

Beat the Odds® Reunion Participants

Marino Angulo, Los Angeles, Calif. 1990

Marino's family emigrated from Mexico when he was six years old. His mother was imprisoned for drug possession, and his alcoholic father was unemployed. Marino and his sister raised the other eight children. To help make money for his family, Marino sold fruit, did odd jobs, and cleaned at a gas station. While doing all of this, he was able to maintain his superior academic standing and participate in varsity athletics. Marino attended Whittier College and then returned to pursue a master's degree in education. Since 1997, he has been teaching social studies and coaching basketball and baseball. He is married to a first-grade teacher, Sandra, and they have two children.

Helena Edwards, Washington, D.C. 1991

Growing up in the foster care system, Helena faced numerous challenges, yet she continued to stay focused on her future and pursue her educational goals. She received her first computer as a result of her Beat the Odds award, saying that is what started her on a technical path and increased her curiosity in computer technology. Helena earned her Bachelor of Science in electrical engineering in 1998 from Morgan State University and a Masters of Science in information systems in 2003 from Strayer University. She is currently employed as a professional electrical engineer at Northrop Grumman in Linthicum, Maryland, and is planning to earn a Ph.D. in communications systems.

Tyrina Smith, Washington, D.C. 1991

Tyrina, a single mother of two boys, notes that her life is not normal, even though it may seem normal to most. Life in southeast D.C. made it almost impossible to imagine her coming as far in life as she has. Tyrina works full-time and is purchasing her own home, making a better life for herself as well as her children. Winning the BTO award helped her to see that she was not alone and that she could break away from the expectations of society and achieve her dreams. Currently, Tyrina is a human resources specialist, working in civil rights with the Department of Agriculture, a job through which she feels she can give back to the community.

David Opont, Washington, D.C. 1991

David immigrated to New York from Haiti with his parents and his sister in 1988. Two years later in March of 1990, David was walking to school with friends when a neighborhood bully confronted them, singled out David, and dragged him at knifepoint to the basement of an abandoned building. There he was tied up while his attacker repeatedly tried to make him do drugs. When David refused, he was set on fire. More than half of his body was burned and doctors gave him only a 50/50 chance of survival. Yet, five months later David was released from the hospital and spent the next two years speaking to children about the dangers of drugs and the importance of education. Today David is preparing to enroll in the Metropolitan College of New York to pursue a degree in social work.

Charles Preston, Washington, D.C. 1992

Growing up, Charles endured many hardships, with an alcoholic father who was abusive to both him and his mother. In fact, the beatings became so bad that his school alerted the authorities, and Chuck was sent to live with relatives. But two years later, he and his mother moved to Washington, D.C. with her boyfriend, who also abused Chuck. That's when Chuck started abusing alcohol and was charged with possession of a deadly weapon. But he still held onto his dream of becoming a strong male and a "perfect father" and managed to make a 180-degree turn in both his personal and academic lives, going from delinquent teen to "Most Improved Senior Student." He maintained a 3.0 GPA, played football and basketball, volunteered, and tutored elementary students along with other activities. At the BTO ceremony, the M.C., Susan Kidd, a television news anchor with the NBC affiliate in Washington, D.C., adopted Chuck. From there he went on to graduate from Hampton University and play for NFL Europe as well as the XFL when he returned home.

Rhondee Johnson, M.D., Washington, D.C. 1992

In an award-winning speech entitled "Impact of Violence on the Family," Rhondee described the murder of her aunt in 1983 and the effect it had on her family. After her parents separated, she had to assume a great deal of responsibility for the care of her family. Yet through it all, she excelled in high school becoming a National Merit Commended Scholar and Senior Class President; she volunteered at the Washington Hospital Center and Howard University's Therapeutic Childlife Center and participated in several medical apprenticeships. Rhondee graduated from Spelman College and then went on to Harvard Medical School. At Harvard, she was a Northeast National Association of Minority Medical Educators LeGrand Newman Scholar.

