

RISING *Stars*



Teachers who have been with the Star Academy program in Mobile, AL, all four years it has been in place include, from left, Melissa Story (science), Robin Rivers (ELA), and James Dixon (math).

Alabama program: Fresh start for students *and* staff

Mobile Star Academy on the rise as veteran teachers provide stability and personal attention

MOBILE, AL – In its fourth year, the Star Academy program at the Pathway School in Mobile, AL, is hitting its stride, serving a maximum number of students and preparing them to get back on track with their age peers in school.

Perhaps not coincidental to this positive progress, three of the four teachers have been with the Star Academy program since its inception in Mobile. Assistant Principal Francine Craig credits this core group of veteran educators for gradually embracing their roles and ensuring continual program improvement and success through the years.

“They love the children,” Craig says of Robin Rivers (ELA), James Dixon (math), and Melissa Story (science). “We have an opportunity to build relationships with our students. . . . You can’t help students

if you don’t know them. You have to know them, and they have to feel comfortable knowing that they can come to you with any problem, whether it’s school related or not.”

Rivers welcomed her expanded role because she had fallen into a predictable routine at her previous teaching stop. “I thought I was teaching for seven years. I really did. I thought what I was doing was effective. But I came here and I was challenged, and there’s this introduction to technology and different programs. I had to learn these programs and different techniques and say, ‘You know, this is actually set up a little bit better than what I’ve been doing all these years.’”

Then there is the critical role of the parents. Craig, Principal Ronald Coleman, the counselor, and all Star teachers attempt to engage and communicate with parents on a regular basis.

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Winners of Star Academy scholarships announced! See inside for details.

Alabama program: Fresh start for students *and* staff (continued from page 1)

"At all times, they know what to expect from us and what we want them to do and what's expected of their children," Craig says of parents who allow their children to participate in the Star Academy program. "Periodically throughout the year, we invite them in to share what's going on. We invite them anytime that they need and want to see what's going on. They're welcome to come; the door is open."

Parents' initial involvement comes as part of an interview during a formal recruiting process to the dropout prevention and acceleration program.

Even students who have reservations about the rigorous program designed to advance them from eighth to 10th grade eventually warm up when they learn what the Star Academy entails and how they'll be treated.

"I told my mom, 'Mom, I really don't want to come here.' She said, 'You have no choice. I'm making you come,'" said Jamie, an honors-track student who had fallen behind his age group in the first grade. "They made me do an interview and I was like, 'Now I really wanna go. The first day of school I was nervous, but after a while, I started fitting in with everybody.'"



Faith, right, has made the most of her opportunity in the Star Academy program this year. Here, she works with a classmate in James Dixon's math lab.

Faith, who was held back after failing math as a seventh grader, was excited for a second chance, though slightly nervous at the same time. Any uncertainty quickly faded away. "I saw it as an opportunity," Faith said. "They said it was going to be hard, but I at least wanted to try to get back into 10th grade. It's very challenging, but at the same time it's kind of easy because they help us toward our goal." 

Talented pool of finalists

Scholarship winners had to separate themselves from strong field of contenders

Each year, the pool of finalists vying for the annual Star Academy scholarships grows stronger, which makes the judges' job even more difficult – though more enjoyable at the same time. This year, a full round of judging and a tiebreaker procedure were necessary to distinguish the following two students from their outstanding peers in Star Academies across the country.

Devon Warren of Enoree Career Center in Greenville, SC, and Jesse Nguyen of Moore Middle School in Lawrenceville, GA, have made the most of their Star Academy opportunity, exhibiting characteristics that helped them serve as role models and leaders within their respective schools.

Devon and Jesse will be awarded \$500 scholarships to be applied to their postsecondary education at a four-year university, a two-year institution, or a career-focused training program. Whichever path they choose, success will be well within their reach, in part because of the guidance they've received from their Star Academy teachers and administrators this school year.

We wish Devon and Jesse continued success on their academic journey, and we congratulate all finalists in the scholarship competition for a job well done!

Star Qualities:

Service, leadership, self-motivation

Scholarship Winner:

Jesse Nguyen

School: Moore Middle School, Lawrenceville, GA

Nominator: Kathie Hardin, School Counselor



Jesse Nguyen

Some students do only what is required to pass a class. Then, there are students such as Jesse Nguyen who have only one gear – high – and nothing about their approach could be construed as less than stellar. In fact, anyone who encounters her would classify her as a maximum-effort individual. Give her a challenge and get out of the way.

Nominated by School Counselor Kathie Hardin, Jesse originally had her sights set on a career in teaching. However, exposure to the STEM curriculum in the STEP Academy program (aka Star Academy) motivated her to switch her focus to computer or software engineering at the acclaimed engineering school at Georgia Tech.

"She is focused on her goals on a daily basis, both short-term and long-term goals," Hardin said. "It has been a privilege to be Jesse's school counselor this year. Not only is she an inspiration to other students, but she has been an inspiration to me as well."

