



Camden City School District

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Paymon Rouhanifard
Superintendent

PRESS RELEASE

Superintendent Celebrates 2014 Remarkable Graduates

Students overcame extraordinary adversity; now heading to college

*June 12, 2014—Office of the Superintendent, Camden, NJ—*Superintendent Paymon Rouhanifard is hosting a reception this evening to honor the recipients of the first annual Remarkable Graduate awards. Two dozen 12th-grade students, joined by their families, friends, and educators, will be celebrated at the Camden County College Camden Conference Center in a special event hosted by Mimi Brown of 105.3 WDAS. Camden County College President Dr. Raymond Yannuzzi and Camden County Freeholder—and Camden High School alumnus—Scot McCray are expected speakers, as well as several of the honored students.

“We are so proud of these students and how they have persevered through adversity,” Superintendent Rouhanifard said. “These graduates are wonderful examples for their peers and raise the bar on what’s possible. As challenging as their upbringings have been, these students have developed traits like grit and resourcefulness that will serve them well in college and their future endeavors.”

This year is the first time the Camden City School District has had a special event exclusively for graduating students who have overcome adversity.

A selection of their stories—two from each District high school, in alphabetical order by last name, and shared with permission—is below:

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As the oldest of seven siblings, **Briana Dean** is often helping to care for her brothers and sisters. However, no matter what’s happening at home she takes great pains to succeed at Camden High, too. Briana is a member of the Jobs for America’s Graduates program and is involved in student government. In addition, she competes on the volleyball, softball, and indoor track and field teams and maintains a grade-point average above 3.0. Even with such a full plate, Briana is heralded for her dependability and overall pleasantness. She plans to attend Morgan State University this fall.

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Unlike almost all of her peers, **Wafa Farhat** grew up in the Middle East. When her family immigrated to the United States, Wafa had to make an enormous adjustment; at Woodrow Wilson High School, Wafa and her brother are the only Middle Eastern students. However, several teachers speak Arabic, and they have helped Wafa improve her English proficiency. Over time, her involvement in student life at Woodrow Wilson increased. Wafa plans to begin her education at Camden County College and later seek her bachelor's degree.

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Growing up, **Alesha Figueroa-Falcon** lost her mother to cancer and her father to the justice system. Her grandmother raised her, and her transition to Woodrow Wilson High School was challenging. But Alesha got on track and was elected class president by her peers for three years in a row. She also served as the school's Advisory Board student representative. Currently, Alesha has the 7th-highest grade-point average in her class. She will attend Richard Stockton College this fall on a scholarship and plans to study marine biology.

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As a freshman in high school, **Akirra Freeman** had to adjust to new teachers and new classes. She also had to juggle her educational responsibilities with her responsibilities as a new mother. Through hard work, Akirra found a balance at Creative Arts Morgan Village Academy and even managed to participate in school events and activities. Akirra's determination to pursue a career in medicine keeps her moving forward. She will attend Rowan University this fall.

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In the middle of her freshman year at Brimm Medical Arts High School, **Essence Johnson** had to deal with an unforeseen challenge: homelessness. Essence and her mom's predicament made Essence angry, and her volatile behavior created problems at school. Fortunately, Essence channeled her emotions into sports by becoming active in softball and volleyball. She became more patient and found her way. This fall, Essence plans to attend Fairleigh Dickinson University.

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Dayton Love is graduating from MetEast High School as a mentor and a scholar—in addition to leading a boys group at Thomas H. Dudley Family School, Dayton scored advanced proficient on the High School Proficiency Assessment (HSPA). But Dayton wasn't always in the front of the pack. Earlier in high school, Dayton got into fights—after one incident, he suffered a severe concussion and missed more than five months of school. His home instruction teacher led him to MetEast, which is leading him to Camden County College in the fall.

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Most high school students are used to switching classes every period, but **Shawn Miles Jr.** had to adjust to switching high schools with unusually high frequency. After attending several different schools, Shawn landed at Camden High, where he's found a home. Through sports like indoor track and baseball and a personality that his teachers prize for his honesty and diligence, Shawn is

thriving at the Castle on the Hill. This fall, he'll take his talents to Benedict College.

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Beyond homework and tests, **Markus Rabb-Peace** had to deal with another challenge in high school: bone cancer. He endured chemotherapy to persist through high school, completed a senior thesis project focused on art, and prepared himself for college. After graduating from MetEast High School, Markus, who has been cancer-free for about a year and will be designated as a "survivor" next month, plans to attend the Savannah College of Art and Design.

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Ronald Torres had the hardest start possible in life: his mother passed away during childbirth. His grandmother raised him, but Ronald suffered from anger management issues and a host of other behavioral challenges. During his middle school years, Ronald found jazz and his teachers say the music transformed him. Now at Creative Arts Morgan Village Academy, he plays the trombone and is a member of the marching band. Ronald also is the leader of his own music group, the Little Latin Brass Band. He plans to attend South Carolina State University this fall, when he will become the first member of his family to attend college.

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Ever since **Jenny Young** was in kindergarten, her mom was in and out of the hospital due to several illnesses. But Jenny's mom remained focused on her daughter's education. "She would call me daily while she was lying in the hospital bed to make sure I was getting ready for school," Jenny wrote. "My mother said that without school you cannot be anything in life and that God can take her the day I graduate."

Jenny's mother passed away in 2011, but Jenny is still driven to succeed for her family and for herself. Jenny's older sister stopped going to school in the 8th-grade in order to take care of her; Jenny is graduating from Brimm Medical Arts High School with the goal of becoming the first person in her family to go to college. She will attend Rutgers-Camden in the fall and plans to become a doctor.

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