Tanisha D. Spears Coleman, Washington, D.C. 1995

At age 4, Tanisha's mother developed a major drug problem and her father disowned her. Her mother's addiction caused her family to constantly move from place to place to get away from drug dealers. Eventually they moved to a shelter, and despite numerous hardships, she and her brother continued to excel in school. "We were often hungry, poorly clothed, but never broken in spirit," recalls Tanisha. After she moved in with her grandmother, her life took a turn for the better. In high school, she became president of the National Honor Society, president of the 1995 Senior Class, secretary of the Kiwanis Key Club, captain of the women's track and volleyball teams, and class Salutatorian. After receiving the Beat the Odds award, she was honored with a full four-year academic scholarship to Ohio State University from the Carl T. Rowan "Project Excellence" Scholarship program. Currently she is devoted to making a difference in the lives of children by being a teaching fellow at E.L. Haynes Public Charter School, a new charter school in Washington, D.C. She is married and has a 4-year-old son.

Touch Thouk, Minneapolis, Minn. 1995

Touch came to the United States as a refugee from war-torn Cambodia and had to deal with the pressures of a new culture while still trying to hold on to the culture into which she was born. She survived years of child abuse, and while the memories of her past haunted her, she says she tried to look at those painful memories as a learning experience. Today she lives with her husband in Oakland, California, and is employed as a program analyst for the Oakland Fund for Children and Youth with the City of Oakland. Her professional goals for the future are to continue to work for the City of Oakland, write a children's book series, and start her own business. The Beat the Odds award helped her "to recognize that she was an achiever and with my mind, heart and soul, I could overcome challenges and barriers." She writes, "To this day, I believe that the recognition I received supported my overall growth as a person and has also helped me to see the potential in all youth."

Daysi Blanco, Washington, D.C. 1996

Daysi immigrated to the United States with her parents when she was seven years old after enduring a life full of death and war in El Salvador. She was placed in the 1st grade, even though she spoke no English. When the school nurse noticed that Daysi walked with a limp from an untreated leg injury, it was just the beginning of many visits to the hospital. Daysi had to have several operations on her leg, which caused her to miss a great deal of school over the next few years. Then she was diagnosed with ovarian cancer in the sixth grade and had to undergo three more surgeries. Fortunately, Kiwanis Clinic of Washington, D.C. paid for all of the procedures that were performed. Despite everything, Daysi was able to keep her grades up, even through another surgery in her junior year of high school and graduated on time with a 3.8 GPA. Her cancer has been in remission for 13 years, and she now is on her way to becoming a teacher. She works at Barcroft Elementary School as an instructional assistant and is going to George Mason University at night to finish her bachelor's degree.

Myia Alston, Washington, D.C. 1996

As a child, Myia watched as drugs consumed her parents, forcing frequent evictions and numerous moves. After her mother became completely unable to care for her, Myia went to live with her uncle and his wife who, unfortunately, provided her even less security and stability. To escape the sad reality of her home life, Myia became involved in a local teen talk show and two honor societies while excelling in school. She graduated with honors from The George Washington University and received her graduate degree in communications from Syracuse University. She won the prestigious Emma Bowen Foundation Fellowship and was the Foundation's 2001 "Student of the Year."

Aquila Jehan Shamsid-Deen, Charlotte, N.C. 1996

Jehan grew up in an environment filled with danger, violence and drugs. On one occasion suspected drug dealers fired bullets into her bedroom. Despite such obstacles at home, Jehan rose to achieve academic excellence and become engaged in her community. A graduate of Davidson College, she was active in student government and numerous community activities. In 2000, Jehan interned with the Children's Defense Fund in Student Leadership Network for Children and has participated in four CDF Advanced Service Advocacy Workshops for young leaders at CDF Haley Farm in Clinton, Tenn. After college, Jehan received the George Autry fellowship to work on rural workforce and community economic development with MDC, Inc. Jehan now works in Washington, D.C., at the Moriah Fund, which works to reduce poverty and empower low-income families.

