OPPORTUNITY NATION SUMMIT, WASHINGTON, D.C.

Opportunity Nation is a part of the Be The Change national campaign comprised of more than 300 businesses, educational institutions, nonprofits and civic organizations working together to expand economic mobility and close the opportunity gap in America. The Summit, hosted by Opportunity Nation and co-convened by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, Business Roundtable (BRT), United Way Worldwide, and Jobs for America’s Graduates (JAG), brought together political leaders, business leaders, service agencies, and students in a powerful collaborative agenda aimed at giving youth the chance to network, learn from each other, and create partnerships, giving them the tools they need to succeed.

Two Gateway to College staff members, Balbina Cardoso and Cheryl Ryan, and four students, Joseph Alamo, Romilla Cardoso, Matthew Janes, and Meagan DeRocha, traveled to Washington, D.C. February 25—26 to participate in this amazing opportunity.

Student & Staff Testimonials

Meagan DeRocha, Student: “I had the chance to experience D.C. with fellow students along with Balbina Cardoso and Cheryl Ryan. During the conference, it was so amazing to listen to all of the great speakers and really get a feel to understand what it means to have an opportunity. During our stay in D.C., we ventured to the Holocaust Museum, which was remarkable, along with parts of the Smithsonian. My overall experience could not have been any better. I am grateful and thankful for this amazing opportunity!”

Romilla Cardoso, Student: “My trip to D.C. was very inspirational and incredible. We visited the MLK Memorial, the WWII Memorial, and stood outside of the White House. I was able to hear from many successful and brilliant people who shared their stories, and are willing to help others achieve their dreams. I would definitely attend again with the same amazing Gateway staff and peers.”

Balbina Cardoso, Staff: “The summit was very inspiring, with many speakers such as U.S. Senator Cory Booker, Starbucks Chief Community Officer Blair Taylor and Department of Labor Secretary Thomas Perez. The best part of the conference was to see each student engaged and excited to be a part of this amazing experience. The summit was a validation that the work we do every day influences the lives of so many young adults.”

Cheryl Ryan, Staff: “Students were able to hear powerful stories of inspiration stemming from personal accounts of people who overcame severe challenges, including drug addiction and homelessness, to achieve their goals. Most who shared their story recounted how it took only one kind word or show of support that allowed them to feel empowered, subsequently turning their lives around and following a positive path. Additionally, each speaker drove home the importance of paying it forward, charging those in attendance with the task of helping others to turn their lives around. Each of the students we invited to join us for this event was truly grateful and very appreciative of the opportunity to attend. They left the summit feeling inspired and hopeful.”
Prior to coming to Gateway to College, I felt like my life was falling apart, because I continuously kept failing the GED test. I heard about Gateway to College from Sharice Ferris (Miles); in fact, she was leaving the GED program to go work for Gateway, so I tagged along in 2011. There, I was told that I could earn a high school diploma while taking college courses at the same time. This opportunity could not have come at a better time, a time when I was feeling at my lowest.

A few things stood out to me during my adventure. College Experience was a class that I disliked until the program director who taught the class, Christina Alves, told me that experience isn't something that could be taught, you have to undergo it.

Another stand-out moment in my Gateway experience was becoming a member of the Leadership Committee. I just loved how the students were in control of decision-making for the direction of the Committee. As I strive to become the leader that I am meant to be, I've attained the willingness to be open to new ideas. It wasn’t just about giving back to the community or fundraisers, it was also facilitating groups to develop the ability of individuals to find their ‘why?’ for what they do. I enjoyed that the most.

Gateway also has a Men’s Group led by John Williams who facilitated discussions including critical thinking, time management and insight. Instead of talking on the phone or texting, watching TV or just hanging out, you could be using that time to put more emphasis on your academics. He went on to say how we have to change; that's what will help us survive. Speaking from my own experience, I believe in having open conversations with people and making them feel safe, because I grew up in a community where it is not always safe, and, unfortunately, not feeling safe can possibly bring pain to oneself.

