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Foster Graduates Defy the Odds



As the young people scanned faces in the crowd, they smiled at friends and family. Just a few years before, they weren't sure if they'd be sitting at high school graduation.

"I have been through so much, and I never thought I would be celebrating getting my diploma," says Paul, a seventeen-year-old foster teen. And he wasn't the only one.

Statistically, only 50% of foster children graduate from high school. They are also three times more likely to drop out. This is mostly due to housing instability, lack of academic and social support, placement disruption, and failure to earn passing grades due to truancy and transience.

But on May 24, 2018, Eckerd Connects celebrated 60 young people in Hillsborough County who defied the odds and earned their high school diplomas. Despite the national foster graduation rate of 50%, the **graduation rate for Hillsborough's foster children is nearly 90%.**

"These young adults remained determined despite the many obstacles they've faced,

and I'm thrilled to celebrate this accomplishment with them," says Keith Philipson, Eckerd Connects National Director of Education. "We provided them with the resources and support they needed to get here, but their personal motivation and hard work got the job done and we couldn't be more proud of their life-changing accomplishment!"

The celebration included dancers and poets, musical entertainment, and an address from guest speaker Michael Clayton, formerly of the Tampa Bay Buccaneers.

Several of the graduates beamed as they walked across the stage shaking the hands of the speakers and case managers, proud of reaching this milestone.

If you'd like to help next year's students start on the right path, consider donating toward school supplies, school uniforms, and other expenses by visiting **Eckerd.org/back2school.**



Donate

Get Involved

Adopt a Child

Foster a Child



You did it!

Thank you to everyone who supported Eckerd Connects for Give Day Tampa Bay. Because of your generosity, we were able to raise \$4,040 in just 24 hours to provide a much-needed van for our Raising Hope program!



Raising Hope provides clothing, shoes, school supplies, hygiene items and other necessities to children entering foster care in the Hillsborough, Pinellas, and Pasco counties, as well as homeless children in Brevard County. The program is run by two staff members who put many miles on their personal vehicles picking up donations and managing seven locations.

Thanks to your generosity we are well on our way to making this purchase possible, allowing Raising Hope to serve even more children. Thank you!

LEARN MORE ►►► Eckerd.org/Donate



Using Your Gifts for Others' Good

Moving from home to home, Sebrena Pawley's childhood was filled with uncertainty. With more than 80 placements during her time in foster care, she lacked security and often ran away from her placements. There were even times she slept in the New York City subway station, and all the while she wondered, **What's next? Will life always be like this?**

Even as a young girl Sebrena was known by her peers for her hustle and intelligence. She networked and made connections with people around town, and soon was using her gifts as a conversationalist and motivator to work with Eckerd Connects Workforce Development (WFD). She began showing young people how they could get connected to education and employment opportunities. She found that it was a natural transition.

Sebrena uses her back story to inspire others, "I tell them all the time: Find your gift. Once you do, your goal is not to keep your gift—it's to give your gift away."

Now the Area Manager for Eckerd Connects WFD, Sebrena continues to encourage youth to tap into their own talents and gifts and to use them for others' good.

She is living proof that whether you are giving your time, talent, or money, it can have a lasting impact on others for years to come.



To learn more about Sebrena's story, visit the "video" section on our Facebook page at facebook.com/eckerdconnectsus.

*"I tell them all the time:
Find your gift. Once you do,
your goal is not to keep your gift —
it's to give your gift away."*

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Leadership Society

In April, we launched the Eckerd Connects Leadership Society, a group of local professional leaders dedicated to supporting the mission of Eckerd Connects through fellowship with a purpose. The group's mission is to educate the local community about the dilemmas facing children and families served by Eckerd Connects. Through meaningful engagement with Eckerd Connects executive leadership, members will work together to create solutions for transformational change.

Since launching, the leadership society has hosted a "Shuffleboard Shootout" as well as our signature members only event, "Karaoke With a Purpose". With the shuffle board event serving as an introduction for prospective members, the karaoke night allowed those who have already joined to interact with foster youth in a lighthearted environment while providing the group home with hygiene products and dinner for the evening!