Finie Hunter, Washington, D.C. 1997

Finie had to cope with the loss of her mother when she was only 13 years old and then the passing of her father just five years later. She watched as her mother suffered from cancer and wanted to help others who lived with this disease. Currently, Finie is testing novel and non-invasive cancer therapies as an Intramural Research Fellow (IRTA) at the National Institutes of Health. Finie also is pursuing her Masters of Public Health degree at Howard University. The career path she has chosen allows her to address the disparities in health experienced by African Americans.

Margarita Peralta, Los Angeles, Calif. 1998

As the child of a schizophrenic mother, Margarita spent the earlier part of her childhood as a victim of abuse and a ward of the state. By the time she entered high school, Margarita was the head of her household and the breadwinner of her family. In addition to those very real responsibilities, Margarita earned a 4.2 GPA in high school, was editor-in-chief of the school newspaper, president of the honor society, student body secretary, and logged over 15 hours a week in community service. It was this same drive that led her to graduate from U.C. Berkeley with a double Bachelor of Arts degree in history and rhetoric. Upon her 2003 graduation from Berkeley, Margarita was recruited to work on a Columbia Pictures film with academy award-winning director Jim Brooks. Currently she is undergoing the selection process for a management rotation with Nielsen Media Research. Margarita plans to make a difference in the world by helping to change the way that media portray and influence values and ideas in our society.

Saira Soto, Los Angeles, Calif. 1998

The Beat the Odds award was a defining moment in Saira's life because "it made me realize that I was capable of more than what I thought myself to be." She says that her struggles were something to be proud of and not ashamed of, and she realized the strength that came from her accomplishments. In 2002, Saira earned a B.S. in environmental systems/environmental chemistry from the University of California at San Diego. Today she is employed with Service Employees International Union Local 660 as the community outreach coordinator. In this capacity she initiates and coordinates joint projects with partners on issues that include the environment, health care, and education. "Everyday," she writes, "I have the privilege to improve the lives of those who face social injustice on a daily basis."

April Stevens, Houston, Texas 1999

Her father's untimely death when she was in her teens and the resulting responsibility of caring for her blind mother and younger siblings at a young age meant that April had to grow up quickly. Yet through it all, she excelled academically in high school and went on to be successful at Rice University. April says she is "proud of the things I've managed to accomplish, but I'm even prouder of the person I've become." She recently completed her Masters in Arts and is now teaching 7th and 8th graders in Cabrini-Green, an inner-city Chicago neighborhood. For April, "'Beating the odds' has made living a life of helping others, especially children, a top priority for me."

Shantera Rayford, Houston, Texas 1999

Shantera began to take care of her sick mother and her niece when she was 14. She had to cook, clean, and take care of household business. Yet despite these big responsibilities at a young age, she was able excel academically. Shantera is now a third-year student at the University of Houston College of Pharmacy. She developed her passion for pharmaceutical science while doing research on medications for her mother. Shantera plans to enroll in a general pharmacy residency program so she can become a clinical pharmacist. She is thankful for her Beat the Odds scholarship because it provided funds for her college education and a possibility to rise above her circumstances.

Katriska Evurunobi, Houston, Texas 1999

Katriska's father murdered her mother when she was 11 years old. Afterwards, she and her three siblings went to live with their grandmother. Katriska started working when she was 15 in order to support her family. Currently, she is attending college and majoring in computer engineering technology. Katriska will graduate in December, and she plans to open her own computer repair business one day. She says that the Beat the Odds award helped her "jump start" her college career and gave her more strength to continue towards academic and professional goals. The award also demonstrated to her siblings that, with courage and faith in God, they could achieve anything they wanted.

Courtney Wyly, Houston, Texas 1999

When Courtney was five years old, her father was killed. Her newly widowed mother didn't know how to support three children alone so, desperate, she turned to drugs. By the time Courtney was 14, her mother had been to jail twice. Eventually, Courtney became a ward of the State of Texas, which resulted in four placements and five high schools in three years. Her foster homes provided little security for an ambitious teenager with a burgeoning intellect. Despite her unstable environment growing up, Courtney graduated in 2003 from Grinnell College as a dual pre-med/ English major and is currently a Peace Corps volunteer in the Dominican Republic. Courtney was also an intern with the Children's Defense Fund during the summer of 2000.

