

## Prince William County Bar Association delivers at Beat the Odds Banquet

**By Hillary Chester**

© Prince William Times / Jun. 17, 2016

A mixture of disbelief and pride crossed the faces of most the 24 award recipients at the Prince William County Bar Association's Beat the Odds banquet Wednesday, June 8.

All 24 Prince William County students were aware that they were receiving a scholarship or a laptop at the banquet held at Harbour View in Woodbridge. However, as they looked around they seemed surprised at the more than 250 people who attended to clap and cheer them on for beating the odds.

The Prince William Beat the Odds program began in 2001 with an objective to recognize and encourage youth in the county who come into contact with the juvenile justice system.

Students who are juniors or younger receive new laptops as the Phoenix award winners.

Seniors receive scholarships to cover the cost of a year's tuition at the community college level, even though not all plan to attend community college.

"This program has nothing to do with juvenile delinquency," said David Bailey, the chief judge at the county's Juvenile and Domestic Relations District Court.

Instead, it's about celebrating youths who have overcome their circumstances.

Each of the 24 students have come into contact with the juvenile justice system due to either abuse, neglect, substance abuse, or mental health issues.

"A lot of times these kids have walls up," said Kris Wenberg, an attorney at Compton and Duling who is in charge of picking out mentors who assist and guide the students. Wenberg matches lawyers from the PWC Bar Association to each award recipient.

"This program gives them the opportunity to have hope," said Kate Schell-Smith.



Jeanice Wiethop, president of the Prince William County Bar Association (left), with Fustina King (center) and her nominator, Jennifer Sizer (right), a probation officer with the 31st Court Service Unit, at the PWC Bar's Beat the Odds program. Photo by Hillary Chester.

Schell-Smith works at Gar-Field High School as a therapist with the New Horizons program.

She nominated kids who she feels are worthy of the scholarship or a laptop based on her students' growth.

Markette Plummer, a security assistant with Prince William County schools, who has worked with the program for six or seven years said the best part of the Beat the Odds program is "seeing the children get recognized for the things they deserve and work hard to get."

Ana Ryan was one of Plummer's scholarship nominees. Ryan, who graduated from Gar-Field High School on Friday, June 10, was the first student to ever receive the Officer Guindon Memorial Beat the Odds Scholarship.

"I was excited, I was very excited," Ryan said after finding out she would be receiving a scholarship.

Ryan detailed having witnessed abuse in her home and dealing with severe depression. But after Plummer, Ryan's Step Team coach, stepped in to help, she became a community volunteer, International Baccalaureate Diploma candidate, and the captain of the Step Team. She will be attending Tuskegee University in Alabama in fall 2016 and hopes to become a veterinarian.

Robert "Cole" Thibault, a student at Stonewall Jackson High School, received a Phoenix Award. He wants to apply to Jacksonville University and to enlist in the Air Force.

"She was just overwhelmed," Thibault said when asked about how his mother reacted to learning he would be honored.

Some of the students appeared overwhelmed themselves, some tearing up on stage.

"I never thought I'd be standing up here," said Keyanue Hoover after he was awarded his scholarship.

"I had a lot of disbelief," said Brittany Frejo, a scholarship recipient, who has dealt with substance abuse and depression. Frejo's grandparents flew out from Arizona to watch her receive the scholarship. She also mentioned that it's special as a Navajo woman to be recognized for her accomplishments.

Frejo will be attending Northern Virginia Community College in the fall where she will work to become a veterinary technologist.

Fustina King reminded the crowd to believe in themselves. Born in Liberia, King has dealt with depression, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, substance abuse, and Oppositional Defiant Disorder but is now drug-free and attended school daily. Following last week's graduation, she plans to join the military, obtain degrees in criminal justice and forensic science, and pursue a career as a human trafficking investigator.

"I just want you to continue to prosper in your life," King said.

"You guys help me beat the odds," said Tashira "TJ" Williams, who dealt with sexual abuse, homelessness, depression, and drug abuse. In October 2015, she obtained her GED and started classes at Northern Virginia Community College with plans to get a degree in surgical technology, enlist in the

military, and help others in foster care.

While their stories may be different on how and why they came into the program, they share one thing in common: they are working every day to move forward to a brighter future.

## **2016 Beat the Odds Winners**

### **Phoenix Award Winners**

Alejandra Alfaro  
Angel\*  
Bianca Perez  
Bre-Ellen Harmon  
Hanifa Bensiamar  
Hannah Kinser  
Maria Castro-Medrano  
Ricardo Sanchez-Portillo  
Robert "Cole" Thibault  
Shanya Hill

\* Requested that his last name not be released.

\*\* Two winners requested that their names not be released.

### **Scholarship Award Winners**

Ana Ryan – Officer Guindon Memorial Beat the Odds Scholarship  
Billy Alcazar – Prince William County Bar Foundation "Dream Big" Beat the Odds Scholarship  
Brittany Frejo – William Alan Becker Beat the Odds Scholarship  
Colleen Oshiki – Kiwanis Manassas Battlefield Beat the Odds Scholarship  
Fustina King – Prince William County Bar Foundation "Open Minds" Beat the Odds Scholarship  
Jasmin Edwards – Breeden Foundation Beat the Odds Scholarship  
Katie Dunford – Richard B. Potter Beat the Odds Scholarship  
Keyanue Hoover – Kids Just Like Us Foundation Beat the Odds Scholarship  
Lwam "Lulu" Ghebreariam – Evelyn Utter & Jane Hill Memorial Beat the Odds Scholarship  
Salsabil Faisal – Youth for Tomorrow Beat the Odds Scholarship  
Tashira "TJ" Williams – Jazz 4 Justice Beat the Odds Scholarship

\*One of the scholarship winners requested that her name not be released.