelho’s inspiring novel about self-actualization and power of pursuing dreams.

We also debuted two new classes this summer. The first, a cooking class presented by Cooking Matters, taught students the fundamentals of food preparation and smart grocery shopping. Students received hands-on experience each week making dishes like breakfast burritos and Mexican veggie lasagna, culminating in a dramatic cook-off! The kids also began sewing classes at Keep Me In Stitches. They learned the basics of machine-sewing, and made items like pillows, pillowcases, and handbags.

While these classes were fun and engaging for everyone, they also served important purposes. All SRN classes aim to help make our kids well-rounded human beings, and help them overcome hidden barriers that might prevent them from achieving their goals. With both new classes, we’re happy to say mission accomplished!

Meanwhile we’re gearing up for a jam-packed Fall. Our first full academic year in Pinellas begins this semester. With 20 new students expected at Haven South this Fall (and even more expected when the boys dorm opens in Spring), 2017-2018 promises to be a year full of new challenges and triumphs. We look forward to breaking the cycle of poverty and changing lives all over Pinellas county.

In addition to our regular slate of Fall classes and activities, we’re delighted that our inaugural Driving Out Youth Homelessness charity golf tournament was a great success. We are now looking forward to our Lend-A-Hand Luncheon on October 12 from 11:30 am - 1:30 pm. For More information, please visit our website at www.startingrightnow.org or email us at info@startingrightnow.org. We hope to see you there!

-Matt Silverman
President of Baseball Operations
Tampa Bay Rays
SRN Chairman
LEND A HAND

STARTING RIGHT, NOW invites you to enjoy lunch and be empowered by our students’ stories of overcoming youth homelessness.

Thursday, October 12, 2017
11:30 am - 1:30 pm

Higgins Hall
5225 North Himes Avenue • Tampa, FL 33614

Lunch provided by the Columbia Restaurant

Ticket deadline October 5th, 2017
No tickets will be sold at the door.

STARTING RIGHT, NOW wishes to extend our most heartfelt gratitude to our generous sponsors.

Presenting Sponsor: Chris T. Sullivan Foundation

Join us STARTINGRIGHTNOW.ORG
Meet Kathryn and Kenny!

Good hearts recognize each other.

Kenny truly had no family when he joined SRN. It had been years since he opened up to someone. Still in survival mode, he resisted opening up to Kathryn too. “We went to get pizza and I could already tell how curious she was by all the questions she was asking. So when we sat down I said to myself, I’m going to ask her questions instead,” he said smiling.

He knew it was the easiest way to deflect the conversation away from himself. But even as he kept Kathryn at arm’s-length, he could see the kindness she had. “The thing was, she decided to do this. She wasn’t getting paid for it, you know? I could see she had a passion for helping people.” It wasn’t much, but it was enough for Kenny to give her a chance.

Brick by brick, Kathryn gained Kenny’s trust. She didn’t rush him for fear of coming on too strong. She knew the most important thing was just to be consistent. With daily phone calls - Kenny is an old soul, and greatly prefers calls to text messages - and unwavering support, Kathryn convinced Kenny she was in it for the long haul. “Over time he learned I was there for him, and not going anywhere,” Kathryn said. It wasn’t lost on Kenny. Despite their slow beginning, Kenny says now, “I can’t give her attitude about anything. That’s not what she deserves, that’s not what she’s given me.”

Both agreed one of the most important things she’s given him is a sense of self-respect and self-love. “Kathryn hates it when I wear basketball shorts. Sometimes she texts me not to wear them and she gets to the house pick me and I’m like, ‘Surprise!’” He chuckled. “She reminds me of my mom like that. But she explained the way you dress is the way you feel about yourself. She taught not just how to love myself, but to respect the good things I have around me.”

Kathryn also had a secret weapon on her side: her husband Bret. Kenny views them both as mentors, and loves spending time with either of them; but Bret is Kenny’s go-to for relationship advice. “Sometimes I say, ‘Hey, do you mind if Bret comes by himself? We need to talk about something,’” he explained. “She’ll always ok with it, but she jokes that she’s getting jealous.” Kenny also looks up to them as a model of a positive relationship. They way they interact and communicate with each other inspires him to recreate that connection in his own life. “I call them the happy hippies,” he joked. “They know how to talk things out. They make the best couple.”

Kathryn has literally been by Kenny’s side through some of the most significant moments of his life, and it doesn’t look like that’s changing any time soon. She was out of town leading up to his high school graduation but came straight from the airport to see him walk. She still had her suitcase in hand as he crossed the stage, beaming with pride. The pair will share another huge life event together soon: Kenny’s first day at college. “He asked me to take him and it melted my heart,” she said.

Kathryn, Bret, and Kenny share the kind of bond that can never be manufactured: they see each other as family. The connection they have shows the value of the time and energy our mentors invest in our students. Without these incredible volunteers, SRN wouldn’t be what it is today.

Thank you, Kathryn (and Bret!) for being terrific mentors!!