Yer Lee, Minneapolis, Minn. 1999

When she was three months old, Yer and her family came to the United States from Laos. Yer's father died when she was only one year old, and her mother remarried when she was seven. Raised in public housing, Yer recalls feeling at the age of 13 that her world was torn between playing the 'good girl' role of a Hmong girl and balancing her life with the American culture. Yer's world was further torn apart at that same age when her mother and stepfather had arranged a marriage for her. After two year of agony and pain, the marriage ended. Only a few years later, her 15-year old brother was shot. Despite personal hardships, Yer kept myself busy with extra-curricular activities and school work. She graduated from the College of Saint Catherine in St. Paul, Minnesota with a degree in political science along with minors in finance and women's studies. In 2003, she was awarded a Fulbright Scholarship to study in Thailand for one year to conduct independent study and research on the Thai women's grassroots movement. Ultimately, she believes her life work is with an international organization dealing with women's and human rights issues.

Khadija Shiekh, Minneapolis, Minn. 2000

Like many refugees from war-torn Somalia, Khadija—who came to the United States seven years ago—came with no formal education and with a limited knowledge of the English language. She faced head-on all the challenges of adapting to a new life including, most challenging according to her, adjusting to the new educational system. Despite the many obstacles facing a young person living in a new country with no parents to support her mentally or financially, Khadija believes that she not only survived, but managed to successfully rebuild her life and dreams. "I am lucky enough to have emerged stronger and to have remained passionate about achieving my goals," she says. The Beat the Odds award has made a huge and positive impact on her life by providing much needed financial assistance, enabling her to reach her goal of attending college. Today, she is a senior at the University of Minnesota majoring in family studies.

Jose Cedillos, Houston, Texas 2000

Since Jose's father was a proprietor, Jose had to work while attending high school. Often, he had to make a choice between sleeping and studying when coming home from school. Today, Jose is a senior in the Thurgood Marshall Pre-law Program, a federally funded program named in honor of Thurgood Marshall, the first African American Supreme Court Justice. The program aims to increase the number of students from low-income, minority and disadvantaged backgrounds by supporting them in getting into law school, graduate school, and passing the bar examination. Jose aspires to attend Yale Law School in pursuit of his ultimate ambition: To be remembered as one of the greatest advocates of immigrants' rights. Jose says that the help he received from the Children's Defense Fund was one of his greatest gifts because it made him aware that someone cared.

Tiffany Garrett, Houston, Texas 2000

Tiffany's mother was killed by a bus when the bus driver wasn't paying attention. It was a day that Tiffany remembers vividly. She struggled with decisions of what to do after her mother's death, but she says that the real struggles began when people stopped calling and flowers stopped coming. It hit her hard the first day she came from school and her mother was not waiting for her. "My mother was always there when I got home from school; being alone was very new to me," she says. However heartbreaking her mother's death was, Tiffany knew that she had to move forward and to succeed for her mother. She graduated from the University of Texas at Austin with a Bachelor of Arts in biology, and she plans on going to medical school or graduate school to get her master's degree and to pursue a career in cancer research.

Yasmin Haque, Minneapolis, Minn. 2000

After her father was diagnosed with Lou Gherig's Disease and her mother was left to deal with her own mental illness, Yasmin and her two sisters had to learn to take care of themselves. Eventually, all three sisters were placed in foster care, and life became much harder for them. Yet each sister went on to successfully complete high school and college. Yasmin earned her bachelor's degree in management and economics. Currently, she works as a sales representative for Kraft Foods. She still remains close to her sisters in adulthood, and Yasmine recently was able to purchase her first home—with the help of her sisters.

Soukthanome "Nome" Xaphakdy, Minneapolis, Minn. 2000

Nome is a senior at the University of Minnesota, where she is majoring in physiology with a minor in biology. Nome, who has Lupus, finds hope and strength in her Beat the Odds award, as well as from the fellowship of other Beat the Odds award recipients. "This award and other honorees have given me courage and the perseverance to strive forward," she says. Nome is applying to public health and physician assistant graduate programs so that she can use her knowledge and experience to strengthen the healthcare system and protect the rights of patients.

