

**Step Up For Students
November 2006 Student Spotlight:**



**Laquanda Fields
Teacher's Hands Academy
Orlando, FL**

Laquanda Fields is a junior at Teacher's Hands Academy in Orlando on the Step Up For Students Scholarship Program. Laquanda wakes up at 5:00 a.m. every day to catch two buses to get to school and usually does not return home until after 6:00 p.m. due to a schedule that includes high school and dual-enrollment college classes, basketball, track and a part-time job. Despite the busy schedule, Laquanda stays on top of it all and her hard work is paving the way for a promising future.

However, Laquanda had to overcome personal and academic struggles to get where she is today. She has inspired so many others around her that she was given the opportunity to share her personal story with an audience that included more than 2,000 students, parents, educators, corporate donors, legislators and Gov. Jeb Bush during the Step Up For Students Donor Appreciation Rally on October 20, 2006, in Orlando.

Laquanda struggled academically throughout her elementary and middle school years. Her standardized test scores were significantly below average each year. When she reached her middle school years, her mother realized that the public school was unable to help Laquanda overcome her struggles. Knowing that she could not afford private school tuition, Laquanda's mother searched for other options and learned about the Step Up For Students Scholarship Program that would enable her daughter to attend a school that could address her needs. Laquanda received a Step Up For Students Scholarship from Children First Florida and began attending Teacher's Hands Academy in seventh grade.

Laquanda found out that private school afforded her small classrooms with much one-on-one instruction. She knew her teachers and they knew both her strengths and weaknesses. Laquanda began to succeed in her mind "for the first time". As she gained academic ground, she participated in the girls' basketball team, track team, and girls flag football. Her participation in these extracurricular activities helped Laquanda come out of the shell that had entrapped her. She no longer viewed herself as a failure, realizing that she was gifted and talented in more ways than she dreamed.

Since receiving a Step Up For Students Scholarship five years ago, Laquanda has stepped up to her full potential. Now in the 11th grade, Laquanda is on the A-B Honor Roll and she is taking classes at Valencia Community College, including Humanities, American Government and Student Success. In addition to taking high school and college courses, Laquanda is also involved in extracurricular activities at her school, such as track and basketball. She also participates in Student Government, Ensemble Team, and the mime group. Laquanda also works part-time at Checkers on the weekends for extra money. Her plans for the future include going to college to study dermatology.

Not only has Laquanda improved her life and her future, she has also inspired others around her. "As a teacher and administrator, my life has been inspired by Laquanda Field," says Carolyn Rethwisch, an administrator at Teacher's Hands Academy and one of Laquanda's teachers. "She is a beautiful young lady with a heart of gold. She never gives up on herself and never lets her surroundings defeat her. Her smile is contagious. She dreams big and puts in long hours of work to make those dreams come true. It has been a privilege to teach her!"

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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. The ESE staff is composed of teachers, reading and math specialists, as well as an educational specialist who writes and monitors all Academic Improvement Plans/Individual Education Plans. 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 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.

Graduates from THA can be found serving proudly in the United States Navy, Marines, and Army; University of Central Florida, Valencia Community College, Flagler College in St. Augustine, University of North Carolina, Kreger College, adult culinary program at Mid-Florida Tech, and University of Mississippi. One graduate will enter medical school next year, while another hopes to be drafted into the NFL!

THA is not for every child or every family, however the ones that are accepted and work with the "team approach" are doing wonderfully both academically and socially! The different scholarships available have enabled each child (regardless of demographics) to attend a private school. These children now have the same educational opportunities previously only available to wealthy families for a quality education with many services previously out of reach.

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.

