





# FOSTERING HOPE *Through Education*

**A**fter viewing the documentary *Aging Out*, about the plight of youth exiting the foster care system, Darrell Mays was compelled to act. He founded The nsoro Educational Foundation with a mission to provide access to postsecondary education for youth in foster care, wards of the state and youth who have aged out of the foster care system. The Starfish Ball was created to introduce a cause at the edge of awareness and raise the funding necessary to educate this vulnerable population.

## THE EDUCATION GAP

While 70% of youth in foster care plan to pursue postsecondary education, the instability inherent to the foster care experience creates significant barriers: 1 in 4 youth in foster care will experience post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) – twice the rate of U.S. veterans; 50% of former foster youth are homeless within two years of leaving the system; and 78% of the current death row population spent time in the foster care system.

The national college enrollment rate of 65% and graduation rate of 59% stand in stark contrast to the 10% college enrollment and 3% graduation rates of youth in foster care. The nsoro Foundation sees this disparity as its clarion call.

## THE GREAT EQUALIZER

The nsoro Foundation works to combat educational inequality

with direct academic scholarships and the College Bound Program hosted on eight universities across four states.

High school students in foster care are first introduced to nsoro through College Bound. This weeklong program features an enriching curriculum of S.T.E.A.M. (science, technology, engineering, art and mathematics) instruction, self-advocacy practice, financial literacy education, and health and wellness exposure. In six years, 623 students have graduated from the College Bound program.

With 293 scholars at 192 universities in 37 states, Mays' vision of leveling the educational landscape is becoming a reality. Since 2005, nsoro has awarded more than 700 scholarships for postsecondary education. The impressive statistics speak for themselves: 89% of nsoro scholars have graduated or are still enrolled in school, 65% are pursuing an advanced degree, and 40% of nsoro alumni are working in their field of study. Equally telling, 98% of nsoro alumni have not been incarcerated, 78% have not been homeless, and 96% have not abused drugs or alcohol.

The name “nsoro” is derived from the Ghanan term *nsoromma*, meaning “children of the heavens.” Mays believes youth in foster care – with so few blood ties they can claim – are part of a more divine family. A lowercased “n” is always used in the spelling of nsoro as a constant reminder that what matters most is accountability to these children.

## *The 2018* STARFISH BALL

The nsoro Foundation will honor two of Atlanta's most esteemed philanthropists at the Starfish Mardi Gras Ball on Saturday, Jan. 20, at the St. Regis Atlanta. Steve Smith and Elizabeth Allen will be crowned King and Queen at the 13th annual gala, reigning over the evening's festivities, which include performers and surprise special guests, as well as a silent auction and live auction, punctuated with the success stories of nsoro Scholars. Guests are encouraged to bring their masks for an enchanting evening.



**Elizabeth Allen** will be honored for her decade of support of The nsoro Foundation, and **Steve Smith** for his leadership as board vice-chairman since its inception, at the 2018 Starfish Ball.

PHOTO BY BEN ROSE



# Celebrating nsoro's Scholars

## ANTOINETTE RUCKER

### Aging out - the anomaly

**R**edefining the grim statistics of youth aging out of the foster care system, Antoinette Rucker is a trailblazer. In 2014, she was honored with the Youth Advocate of the Year Award, a Georgia state appointment for her humanitarian efforts rallying with



state legislators on issues concerning children and families in foster care. This fall, she received a nsoro scholarship for graduate school to pursue a master's degree in social work at Walden University. Here's Antoinette's story, in her own words:

"Champions. According to the Webster's dictionary, a champion is a person who fights for a cause. A supporter.

In the spring of 2016, I was introduced to The nsoro Foundation at a graduation celebration for

foster youth. At the event, Monica Pantoja shared that nsoro supported graduate students who've aged out of foster care. I could not believe my ears. As fate would have it, I was in the process of deciding if I wanted to go graduate school, but I knew that resources were limited.

A few days later, I contacted nsoro to share my interest in furthering my education. I learned that I was eligible for academic funding and that nsoro would support me with an educational scholarship through age 26.

Fast forward to July 2017. I never submitted my application to nsoro. I decided to take a year off. At this point, I had applied and was accepted to graduate school, but I was left with a tuition balance and I wasn't sure how I was going to pay for it. I could not imagine forgoing graduate school because I didn't have all of the funding needed to attend.

Nervous and discouraged, I reached out to nsoro again, a year after my initial meeting. To my surprise, the nsoro team was so warm and welcoming, assuring me nothing had changed, and they would still support my academic pursuit. My heart was so full."

## ALEXIS LENDERMAN

### Determined to serve and driven to succeed!

**F**ollowing a difficult childhood that culminated in a foster care placement while in high school, Alexis Lenderman is rewriting her future – determined to serve and driven to succeed. "Education is the one thing that can't be taken away from me," she said. "So, I push myself as hard as I can to see what I can do."

A senior majoring in entrepreneurship and global international studies at Western Michigan University, Alexis was honored with two highly prestigious awards this year for her commitment to public service and civic engagement. She was named a Newman Civic Fellow and received a scholarship from the Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation and Institute's Leadership and the American Presidency program.



"Alexis is one of the most motivated, focused and engaged students I have had the pleasure to know," said Jane Baas, Associate Dean of WMU's Lee Honors College. "I have no doubt that Alexis will lead the way wherever she lands after graduation."

Alexis is guided by two key principles: to learn as much as possible, and to do as much good as possible with what she learns. This past fall, she interned on Capitol Hill with the Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute while taking classes as a visiting student at George Mason University. Her move to Washington D.C. came after spending the summer in South Korea studying international humanitarianism – her fifth experience studying abroad.

"As a first-generation college student who aged out of the foster care system, I have seen the power of advocacy on behalf of marginalized populations firsthand," Alexis wrote in a personal statement for the fellowship. "I spent years feeling as if I did not have a voice, so I am determined to use my voice to address social issues affecting those that have also felt unheard."

Her ultimate aspiration is to work for the United Nations on humanitarian missions.



Above: Starfish Ball queen 2018 **Elizabeth Allen** and **Darrell Mays**, nsoro founder.

Left: **Tara** and **Darrell Mays**, **Roz Thomas**, **Dedrick Thomas** and **Millie** and **Steve Smith**.

# SALUTE TO nsoro SUPPORTERS



Board member **Bill Voyles** and **Cindy Voyles**.



**Tish Inman**, **Sandra Baldwin**, **Vicki Palmer**, nsoro Scholar **Katrina Oglesby**, **Tara Mays**, **Millie Smith** and **Bonnie Meshad**.



**Tony Conway**, **Johanna Ellis-Reisinger**, **Jack Sawyer** and **Jamail Larkins**.



**Stephanie Travis**, **Claire Travis** - nsoro's Programs and Social Impact Manager, **Alex Mays** and **Tatiana Werther**.