- Andrew Bresnahan
SRN Scholarship Coordinator
Hillsborough Happenings

The upstairs at Haven Poe is open for business! Renovations have been completed, making room for 15 new beds, bringing the total to 35. As we begin interviewing students, we look forward to offering hope to more youth than ever before. Thank you to everyone at the Spurlino Foundation, The Broadrick Foundation, Conn Memorial Foundation, and Wharton-Smith for supporting this project every step of the way - we couldn’t have done it without you!

Meanwhile, our Hillsborough training center is moving! After ten years in New Tampa, we’re relocating to South Tampa. The new space is nearly twice the square footage of our current building, and should make life easier - and less crowded - for everyone. But more importantly, it’s significantly closer to Haven Poe and Haven South, meaning we save on transportation costs and can go to helping our kids in other ways. Renovations are currently underway, and we expect to start the new year by moving into the training center! Thank you Suffolk Construction for making this project come to life!

Pinellas Pride

Our beautiful new Haven South campus was put to good use this summer when we hosted our first cooking class. Cooking Matters brought the class right into our own kitchen to put our facilities to the test. Students from both houses learned the basics of cooking, and hopefully learned their way around the kitchen. We hope to host many future classes at our spacious St. Pete campus.

Not to be outdone, Rococo Steak brought our kids in for an amazing four-course meal, during which they taught the students proper etiquette. Not only that, they also have been generous to donate a tremendous amount of food to both houses!

Above: SRN students Anita Morgan, left, and Ramses Roman, right, in cooking class.

Staff Spotlight: Ja’Lezza Clark

Ja’Lezza Clark knows how quickly circumstances can change.

Hours before she and her family moved 1,000 miles from their home state of Ohio to Florida, their new home flooded. A pipe burst, the landlord told them, destroying the entire first floor. There was no way they could move in. With everything they owned packed in their cars, having given up their apartment in Ohio and found new jobs in Florida, they had to move. For two weeks, Ja’Lezza, her mom, both her sisters, her sister’s husband, her nephew, and a dog shared a hotel room, before moving into a one-bedroom apartment.

Late one night, after more than a month of daily job-hunting and living shoulder-to-shoulder with her entire family, Ja’Lezza’s phone blinked with a message. She opened her inbox to read one of Vicki Sokolik’s patented midnight emails. Do you realize this is a live-in position? Her living situation was a little chaotic at the moment, and it couldn’t hurt to interview and find out more. “To be honest, I thought it was a crazy concept,” Ja’Lezza said, recalling her interview. “I’d never heard of something like this before. But after meeting Vicki, I thought she was amazing. I was sold.”

None of this happened the way she planned it. She recently graduated from a small liberal arts college in her home state of Ohio with a degree in Health, and an interest in sports management. “I never thought in a million years I’d be working with young adults,” she said. But SRN has a way of attracting people from unexpected backgrounds and piecing them together in just the right way. Two years later, there is no more important component to that puzzle than Ja’Lezza Clark.

As a member of both the office staff, and the house management team, Ja’Lezza truly sees all sides of the program. “My first day at the house was crazy,” she said smiling. “but now I know that’s typical. The students asked me a thousand and one questions about my life. It was more in depth than my interview with Vicki!” There is more truth to her joke than meets the eye. Most of our students have been let down so many times, they are very careful whom they trust. Ja’Lezza’s ability to connect with our kids was the sign she belonged. College sophomore and SRN student Raphael Taft noted how Ja’Lezza’s compassion shows through in the little things she does. “I really appreciate when she checks in on me to see how I’m doing, even when it’s not SRN related.”

But this is only half of what Ja’Lezza does for SRN. Like another famous Clark, Ja’Lezza has an alter ego at the SRN office: Life Skills Coordinator. Trading cape and tights for high heels and high fashion, Ja’Lezza’s main duty is to help our students handle their finances and scholarships, and as she can tell you, that is more than enough.

The budgets are a source of frustration for many students, who don’t always like being told how much money they can spend. But they are always grateful in the end. “We had our problems when it came to budgeting,” said SRN graduate Chaelle Garcon. “But at the end of the day she loves me, and I love her too.”

Ja’Lezza’s story is an example of the delicate thread we tightrope unknowingly each day. While she was never homeless - she and her family were only in the hotel for two weeks, and had a house waiting for them - she knows how quickly circumstances can change. It’s a humbling lesson to learn. Every one of us is one tough break away from hardship. That’s why SRN exists - to offer vital support to kids whose lives have been one tough break after another. And without amazing, dedicated staff members like Ja’Lezza, it’s support we would not be able to provide. Perhaps she said it best: “The staff that make this organization run are some of the best people I’ve ever met.”

“Ah and one last thing,” Ja’Lezza added. “Go Buckeyes.”

- Andrew Bresnahan
SRN Scholarship Coordinator
Summer 2017: Classes, concerts, and college tours, oh my!

If you would like to be a mentor, please e-mail us for a mentor application at: info@startingrightnow.org

We are always in need of professional services for our students. Please contact us to donate a service.

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