Saadia Haque, Minneapolis, Minn. 2000

Saadia was placed in foster care when she was 17 years old. Although it was difficult for to join a new household at this age, she felt happy to have finally found people who cared about her. With the support of her foster family and advisers of the Upward Bound program at the University of Minnesota, Saadia and her sister Yasmin composed a winning essay that brought them into the arms of the Children's Defense Fund. CDF helped Saadia both financially and emotionally to get through four years at college. For her, Saadia says that "beating the odds" means accepting that "the past is what it is and that the future is only what [she] will make of it."

Gina De Leon, Houston, Texas 2000

Gina's mother abandoned her when she was only six months old. After that, she went to live with her grandmother who already was raising seven children. Gina later lived with her uncle and aunt who cared for a disabled sister. Gina's father died when she was seven. With the instability of moving from home to home at such an early age, Gina says that the opportunity to attend college is a blessing for her. Her Beat the Odds moment gave her the insight and encouragement to see that no matter what she was faced with, she was bigger than the situation. She believes she can achieve anything and is currently studying architecture and plans to go on to graduate school.

Steven Rocker, New York, N.Y. 2000

From a childhood in which he parented his younger siblings, even as they were shuffled in and out of separate foster homes until his mom surfaced from a stint in prison, Steven Rocker became an Ivy League college student on full scholarship. He received his scholarship through unconventional and extraordinary means. Rosie O'Donnell identified Steven as a "superkid" and hosted him on her show. She introduced him to the Kellogg Company, which subsequently awarded him a full scholarship. Today, Steven is a political science major at Columbia University and has aspirations to become a lawyer, because he says he wants to provide first-rate legal representation to those who normally could not afford it.

Anthony Williams, Minneapolis, Minn. 2000

A childhood exposed to violence between family members and lacking significant positive male influences left Anthony determined to put himself on a "path to change." He wanted to turn his family's misfortunes around "in order to solidify their place in history." Both of his grandfathers were killed by police, and his father is currently serving a life sentence without parole. Yet Anthony's mother and father (through conversations and letters from prison) taught him to be a leader and encouraged him as he became the first member of his family to graduate from high school. Anthony is currently a junior and dual business management/political science major at the University of Minnesota. He desires to become a successful lawyer and to offer a representative voice for minority communities nationwide. His Beat the Odds award "showed [him] that there are people out there who care and believe that everyone deserves a chance to be successful."

Steven Dinh, Washington, D.C. 2001

Originally from Vietnam, Steven came to the United States to live with his father at the age of 15 so he could escape the hardship of life as a poor young person. However, life in the United States turned out to be equally arduous because of an overbearing father who was very controlling. School work and activities, in addition to a part-time job, were Steven's only outlets. He says the Beat the Odds award had "a very big impact in my life because it gave me an opportunity and hope to get a better education and a better life for myself." Today, he is a full-time student majoring in chemistry with a minor in pre-pharmacy at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU), and he also works as a certified pharmacy technician at Walgreen's pharmacy. His professional objective is to become a pharmacist so that he can help people stay healthy and live longer, better lives.

Jeffrey Ward, Washington, D.C. 2001

As a teenager, Jeffrey Ward witnessed a dump truck strike that killed his father on the Capitol Beltway. Both he and his mother went to therapy for a few years after the accident, while Jeffrey maintained the focus to finish a successful high school career. Jeffrey is currently a senior at Rutgers University. During his first and second year, he carried a 3.867 GPA and was elected Class Vice President for his freshmen and sophomore class. Jeffrey is a member of the National Society of Collegiate Scholars, and has spent spring breaks on community service projects with Habitat for Humanity. Last summer he participated in a week-long mentoring program, Reach for Tomorrow, aimed at teaching young teens the importance of an education.