As graduation approached, I was invited to the Gateway to College National Network Peer Learning Conference in St. Louis. I’d never been on a plane, so I was second guessing the trip. Thinking I might not ever get this opportunity again, I seized the opportunity. Not only were the sites beautiful, so were the interactions and connections I had and made. While on the trip, I learned about social mobility and the power of positive energy.

As I stuck it out - attending school every day, doing homework and studying for exams - I eventually graduated in 2013 from Gateway to College, and began my journey into Massasoit Community College as a student with 37 college credits. Two years later, here I am about to graduate Massasoit Community College when Gateway invited me to another conference in our Nation’s Capital. Washington D.C was sensational! The possibilities for young people – all people – to network and connect with one another were endless. I got to network with old and young, white and black, males and females. The diversity was real.

As I move through studying and education, I can say that I am proud to be a high school graduate- and soon to be college graduate with an Associate’s Degree in Liberal Arts Transfer. After I finish here at Massasoit, I will be taking my show on the road to Fitchburg State University.

I am appreciative to be a part of the Gateway to College family. I cannot be more THANKFUL. I'd like to thank all of the Gateway staff and faculty for all of their love and support. I'll be able to bend, but I'll never break.
You think you’ve got problems? Some of my students have faced almost unimaginable hardships and still found the means and the time to write about Robert Frost and F. Scott Fitzgerald with care and enthusiasm. Some of these young men and women have been in gangs, become teen parents, endured homelessness, and overcome addiction. Our program supports real people, with real lives and real problems, who have real things to say—even if they don’t know it yet.

Come to think of it: did any of us actually like high school? I’m sure that we can all recall a poignant moment or two out of the glare (e.g. prom, some football game, or the French fries at lunch); however, aside from a few things that even I’m struggling to recall, that four-year experiment in panic and nausea certainly didn’t amount to “The Best Four Years of Your (or, my) Life.” Did I finish? Sure. Why? I really didn’t see a viable alternative…

The biggest misconception about the students in our program is that they’re “drop outs” and are here because of academic deficiencies. This couldn’t be further from the truth. In fact, our Gateway students are required to score higher on their placement exams than the general population. Why don’t we step-back and realize that they were brave enough to say, “This just isn’t working,” and sought-out an alternative means of earning a high-school diploma while simultaneously netting college credits?

It’s particularly satisfying for a teacher to be able to see his students grow, progress, become better monitors and managers of their own potential, and assume leadership roles—positions from which they have inspired their family members, peers, and contemporaries to follow in their footsteps and pursue educational opportunities outside the traditional walls of a high school.

I’ve been fortunate enough to work with our Gateway students since 2008—my first year as a professor at Massasoit. In these past (going on) eight years, I’ve witnessed groups of young persons, with dignity and courage, break stereotypes; finish high school (and more); become matriculated students in order to finish their associate’s degrees; transfer to four-year colleges and universities; enter the workforce to pursue fulfilling and meaningful careers; and, perhaps, think about a poem or two, once in a while, even though all of their papers have been turned-in.

Hope for Children and the Gateway to College program have collaborated to provide students with wonderful opportunities to learn and grow into valuable members of the community. The two organizations have worked together to involve students in some amazing projects where they have acquired valuable social and workplace skills, as well as wonderful experiences integrating themselves further into the community. Some of the projects students have participated in include:

**The At-Risk Youth Project**

In this project, students have the opportunity to become active citizens in the community by engaging in various philanthropic activities. Students have volunteered with various agencies within the community as well as with HCI’s Gillette Stadium Concession program. In this program, participants are taken to Gillette Stadium where they set up concession stands, sell products, and provide customer service. Students who have participated in this program have walked away with the critical skills associated with managing a small business and working collaboratively with others members of the community.

**Vocational Program**

This program trains students on video production. They learn everything from how to put a television show together to how to handle cameras and behind the scenes production. This program has provided participants the amazing opportunity to be able to work and interact with a variety of successful people in the community.

**Mentoring Services**

HCI provides guidance, support and referral services to students regarding managing school and personal life.

**Visit or Contact Hope For Children to get involved!**

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