In addition to helping her peers with their assignments when teachers are busy with others, Jesse serves as a math and science tutor one morning each week and participates in the Moore Middle School Peer Leader Program through community service projects such as a fund-raiser at Chick-fil-A to fund a field trip to Emory University.

Jesse has made straight A's in the STEP Academy, was selected as the top student in the first semester, and was presented the Top Knight Award for academic excellence.

Star Qualities: Selfless, considerate, relentless

Scholarship Winner: Devon Warren

School: Enoree Career Center, Greenville, SC

Nominator: Carol Rodgers, ELA Teacher

His family moving when he was in the third grade proved to be too much of a hurdle for Devon to overcome, and he was held back when he failed to adjust academically at his new school. But at the first opportunity to catch up with his age peers, Devon has capitalized on his Star Academy experience. Not only is he on track academically to advance from eighth to 10th grade, but he has also been a model student whose influence on his peers and impression on his teachers and administrators have been indelible.

Scholarship nominator Carol Rodgers, Devon's ELA teacher, had this to say about him: "While we learn to love all of the kids for the year we teach them, there are students that always stand out in our minds and will never be forgotten. They are the ones that we know will be

successful. Devon is one of those students. He does what we hope our own children are doing: paying attention, leaning forward into the instruction, working to be the best, meeting deadlines, and inquiring beyond the lesson."

Devon volunteers for service projects and always takes a leading role in carrying out his duties and responsibilities: helping with the lunch line, selling snacks for Student Council, working at the local Saint Francis Cancer Center, helping with holiday fund-raisers, volunteering at hospitals, and more.

Looking ahead, Devon aspires to be an actor. He plans to apply for a spot in the South Carolina Governor's School for the Arts and Humanities and eventually continue on to a college program where he can hone his acting skills, such as the New York Film Academy, Bob Jones University, or the University of South Carolina.

A turning point for Devon came in the sixth grade when he realized that education could be "a bridge to a better life." He would stay after school, not in an effort to catch up on his work but to get ahead even further.

"For him, it was a decision point," Rodgers said. "His work was no longer about passing or even doing well; for him, it was about being the best, not just the best in the classroom with his peers, but being the best. Wow! What if we all felt that way?" 



Devon Warren

Too many stars to count

Every year, Pitsco solicits scholarship nomination submissions from Star Academies across the country – and the floodgates open. How to choose among so many worthy candidates? There is no way to present every great story, but we wanted to share excerpts from just a few more that caught our eye.

"Dylan is the true definition of humility and integrity in his personal life. Dylan has the reputation throughout the entire school of a well-rounded student. I have never heard one negative word spoken about him by another teacher, coach, administrator, or fellow student."

Nominee: Dylan Lawrence

School: George County Middle School Star Academy, Lucedale, MS

"My student, Nayely Iracheta, stands apart from the masses because she carries an inner torch and seeks out truth through reason for the sake of acquiring knowledge. . . . When Nayely sets her mind, she is simply unstoppable."

Nominee: Nayely Iracheta

School: Southwest Early College High School, Pharr, TX

"Jules has been an example of model behavior since the day he has walked in our doors. Jules spends his extra time during school

studying for his classes, helping other students with work, and performing random acts of kindness that make him and everyone around him better."

Nominee: Jules Exciminiano

School: Berkeley High School Star Academy, Moncks Corner, SC

"Jesus has worked diligently to get and stay ahead in his classes. He is serious about his education and has consistently had the highest average in his coursework. He is definitely a Star."

Nominee: Jesus Villagomez

School: Coffee Career Academy, Douglas, GA

"NyTyriah has accepted challenges and shown a great desire to improve academically. She is not embarrassed to ask questions nor to be wrong in her answers."

Nominee: NyTyriah Anderson

School: Lancaster High School, Lancaster, TX 





Words of inspiration

*Spoken-word artist ShySpeaks visits
Star Academy in Lancaster, Texas*

Who inspires you? Many of us take inspiration from those who started their lives in situations similar to our own and then went on to live out their dreams.

Recently, students at the Lancaster High School Star Academy in Lancaster, Texas, were visited by a special guest: spoken-word artist Shy Amos, also known as ShySpeaks. The visit occurred at an awards ceremony for the students.

The following is an excerpt from an account of the visit, published by the district.

Amos – Dallas native, American hip-hop artist, singer and songwriter – encouraged the students by sharing her personal story of challenges and her refusal, at age 12, to become a statistic. Instead Amos explained through her poetic piece titled “More” how she pushed herself to complete her high

school diploma with a 4.0 grade point average and then on through college to obtain a bachelor and master’s degree.

Approximately 24 scholars were honored at the Star Academy Awards for their exceptional achievement in leadership, perseverance, character, and academics.

One student, P’Lar Young, a ninth grader, recalled the impact of Amos’ message.

“I felt like she was speaking to me. The things she talked about made me look back in the past on things I shouldn’t have done,” Young said. “She’s trying to help us to make sure we don’t fall off track. She wants us to be somebody.”

Where do your Star students find inspiration? We’d love to know. If you have any stories of people or events that have been meaningful to your students, let us know. Email cwhite@pitsco.com. 

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