Jerry Jones, Washington, D.C. 2001

After his mother's death, Jerry went to live with his grandmother, but he ended up taking care of her as he got older. Jerry learned to drive when he was only 12 years old, just so he could drive his grandmother around. Eventually, he became a ward of the state. Now Jerry is a student at Towson University with a triple major in computer information systems, business administration, and Spanish. He has worked as a resident assistant at Towson, a marketing intern for The Shelter Group, LLC, and is currently an intern for McCormick and Company. Aside from his ability to multi-task ambitious academic and business goals, Jerry loves to teach and help his community with service projects.

Khalilah Karim, Washington, D.C. 2001

Although her mother died when she was only three years old and she was orphaned at 11, Khalilah thinks of herself as “fortunate.” She says that she believes her duty “is not to simply ‘beat the odds,’ but to change them, especially for those who cannot do so for themselves.” Currently, Khalilah is a senior urban studies major at Stanford University. When she graduates she intends to work for human rights, domestically and internationally. In addition to completing an honors thesis, Khalilah also manages Stanford’s oldest African American student newspaper and co-chairs a student fundraiser for undergraduate education. In addition, she mentors youthful offenders in local juvenile detention centers.

Donnie Belcher, Minneapolis, Minn. 2002

Donnie’s mother struggled with drug addiction and was imprisoned early in Donnie’s life. At age 12, Donnie was assaulted. Overwhelmed by feelings of guilt and shame, Donnie began to withdraw. When her mother moved them to Kansas City, Donnie participated in CDF Freedom Schools, a summer literacy and cultural enrichment program. Inspired by her experience, upon returning to Minneapolis, Donnie joined a program to mentor younger students, participated in a mission trip to Jamaica, and helped raise funds so children could visit their mothers in jail. An accomplished poet and writer, Donnie is currently a junior and secondary education major at DePaul University. She’s also an active leader in Residence Life and has been married since January 2004.

Princess Allen, Los Angeles, Calif. 2002

Born into a bi-racial home that was consumed with drug addiction and domestic violence, Princess lived her first 10 years with her paternal grandmother and an aunt. At age 10, she was placed in the foster care system, where she experienced life with two different families before going to the University of California at Berkeley. In addition to focusing on her studies, Princess is a tutor and mentor at Thousand Oaks Elementary School in Albany, California. Since her freshman year, she’s been an active member of the Black Recruitment and Retention Center (BRRC), a student group committed to recruiting African American students to U.C. Berkeley, as well as retaining current African American students through college presentations about the U.C. system and the U.C. Berkeley campus.

Lily Moua, Minneapolis, Minn. 2002

The sixth of 12 children of Hmong immigrants, Lily has faced the challenge of becoming a member of American society while respecting the wishes and culture of her parents. With a deep concern for bridging cultural and generational divides, she has organized discussions with her fellow Hmong students and their parents. Currently Lily is a junior sociology/anthropology and management studies major at St. Olaf College in Minnesota. She spent her first semester of her sophomore year in China, during which time she studied modern Chinese history and art in Beijing and traveled to Thailand, Vietnam, and Laos. This past summer she participated in a Southeast Asian summer program with an emphasis on Hmong culture at the University of Wisconsin. For the past two summers, she has been an intern for the Target Corporation.

Anjeleeca Oziwo, Los Angeles, Calif. 2002

To escape a very unsettling childhood, Anjeleeca engrossed herself in “anything and everything.” She lived with her grandmother after her parent’s divorce, but then returned to her mother and stepfather only to endure “extremely frightening” nights, which she rarely discussed with anyone. In high school, she participated in JROTC, track, volleyball, the Pasadena Youth Council, Young Black Scholars and the church choir. “I was active and succeeding in all of these activities just to keep my mind off the frightening nights,” she says. Currently, she is a second year student at UC-Davis, where she is pursuing a degree in exercise biology with a minor in African-American studies. She also is involved in IMPACT, a Christian outreach program for African-American students, and is a high school mentor. Her professional goal is to open a sports clinic in the LA-Pasadena area for high school athletes.

