

**Step Up For Students
February 2007 Student Spotlight:**



**Erica Varnell
Teacher's Hands Academy
Orlando, FL**

Erica Varnell is a ten-year-old fifth grader working on an advanced sixth grade curriculum. She has attended Teacher's Hands Academy in Orlando for the past five years on a Step Up For Students Scholarship. Prior to receiving her scholarship, she was deemed a problem student and struggled with reading and writing at her public school.

Erica transferred to Teacher's Hands Academy (THA) in the first grade from her neighborhood public school where she attended Pre-K and Kindergarten classes. While in the public school, Erica was considered a behavior problem because she wouldn't stay in her seat and she struggled with reading and writing. She had no motivation to achieve and felt defeated. She was not receiving help from her teachers, and to make matters worse, she was bullied by her peers. Helen Varnell, Erica's mother, feared that her daughter would never reach her full potential if she did not find help. Helen found a solution to her daughter's dilemma in the form of a Step Up For Students Scholarship and the caring staff at Teacher's Hands Academy.

After Erica transferred to Teacher's Hands Academy (THA), the staff realized that she really was a talented student. With help from her THA teachers, Erica overcame her struggles in reading and writing and her confidence soared. She also became a shining star on the stage during programs where she sang and acted. Her annual Stanford Achievement Test (SAT) scores showed Erica was not only succeeding, she was excelling! This past year's SAT scores demonstrated that Erica had made the necessary gains to place her in classes a full year above her age. She is now technically a fifth-grader working in all sixth-grade classes.

Everything has changed for Erica since her public school days. Today, Erica is very motivated and consistently makes the honor roll. She has even begun to think about her future and set a goal for herself to become an aerospace scientist. Erica is happy with the opportunities she has been given at THA. Her success in the classroom has carried over to other areas of her life as she has participated in cheerleading, bowling team, acting, dancing, and singing on stage during various school performances.

Erica's parents, as well as her teacher's at THA, are extremely proud of her accomplishments. Without the scholarship program, Erica's reality may not have been what she is experiencing today.

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About Teacher's Hands Academy

Teacher's Hands Academy (THA) provides students with an individualized learning environment and offers a unique program that recognizes the diverse skills and needs of each student and offers a quality curriculum with low teacher-student ratios. Carolyn Rethwisch and Michelle Nieves opened the school in June 1999 with 21 students and five staff members in a 1,000 square foot building. In seven years it has grown to a population of almost 300 with 40 staff members in a 38,000 square foot building.

The school serves students in grades K2 through 12th grade. Students take Spanish, physical education, art, music, speech, drama, home economics, band, computer, and leadership classes. The school also offers a full sports program consisting of basketball, soccer, cheerleading, softball/baseball, and bowling. Extracurricular activities include a hip hop dance team, performing arts, community-centered mime team, after-school peer tutoring classes, homework club, girl and boy scout troops, 4H club, and an after-school fine arts program.

Teacher's Hands complete Exceptional Student Education (ESE) program has eight self-contained classes and full diagnostic-testing center for students. Speech Therapy, Occupational Therapy, Physical Therapy, Behavior Technicians, Behavior Analysts, Counselors, tutors, and homework study groups are available to families for different types of services both during and after school. Gifted and honors Classes are also available for students. New programs that were added this past school year include high school dual-enrollment with Valencia Community College, Mid-Florida Tech, Orlando Tech, and West Side Tech for qualifying students in both 11th and 12th grades.

Of the three hundred students in attendance, many are from lower-income homes attending the school on the tax-credit scholarship or the John McKay Scholarship for students with learning disabilities. Teacher's Hands Academy has 260 total students, of which 45 are Step Up For Students (CTC) Scholarship students, and 150 McKay Scholarship students. The school is quite a melting pot of ethnicity - with 20 percent African-American, 40 percent Hispanic, 35 percent Caucasian, and 5 percent Asian.

The Stanford Achievement Test (SAT) is administered each year to monitor progress for each traditional student. The school's ESE students take the Brigance, WRAT, SIT, TAPS, ALDA and Toni-3 to monitor progress. The average tuition amount for the school is \$4,000.

About the Step Up For Students Scholarship Recipients

The typical Step Up For Students scholarship family has an average income of \$23,000 for a family of four, and more than half of the scholarship families are single-parent homes. The typical scholarship student is an ethnic minority living with a struggling single parent/caregiver in a high crime community. They are either below grade level, failing at their previous school or both when they receive a scholarship. Parents, who find their children in these circumstances and care about their future, look for viable options. Parents apply for Step Up For Students Scholarships so their children can attend the school best suited for their special needs, beliefs, and abilities, and to address negative trends in their child's learning skills and/or environment.

Step Up For Students Scholarships are funded by corporations that redirect up to 75 percent of their corporate state income tax liability to a qualified Scholarship Funding Organization in exchange for a dollar-for-dollar tax credit. For more information or to learn how your corporation can participate in the program, visit www.StepUpForStudents.com, or call 1-800 782-9140 for more information.

