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# Ventnor teen sets a shining example

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Rona Zucker Kaplan (left) says, "There is a uniqueness" about Sparkle Prevard (right). Kaplan, an Atlantic City lawyer, has been a mentor to Prevard for two years and adds: "She is delightful." (ED HILLE / Staff Photographer)



**GALLERY: Sparkle Prevard (right) with her new roommate, Jasmine... (ED HILLE / Staff...)**

**By Melanie Burney, Inquirer Staff Writer**

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Sparkle Prevard is on a mission to live up to her name.

That's the refrain among those who have come to know the 18-year-old with the upbeat attitude.

In two weeks, Prevard will compete against four others for the national Boys and Girls Clubs' Youth of the Year title in Washington, where she also will meet President Obama.

The winner gets a \$20,000 scholarship and will serve as a spokesperson for the Boys and Girls Clubs of America, which provide afterschool educational, recreational, and social programs for more than four million youngsters

It has been an incredible journey for a young woman who once doubted her self-worth.

Now living in Ventnor, N.J., she grew up in a neighborhood in Atlantic City plagued by crime, drugs, and hopelessness. She became homeless at age 12 when her mother died of chronic illnesses, leaving behind six children. Her father was not involved in her life. The siblings were separated, and eventually reunited when they went to live with an older brother, Travis.

"It was a really difficult time. To lose her was really tough on all of us," Prevard recalled last week. "But we stuck together, and we got through it."

Participants in the contest will be judged on citizenship, morals, character, academics, and community and club involvement.

With coaching from a circle of mentors, Prevard has been polishing her competition speech for the judges. It is the same simple but eloquent message she has delivered in the previous rounds of the competition.

"I once knew what it felt like to be disposable - to feel like a nobody," Prevard says in the speech. "But I now know that I am somebody!"

Prevard says the nurturing she received from mentors at the Boys and Girls Club of Atlantic City helped her put her life back

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together. She joined when she was about 9, but became immersed in the club four years ago, when she was a sophomore at Atlantic City High School.

She not only improved academically, but became a standout as part of the club's Champions of Youth program. The program, started eight years ago, prepares at-risk youth for college. It has a 100 percent high school graduation rate, and half the graduates have earned college degrees.

"I'm very proud of her. She gives me hope for the future," said Michael Everett, director of Champions of Youth in Atlantic City. "Sparkle very easily could have fallen through the cracks, like so many kids do."

Prevard competed against three youngsters to become the club's Youth of the Year. Next, she was chosen from a field of 20 for the state title. In August, she advanced to next week's final round by capturing the top spot to represent the Northeast.

"There is a uniqueness about her," said Rona Zucker Kaplan, an Atlantic City lawyer who has mentored Prevard for two years. "She is delightful."

Kaplan and others call it the Sparkle factor. Prevard was given her name by her older sister Kelley, who simply liked it. Prevard has grown to love it, too.

"She lives up to the name," said Erin O'Hanlon, a community organizer and another mentor. "She has this ability and energy to connect with people."

Prevard became the fourth Atlantic City club member in seven years selected as the New Jersey Youth of the Year. She is believed to be the first New Jersey winner in 40 years to win the regional title, according to Everett. She has won \$30,000 in scholarships.

She has become a role model for her peers. She juggles a hectic schedule, and finds time to help feed needy families and organize a youth empowerment group with a fellow club member.

"I want them to see themselves in me, and know that [success] is possible and that one day you may be able to meet the president," Prevard said.

She will get another chance to share her story in the weeklong final round of the youth of the year contest, which begins Sept. 11.

She credits her mother, Leslie, who died at age 44, for her positive attitude. She said her mother remained upbeat while working long hours at a housing complex and struggling to raise her family.

"There are many things that could have gone wrong," Prevard said. "So many of my friends have dropped out, gotten pregnant, or had brushes with the law, gotten killed."

Prevard graduated from Atlantic City High School in June and enjoyed a busy summer. She went on a whirlwind tour of historic sites in the South and last weekend moved into a freshman dormitory at Richard Stockton College in nearby Pomona.

She will begin classes this week. She is considering majoring in law or social work. She plans to become a community organizer in Atlantic City and give back to her hometown.

Her success has been a morale boost for the Atlantic City Boys and Girls Club, which has run into financial difficulties. Stockton agreed to fund the Champions of Youth program this year to keep it afloat.

"I hate to say it, but she sparkles. She owns the name," Kaplan said.

mburney@phillynews.com  
856-779-3814 @mlburney

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