



A MESSAGE FROM THE
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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

DJJ Education & Re-Entry Training Reforms Changing Student Lives

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(ATLANTA - GA) It can be easy to overlook the individual juvenile offender reform stories that are behind Georgia's growing number of youth who distinguish themselves with hard work, perseverance and academic accomplishment. Four young adults were honored for their personal endeavors and success stories at the January 2016 meeting of Georgia's Board of Juvenile Justice.

The Juvenile Justice Office of Reentry Services delivers aftercare services to support the successful reentry of incarcerated youth back into their local communities. These positive reentries often require detailed coordination across multiple support agencies, state and local juvenile justice systems, and other youth and family service systems.

However, the most important factor contributing to successful juvenile transition is the individual strength and determination of the young adults. For Board honorees **Chase Thomas, Carlos Valdez, Shedeedreonna Mallory, and Christie Cash**, the long journey toward healing began while receiving comprehensive agency support during time in custody at the Department of Juvenile Justice.

These honorees forged promising futures while overcoming the kind of extreme life obstacles that are unfortunately all too familiar in today's world of juvenile justice. Drug abuse, molestation, family death and estrangement, interrupted education, and gang affiliation were among the factors challenging these individuals' lives, just as they do for many youth held in DJJ secure facilities.

Yet, each of these honored young adults faced-down personal hurdles and took advantage of the many opportunities for recovery and reentry presented to them while receiving quality educations and appropriate treatment programs at the Department of Juvenile Justice.

DJJ HONOREES – FORMER STUDENT SUCCESS STORIES

- Troubles with the law began for **Chase Thomas** when he was thirteen: **“Caught up in drugs at a very early age, I was a very lost youth,”** Chase told the Board.
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But he managed to turn his life around after leaving the care and custody of the Georgia Department of Juvenile Justice. Chase confided to Board members that it took him four years at a Youth Detention Center to develop the maturity to appreciate the benefits of the education he was being offered as a daily classroom regimen.

“DJJ gave me opportunities that at the time I did not want,” Honoree Thomas said. “But these were opportunities that I needed to be able to make good decisions.”

Now education is a priority for Chase Thomas as he pursues a Business and Mission Bachelor’s Degree at Truitt-McConnell College. He is married with two children and considered a pillar of his church for speaking to youth groups like the Commissioner’s Teen Forum in Hall County. His life today defines community spirit as Thomas shares his experiences as a former juvenile offender to help keep others from following that path.

- Honoree **Carlos Valdez** was sixteen when adjudicated to the custody of the Department of Juvenile Justice. His dynamic test results during a high school equivalency practice exam led Valdez to pursue his GED while in juvenile custody. Strong support from DJJ Associate School Superintendent Dr. Audrey Armistad cleared the way for Carlos to earn certification in three technical trades including Construction and Nursery Greenhouse worker, and Microsoft Application Specialist.

“I earned the Georgia BEST certification, that’s the Business Ethics Student Training and it taught me a lot of soft skills about being in the work environment,” Carlos said. After leaving custody, Carlos Valdez obtained full-time employment working at a job he loves.

“I was trying to find a place where I actually wanted to be,” Carlos said. ***“It’s a hands-on job that I really like doing.”*** Now he’s working to re-integrate himself into his community with his family. He has one son and a new child on the way. ***“By the grace of God I’m here today,”*** Carlos said.

- One of the younger people recognized by the Board of Juvenile Justice, **Shedeedreonna Mallory** also took advantage of the positive environment established by the Georgia Preparatory Academy. By age fifteen she was a very troubled teen. ***“I had a bad attitude. I stopped going to school. I started doing bad things,”*** Shedeedreonna said.

Committed to the Department of Juvenile Justice, she went into a special arts program and learned much more than art. ***“I learned how to respect others and learned everything can’t go my way,”*** she said. ***“I learned so much. I changed for the better.”***

After her release Shedeedreonna graduated from high school and is now pursuing her new dreams of a college degree and a productive future.

- Faced with overwhelming childhood suffering no youth should endure and no hope for a positive future, **Christie Cash** was an angry, rebellious teenager without loving parental guidance. In and out of foster homes after a series of devastating personal traumas, she was a runaway at age thirteen and committed to the State of Georgia.

Christie told Board members it was through years of love and support from dedicated DJJ leadership and staff that she was finally able to acquire the proper structure and discipline needed to turn her life around.

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“I honestly felt just hopeless and I want to thank DJJ for believing they can help lost teenagers and for believing in me,” Christie told the Board. ***“They gave me hope and always believed in me when no else did. They taught me about taking responsibility no matter what your age.”***

After leaving DJJ custody Christie decided she had to do more changing within herself. ***“I had to love who I was in order to become someone inspiring.”*** She said four years active duty in the U.S. Army provided her with the next life-changing experience.

“I stopped feeling sorry for myself and decided I wanted to use my life to inspire other troubled teenagers who feel like they can’t go another day or another moment -- To give them that ray of Hope,” Christie said. ***“It’s really time to pay love forward, because I have beaten all the odds that were against me.”***

Christie Cash was one of the first American women in combat. She served one tour in Afghanistan as a driver-gunner on scout vehicle missions detonating IEDs to protect army convoys. After that successful stint in the armed service, she is now in the reserves, married, and about to receive her degree in radiology.

Each of the former DJJ students was presented with a ‘Successful Youth Award’ before the Board. Board Member Willie Bolton from Athens told them, ***“Sometimes life will knock you down, but it is up to you to get up -- and you got up. You faced life and I’m so proud of you to do that because only the man or the woman in the mirror can make the change. You’ve done that.”***

Board Member Richard S. Ambrose from Vienna congratulated the honorees. ***“Your success stories just mean everything in the world. God bless you, you’re great.”***

Board Member Adam Kennedy from Claxton remarked, ***“You’re an inspiration for people in the juvenile justice field. You give us hope to wake up every morning and say there is a reason to go do this job.”***

Board Member Dick Yarbrough from Atlanta reminded DJJ Staff members about his personal philosophy for leaving the world a better place than they find it. ***“You can really feel good about what you’ve done with these young people. I am so proud to be a part of this.”***

DJJ Commissioner Avery Niles says he sees everyday evidence in Georgia’s juvenile justice system to support Governor Nathan Deal’s conclusion that ***“If you’re going to just make them serve a sentence and turn them loose and they still don’t have a high school diploma or a GED or any marketable skills, well no wonder we’d have one in three back in the system after they’re released.”***

Commissioner Niles concluded, ***“The Governor knows the best way to institute juvenile justice reforms in Georgia is to change the ability of former young offenders to get a quality education, get a job and successfully reintegrate into their communities. Then we will see many more success stories like the ones honored today before the Board,”*** Niles said.

The Georgia Preparatory Academy (GPA) has dual accreditation from the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) and from the Correctional Educational Association (CEA). The GPA mission is to provide a comprehensive educational program which will facilitate the successful integration of each student into the community and workplace. For additional good news stories from the Department of Juvenile Justice, visit us on the web at www.djjnewsandviews.org .

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The attached photograph of the Department of Juvenile Justice Board Chair and Commissioner with the DJJ honorees can be used in publications with photo credit given to the Georgia Department of Juvenile Justice.



SHOWN HERE FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: Department of Juvenile Justice Board Chair Elaine Snow with Board Honorees Chase Thomas, Carlos Valdez, Shedeedreonna Mallory, Christie Cash, and DJJ Commissioner Avery D. Niles.

(END RELEASE)