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BURTON SENIOR DEFIES THE ODDS FACING MANY CALIFORNIA FOSTER YOUTH

--Credits the School's Wellness Center for Care, Support, Confidence...and Keeping Her Out of Jail--

(SAN FRANCISCO, Calif.) – May 29, 2014 – Maya Ned entered the foster care system at age 3, briefly left at age 8 and returned soon after. During her freshman and sophomore years of high school in Vallejo, she was a straight F student. She was mean. She liked to fight. She says she “stomped” a girl and was nearly arrested. “Everyone knew not to mess with me after that though.”

Two years ago, right after her sophomore year she was in “a really bad foster placement and having a really bad time.” It was her seventh placement in nearly as many years. She attempted suicide.

Maya, a 17-year-old African-American student, faces challenging odds. A 2013 report released by the Stuart Foundation revealed that only 45 percent of California's foster youths graduate from high school. Seventy percent had three or more placements. One-third of foster youth were of African-American descent, compared with one-tenth of general population students.

But today the odds are definitely in Maya's favor. At the beginning of her junior year, Maya moved to Phillip and Sala Burton Academic High School in the San Francisco Unified School District and was referred to the school's Wellness Center by her social worker. Maya says she felt welcomed by Wellness Center Nurse Kathy Babcock. “I started coming back here every day to have lunch and when I had breaks. I met my best friend in Wellness,” she says. “Nurse Kathy nominated me for the Extraordinary Foster Youth Award, and she even came to the awards ceremony to see me accept it.”

According to Ms. Babcock, “I nominated Maya for the foster youth award because she tries so hard to figure out how to grow and stay positive, despite a tremendous difficulties in her life. The nomination gave her something very positive to focus on during an extremely trying time in her life.

“In addition, Maya is able to motivate other people to do well through her tremendous force of personality and often very buoyant nature. She is successfully holding a job outside of school; she's completing her graduation requirements, including participating in night school classes; and she's active in several community organizations,” Ms. Babcock added.

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She also served as the Teaching Assistant in the Wellness Center, helping the staff wherever needed. “Wellness has helped me with everything, she says. “They’ve helped me improve my social skills and they’ve helped me reduce my anger.”

By the end of the school year, Maya was earning an A, two Bs and two Ds. “I’m a little stressed about it but I’m still passing. School comes before everything.”

Though Maya receives counseling and therapy outside of school through the foster youth program, she credits the Wellness Center with her transformation. “It’s a safe environment and they make me feel welcome. I wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for Wellness. I would be in jail. They’ve provided me with so much care; I almost feel like I am their child.”

Maya graduated on May 29, and is focused on her goals. “Next year I’ll be going to Merritt College in Oakland to get started on my pre-reqs for nursing. When I turn 18 in October I’ll go to transitional housing in Oakland and have a housemate. Later I’ll transfer to Florida A & M to finish my R.N degree. I want to travel after college, move to London and travel around the world. I’ll be independent and living life. I want to be the best person I can be.”

About the San Francisco Wellness Initiative

The San Francisco Wellness Initiative is a groundbreaking program dedicated to improving the health, well-being and academic success of the city’s 16,000 public high school students at 19 campuses. Staff members at each onsite Wellness Center help teens gain the skills they need to cope with complex issues such as anxiety, depression, drug and alcohol use, sexual health and relationships. Students learn positive, lifelong habits that contribute to their well-being and success, and ultimately, to the health of the communities in which they live.

The Wellness Initiative is a unique partnership between the San Francisco Department of Children, Youth and Their Families, the San Francisco Department of Public Health, and the San Francisco Unified School District. Core funding for the Initiative comes from the City of San Francisco’s Children’s Fund and the Public Education Enrichment Fund (PEEF) of the San Francisco Unified School District.

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