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of the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act

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Mr. Chairman, my name is Talaya Ford. I am 16 years old and I am a graduate from the P.A.C.E. Center for Girls in Jacksonville, Florida. I appreciate the opportunity to tell you about myself and how I have changed my life in a positive way. I hope that my experiences will assist you in helping other girls who may be in similar situations.

I'd like to give you some background information about myself. I'm originally from Philadelphia where I lived with my grandparents. My father was in prison since I was 2 years old and my mother became a drug addict when I was 6 years old. My grandparents were the ones who raised me. When I was 10 years old my grandmother died so my mother wanted me to come live with her in Jacksonville, Florida. This made me feel badly since my mother had never been there for me before. It was hard being separated from my grandfather who was like a father to me.

When I was 11 my grandfather moved to Jacksonville which helped but I still didn't get along well with my mother. My mother didn't understand why my attitude was changing and assumed I was on drugs - which at the time I wasn't. She placed me in a drug treatment program in an attempt to make things better. All this did was upset me to be placed somewhere I didn't belong.

After returning home I was angry and our relationship got worse. This is when I began sneaking out of the house during the night and going to night clubs even though I was only 13 years old.

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I eventually ran away to stay with friends. My mother put a custody order out on me and I was picked up by the police and held in the detention center for a week. This is when the social services agency became involved. I went to court where my mother said she didn't want me home and I didn't want to go home. I was placed in a foster home.

I didn't like being in the foster home because I felt out of place, the home was not heated properly and the foster parent talked nasty towards me and the other foster children. That's why I ran away from there.

I tried to live on the streets, staying with friends but I soon realized I couldn't take care of myself and when I got sick I turned myself in to the social services agency. They took me back to the detention center for several days and then placed me in yet another foster home for girls. It was better than the other foster home but it still was not somewhere a person should live. During the time I stayed there I saw girls trying to kill themselves. They would cry every day and so would I. About four days later I was told that I was going to be sent to another foster home, I could not handle being shifted around so much and being treated like nobody cared what happened to me. So I ran away from there. Although I already knew that living on the streets was not a good life I felt that it would be better than going from foster home to foster home.

For the next 2 years I lived with friends, not going to school, using drugs, drinking and wasting my life away. I continued to have contact with my grandfather because he was the only person that I felt really cared what happened to me.

When I was 14 I was driving my friends mother's car and I hit a school bus. The ambulance took me to the hospital. The police

gave me a ticket for wreckless driving. After I was released from the hospital I continued to stay with friends again. My life didn't change. I was around people not doing anything for themselves and therefore I also had no hope for the future.

When I was 15 my grandfather died. I tried to blame everyone else for his death. I felt angry, sad, and most of all very alone! The most important person in my life was now gone.

One of the last things my grandfather told me was that it was very important to get my education. He believed in me and saw a better future for me. That was a turning point, I then knew I had to change my life.

I turned myself in to the police and was taken to the detention center. I heard about the P.A.C.E. Center For Girls and I felt like that might be an opportunity to get my education. When I went to court it was decided that I could move back in with my mother. We worked on our relationship and began getting along better.

I also enrolled in the P.A.C.E. Center For Girls. The program taught me many things. I learned not only academics but also the lifeskills I needed to make it. I felt as though the staff really understood me. They taught me how to set goals, achieve them and then recognized my accomplishments. This made me feel really good about myself. I had a very special advisor at P.A.C.E. who helped me deal with my personal problems as well as school problems. She met with my mom monthly to discuss my progress and to talk about how things were going at home. This also helped with my relationship with my mom. I earned my high school diploma and I'm currently taking a computer course through the community college and working part-time. When I turn 17 I will enroll in the college nursing program.

It wasn't the judge who made me want to go to school or the social workers who made me want to better my life. It was people who cared, who made me know that I deserve better.

Being in and out of the detention center and foster homes, didn't help any. To tell someone you were in places like that, was like boasting about old war stories.

But to tell someone how people like my grandfather, my mother, and the people at P.A.C.E. gave me that push and confidence to make me want to strive for excellence was like telling someone how I won the war.