This is only the beginning. As the group continues to grow so will the impact. "We believe that collaboration is dynamic", says Co-Chair Rachel Burns.

LEARN MORE ►►► Eckerd.org/volunteer

MEET THE CHAIRS

Eric Beck

I was originally introduced to Eckerd Connects through my job at Bouchard Insurance, 10 years ago. Bouchard has long had a strong partnership with Eckerd Connects so I have had the opportunity to really get to know the organization and the important work they do to help children and families in need. Implementing the Eckerd Connects Leadership Society has been a long-standing goal of mine. I want to provide an opportunity for like-minded individuals to get a deeper understanding of the issues faced by our communities and have an outlet to make an impact.



Rachel Burns

As a small business owner, I wanted to find a sole beneficiary to make the most of the funds that my company can donate. I chose Eckerd Connects because of the wide variety of programs and services that they offer and the organizations focus on helping the whole family. I had a great childhood and I feel like everyone should get the same opportunities I had. I want to do something bigger than myself and inspire people to live their best lives.



Swing into Fall **N** 15TH Nov.



LEARN MORE ►►► Eckerd.org/HarvestingHope

UPCOMING EVENTS

- **September 13 & 14**
Family's First Child Welfare Symposium
Learn more at: RiseUpFL.com
- **October 25th**
E-Nini-Hassee Spaghetti Dinner
- **November**
Adoption Awareness Month
- **November 15**
11th Annual Harvesting Hope

To learn more about these events and other Eckerd Connects events, please visit:

Eckerd.org/events

Annual Golf Tournament Raises Money for Foster Children

More than 200 golfers visited Innisbrook Golf Resort in Palm Harbor, Florida to raise money for a worthy cause. The green was filled with men and women committed to providing critical resources to young people entering the system of care. Together, we raised \$32,000 for foster children in the Bay area.

These funds will be used to help foster children:

- Attend camps
- Pay for extracurricular activities
- Cover music lessons
- Secure tutoring services
- Receive hygiene products

The money raised from the golf tournament allows foster children to have the same opportunities as other kids. Your donations make it possible for children in the foster system to have true security, meaningful relationships, and a chance at healthy social activities. Thank you for your sponsorship and support.



About Eckerd Connects

Eckerd Connects was founded in 1968 by Jack and Ruth Eckerd with the belief that everyone deserves the opportunity to succeed. The national nonprofit organization has connected more than 230,000 children and families to the help they need through programs in family and child services, workforce development, and juvenile justice services.

LEARN MORE ►►► Eckerd.org



Jack & Ruth Eckerd

Jacksonville Youth Connected To Employment Opportunities

Wayne Rivera joined the Eckerd Connects' Workforce Development Jacksonville program because he wanted to provide for his family.

"They taught me how to be professional, dress up, talk to people, and basically, how to live the right way. I'm trying to change my life, getting it together by going to school and working."

He earned a paid internship that turned into a full-time job with a pest control company, and encourages others to join Eckerd Connects' Workforce Development.



Wayne sharing his journey with Action News at program interview.

Despite improving employment rates in Duval County, many young people still find themselves starting the summer without a job. That is why Eckerd Connects' Workforce Development Jacksonville holds open houses to help people during their job search.

To date, the program has helped over 250 young adults find a better future. Of that total, nearly 170 have found employment or have enrolled in college or the military. Eckerd Connects' Workforce Jacksonville continues to help more than 80 young adults find a better future. And they are hoping to help another 135 young adults over the next 12 months.

Shellonda Rucker, the Operations Director of the workforce program, is passionate about the way the program sets people up to operate independently and to realize their potential for self-sufficiency.

"They need connection and opportunity to re-engage in their education and to enter into the workforce with their first jobs, ultimately opportunities to lead them to financial growth."

Donations, grants and other funding allow Eckerd Connects to provide more than just job placement and college enrollment assistance. It also offers interviewing skills, paid internships, certification scholarships, and GED assistance.

LEARN MORE ►►► Eckerd.org/jobsjax

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