Sophie Parra, New York, N.Y. 2003

By the time she was a senior in high school, Sophie had struggled through three foster homes, drug addicted parents, poverty, physical and mental abuse and the loss of her father. Despite these obstacles, Sophie was an active member of her school community, participating in the student government and working on the student leadership team. Sophie, who recently changed her name to Sophie Florez when she discovered on her birth certificate that her mother had made up the name Parra in place of her given name, is now a first-year student at SUNY-Albany and aspires to a career in politics.

Toby Hairston, Washington, D.C. 2003

Toby's early years were spent watching her HIV-positive mother shoot-up heroin and cocaine. Eventually Toby, who is not HIV-positive herself, went to live with her aunt in Maryland. After a stellar high school career, Toby chose to attend Spelman College where she will receive her degree in business administration with a minor in journalism. In addition to the Beat the Odds award, Toby has received the 2004 Delta Sigma Theta Most Improved Scholarship Award, the Jack and Jill of America Annual Scholarship and the Martin Luther King, Jr. Scholarship.

Donald Washington, CDF Scholastic Intern, Washington, D.C. 2003

Homeless for two years prior to graduating from high school, Donald's first goal is to achieve financial independence, "so he will never be homeless again" and can "give back to help needy Black students." Donald began his studies at Montgomery College where he was editor-in-chief of the school newspaper. He then transferred to Morehouse College with a full scholarship from the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation. Donald is well on his way to reaching his goal of owning his own newspaper having spent the past two summers as a Scholastic Intern. The intern program, which is a partnership between Scholastic, Inc. and the Children's Defense Fund, identifies promising minorities for careers in publishing.

Jesse Kimmel-Freeman, Los Angeles, Calif. 2003

Although she had to struggle through a difficult childhood, Jesse attributes her success to her ability and determination to stay focused on her dreams. She is currently attending Mills College and is pursuing a major in anthropology with a minor in film studies. After graduating from Mills, Jesse will continue her education to earn a Ph.D. in vertebrate paleontology. She is grateful for her Beat the Odds award because it allowed her to take the first step towards achieving her life-long dream of becoming a paleontologist.

Joanie Theus, Los Angeles, Calif. 2003

Born addicted to drugs and abandoned by her biological parents at birth, foster care was an early reality for Joanie. It was also an environment that forced Joanie to grow up fast, yet she remained optimistic as she helped care for the other children and developed a deep patience and love for all children. During her middle and high school years Joanie worked diligently on her studies and became involved in several clubs and organizations. She realized that her dream was to go to college so that she could one day work with children professionally. Today, Joanie is a sophomore at the University of California, Santa Barbara, studying psychology and minoring in Black studies. She has spent the past two summers working at the local YMCA, saying it brings her great joy to be a positive influence in a child's life.

Osvaldo Angel, Los Angeles, Calif. 2003

Born in the United States, Osvaldo was sent back to his parent's country, Mexico, at a very young age. For nine years Osvaldo endured child labor and poverty while his parents struggled to gain financial stability. Finally the family was reunited in America, but they continued to struggle. At the age of 15 his parents suggested that Osvaldo return to Mexico, but instead he sought help from his church. He has been out of his family's household ever since and today lives with his pastor. Osvaldo is finishing his general education degree at Rio Hondo College and has plans to transfer to a private university where he will pursue a degree in sociology. Osvaldo's initial plans are to teach sociology and conduct research, then eventually go to other countries to help children that have been neglected emotionally and physically.

Nathon Seth Martino, Los Angeles, Calif. 2003

When Nathon was only six years old his father went to jail. Then when his mother and stepfather became consumed by drugs and alcohol, Nathon began to be shuffled among his relatives. The lack of interest in Nathon's education had an adverse effect on him as he fell into the wrong crowd and began to skip school. It wasn't until Nathon was arrested for "tagging" that anyone realized the level of neglect that he and his siblings had endured. It was at this time that Nathon was put into a foster home—his first real home. His foster parents made sure that education was a priority in his life, and his teachers and counselors helped him get into college. Now Nathon is attending the California State University at Los Angeles where college life is all that he dreamed it would be. He plans to major in vocal music with an emphasis on teaching. He hopes to one day return to his old high school where he would like to take over as the choir director for the choral union.

