

**5th Annual Step Up Donor Appreciation Rally
Featured Student Speaker:**



**Denisha Merriweather
Esprit de Corps Center for Learning
Jacksonville, FL**

Denisha Merriweather is an 11th grader at Esprit de Corps Center for Learning in Jacksonville, a school she has attended for the past five years on the Step Up For Students Scholarship Program. Denisha is an honor roll student with big plans for the future. However, Denisha had to overcome many personal and academic struggles to get where she is today.

For the first part of her life, Denisha resided with her biological mother, and they often moved from place to place. As a result, Denisha never stayed in one school for very long. The constant need for Denisha to re-adjust to new school environments took a tremendous toll on her academic performance. By the time she was in third grade, she was failing all of her classes. To make matters worse, Denisha often got picked on by other students because of her low grades. Frustrated with her failing grades and the constant conflicts with her peers, Denisha would lash out, often getting into physical fights with other students. Her failing grades combined with the many days she was absent from school caused her to fail the third grade twice.

In fourth grade, Denisha switched to another public school and enrolled in a special program designed to help students who have fallen behind catch up to their grade level. Despite the efforts from Denisha and her teachers, Denisha barely caught up to her grade level by the end of the year. Her self-esteem was crushed.

In the fifth grade, Denisha transferred to yet another public school. The teachers at this new school worked hard to help her overcome her learning difficulties and she started to make some progress. However, her conflicts with other students continued and she began to get into physical fights with her peers once again. Because of her dwindling self-esteem, she found it hard to apply herself.

In sixth grade, Denisha's life took a positive turn. Now in the care of her Godmother, Johnell Jones, Denisha began attending Esprit de Corps on a Step Up For Students Scholarship. With the much-needed one-on-one attention from her teachers, Denisha was able to finally break her learning barriers. By the end of the first nine weeks, her grades had risen from D's and F's to A's and B's. She also learned valuable lessons in respect, and with the mutual consideration and encouragement from the other students around her, she no longer had the urge or need to fight.

By the end of the first semester at Esprit de Corps, she made the A/B honor roll. Since that time, her progress has continued and she has consistently made the honor roll. Her experience at Esprit de Corps has also inspired her to help other children overcome their own difficulties. She

is an active volunteer at the Jacksonville-area Police Athletic League, where she enjoys helping children that may be dealing some of the same challenges she has faced. She is also the Statewide Vice President of the Youth Directors Council in Florida, a leadership program that is an extension of the Police Athletic League.

Now in the 11th grade, Denisha maintains a 3.8 GPA and is preparing for the future. After studying genetics last year in her biology class, she has decided to pursue a career as a geneticist. After graduation, she plans on attending Florida Community College at Jacksonville (FCCJ) for the first two years and then transferring to Ohio State University to complete her degree.

About Esprit de Corps Center for Learning

Located in Jacksonville, Fla., Esprit de Corps Center for Learning currently serves 127 students in Kindergarten through 12th grade. More than 70 students at the school are receiving Step Up For Students Scholarships. The cost of tuition at Esprit de Corps is \$4,260. The school annually administers the Stanford Achievement Test (SAT).