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Hamilton County's Foster Youth Celebrate Overcoming Obstacles and Graduation

Cincinnati (June 13, 2010) Nearly 40 teens in Hamilton County's foster care system will bid farewell to high school and say hello to their futures at this year's "Celebration of Dreams" event.

The 13th annual event will be held at 6 p.m. June 16 at the 20th Century Theater in Oakley. The event includes dinner and an awards ceremony highlighted by keynote speaker Dr. Gregory H. Williams, president of the University of Cincinnati. Williams will relate his personal tale of overcoming poverty and other challenges to achieve success.

The night will be spent honoring teens who have overcome tough backgrounds – sometimes abusive backgrounds -- to graduate high school. The 37 teens invite their foster families and other important people in their lives, such as caseworkers, mentors, court-appointed special advocates and guardian ad litem. They receive gifts and certificates for their achievement.

One student who has traveled a tough road and found success is Myra Oliver. Her mother was an addict and left the family. Her father died when she was young. Her grandfather, who took care of her upon her dad's death, died too. As a sophomore, she was placed in foster care.

"I felt relieved," Myra said. Suddenly, life was more predictable.

She and her foster mother, Erma Houston, clicked almost immediately. While other teenage girls Erma had fostered were focused on boys, Myra was different.

"She liked school. She had that passion and she wanted to do better, so I just sort of pushed it," said Houston, who didn't attend college but recognizes education is key to changing your life. "College has been my goal for all my kids, whether they do it or not. But when Myra came, she was a lot more focused than a lot. She stood out. I knew this one had it."

Myra said she always wanted to go to college, in part, because no one else in her family ever had. She plans to attend the University of Akron and study psychology. She hopes to walk on to the volleyball or softball team.

Moira Weir, director of the Hamilton County Job and Family Services, which hosts the event with the Foster Child Enrichment Council, said this is the only graduation party most of the graduates will experience.

"This is just a little something to help them have a normal experience," she said. "They really deserve to be kings and queens for a day because they have worked extremely hard for this and overcome some very tough obstacles to achieve their dreams. This is their night to celebrate."

Weir said she is hopeful this is not an end for the graduates, but a beginning that will include college, a trade school or success in the working world. She noted that many are involved in the county's Higher Education Mentoring Initiative with the University of Cincinnati, which pairs foster children with mentors who help them make the transition from high school to a successful post-graduate life.

"These teens have already beaten the odds and shown they are fighters," she said. "We want to make sure they don't falter as adults. Taking the next step will be a challenge, but their dedication and determination will help them be a success at anything they choose to do."

Hamilton County Job and Family Services currently serves about 850 foster children a day. Citizens interested in adopting or becoming a foster parent should call 946-1000 or visit www.hckids.org. Those interested in making donations to the Foster Child Enrichment Council can call 732-5151 or visit www.helpfosterchildren.org

Hamilton County Job and Family Services

Hamilton County Job and Family Services administers federal, state and local programs for those in need. The Department helps with local child protection, elderly protection, child care, child support enforcement, workforce development, cash assistance, food assistance and Medicaid disbursement. Servicing Hamilton County since 1947, the Department helps hundreds of thousands each year and is accredited by the Council on Accreditation, an international, independent, not-for-profit child and family service accrediting organization.

About the Foster Child Enrichment Council

The Foster Child Enrichment Council is a volunteer community group whose mission is to provide positive experiences that enhance the quality of life for abused and neglected children. We serve children in foster and kinship care. The Council has been in existence since the mid-1980's and is a 501 (c) 3 tax-exempt organization and is the only means through which people can give financial donations to Children's Services.

Funds are raised through grants, private donations and the annual sale of Entertainment Books. Celebration of Dreams is possible because of private donations and many volunteer hours. If you or anybody you know would like to assist or be part of the Council's activities you can contact us at: P.O. Box, 18283, Cincinnati, OH 45218 or by leaving a message at 723-5151 or visit our web site at www.helpfosterchildren.org.