Marquita Davis, New York, N.Y. 2003

As a child, Marquita was placed in an abusive foster home, where she struggled to stay alive while caring for her younger sister who suffers from Cerebral Palsy. Despite all of the obstacles in her life, Marquita managed to maintain top grades and was a member of her high school's track team, the school's photography club, the yearbook staff, and the student government. When Marquita won the Beat the Odds award she was a senior at the High School of Fashion Industries in New York. Today, she is a first year student at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in Manhattan. Marquita says she hopes that by sharing her story she will give someone else the strength and courage to "beat the odds."

Martin Garret, New York, N.Y. 2003

Although Martin and his four brothers moved through several foster care homes as children, he was determined to maintain his focus on getting good grades and becoming a role model. He also has helped to plan forums on domestic violence and police brutality. Martin's story together with his interest in computer programming was so impressive that he was offered a year-long internship with *Essence* magazine. From there Martin interned at the Children's Defense Fund assisting with the voter registration and education project. Today, Martin is a first-year student at Bard College in upstate New York and plans to study computer technology.

Crystal Pearl Johnson, Houston, Texas 2003

Growing up, Crystal had to deal with an imprisoned mother, a semi-active father, sexual abuse, and neglect as a young child. Her grandmother raised her and ten other children. Later as a teen, Crystal had to fight her own battles with bulimia. But in spite of everything, she has persevered and today is a pre-med major studying biology at the University of Houston. Crystal plans to enter medical school and go into pediatric medicine. She says that receiving the Beat the Odds award provided her with a sense of self-worth that every individual needs, sparking a drive to press towards excellence in any endeavor.

Shekhinah Jay, New York, N.Y. 2003

After both parents passed away from AIDS during Shekhinah's pre-teen years, she moved in with her grandmother. "Because of [my grandmother]," she writes, "I was able to use all the grief that I built up to produce potential." She persevered and stayed focused on her studies and is now a junior at Cornell University. Currently, she is on the Dean's List and majoring in industrial and labor relations. She participates in the Big Brother Big Sister Program, the NAACP, and the Minority Industrial and Labor Relations Student Organization. Additionally, she runs an Afrocentric Saturday School for minority children in the Cornell community. During the summers, she has had the opportunity to volunteer at Catholic Charities and was a Labor Relations Intern for General Motors. Her goal is to attend law school and then run a community center in her home neighborhood of South Jamaica, Queens, New York. For Shekhinah, "the BTO scholarship is a constant reminder to me that I am special and I can make it if I put my all into it."

Kristin Kayes, Cincinnati, Ohio 2003

Adopted from India when she was almost 14 years of age, Kristin had never had any formal schooling and did not speak any English. When she was about nine years old in India, she was struck with Tuberculosis of the bone and lost all feeling from the waist down because the TB had attacked vertebrae in her lower spine. Because both of her birth parents had died, relatives took her to an orphanage. Fortunately a social worker found her and moved her to a better orphanage in Calcutta so she could be hospitalized and receive treatment for TB. Over a period of 3-4 years of treatment, Kristen gradually regained the use of her legs. She had just started school in America but had to miss several months of class after this extensive surgery. In spite of having to work hard to "catch up," coupled with a limited English vocabulary, at age 21, Kristen graduated from high school, having completed 13 years of coursework in only eight years. This spring Kristen will graduate from Cincinnati State College with an associate degree in business.

Josh Kayes, Cincinnati, Ohio 2003

Josh had been adopted from Korea by an American family at age five, but because of his disability, it did not work out, and he was adopted by another family at age seven. Josh has spina bifida, which means he was born with an opening in his spine that caused damage from the waist down. In Josh's first adoptive placement, the family did not understand his disability and made impossible demands on him. They physically, verbally, and emotionally abused him, repeatedly telling him he was worthless. Overcoming the anger and struggles caused by his physical disability and past through family and professional support and his faith, Josh has proven that he is indeed a wonderful, strong young man. He received a full honor's scholarship to Cincinnati State and will graduate this year. He plans to continue his education so he can become a certified high school math teacher.