

2019

Student Diamond Award Winners  
AAAЕ/ADE Leadership Day at  
the Capitol



**Tyra Dollarhyde**  
**Mena School District**

Arkansas Alternative Educators renew the hope of students for a brighter future.

Arkansas Alternative Education



**ArkansasEd.gov**



### **A Letter From ADE Alternative Education Unit**

Arkansas Alternative Education Leadership Day at the Capitol is about celebrating the successes of our students. Students are nominated for the Diamond Award by their teachers and administrators for displaying diligence, perseverance, sensitivity and resiliency. The selection committee is made up of board members from the Arkansas Association of Alternative Educators and members of the Arkansas Department of Education Alternative Education Unit. Each year, the selection committee agonizes over choosing the winners from all of the nominations, and this year was no exception. The biographies on the following pages, which were submitted by the individuals nominating the students, tell the story of the students' struggles and triumphs, and explain why decisions were so difficult to make. In Arkansas we are proud of each and every one of our Alternative Education students.

We remain committed to developing and supporting students that are actively engaged in college, career preparation, military service and/or competitive employment one year after graduation. Student-focused education is the heartbeat of Alternative Education. Join us in celebrating the success of these true champions.

Arkansas Department of Education

*Lori L. Lamb*

*Dr. C. W. Gardenhire*

*Deborah Bales*

*Gail Brown*

Alternative Education Unit



## **A Letter from the AAAE President**

There is truly not a more rewarding feeling than seeing a student succeed. This day has been set aside to honor a group of students that have persevered against unsurmountable odds. I'm sure there were times when giving up seemed the best option, but through an educator's caring and understanding and a student's determination, they succeeded.

My hopes and prayers for each of them will be to apply these skills of tenaciousness to tomorrow's endeavors so any path they may choose will lead them to a bright and shiny future.

So join with me and celebrate these fifteen young lives that have worked so hard to reach their goals. May February 13, 2019, be one of many special days to come that celebrate their outstanding life achievements?

*Patti Bono*

AAAE President



## **Alton Willingham**

### **Cedarville School District**



Alton Willingham entered the alternative learning program at Cedarville High School as an 18 year old with very few high school credits. At the time of his placement, he was awaiting court proceedings, was homeless and had no family support. Because of his determination to succeed, Alton's attendance was consistent and he had few discipline issues. He maintained a positive attitude, participated in a social emotional learning program and received an academic award for most improved student. Beginning his senior year, Alton was determined to meet his graduation requirements. He passed his courses while working part-time, volunteering as a firefighter, maintaining good attendance, helping at home and demonstrating a great attitude. As the first semester was ending, the unthinkable happened. The husband of the family who provides Alton a home was suddenly killed in a tragic vehicle accident. Needless to say, this has had a tremendous impact on him, but he knows the expectations this man had for him, which was to receive his high school diploma. Alton plans on graduating and finding a job in construction, or something similar, to help support the family who has supported him. Alton Willingham was spiraling downward in life, but has overcome many major obstacles while in the alternative learning program at Cedarville. He is currently a 19-year old senior at Cedarville High School and will proudly graduate in May.

## **Jasmine Copp**

### **Rogers School District**



Jasmine is a young lady that has had several life challenges that have impacted her over the course of her life. Jasmine's mom has struggled with addiction and has been in and out of jail, meaning she has not been able to act as her guardian for quite some time. Jasmine and her younger brother have lived with her grandmother who was their guardian until last February, when her grandmother passed away. Jasmine now lives primarily with her aunt, with her mother moving in and out at various times. Jasmine has had only intermittent support from her mother and, as a result, has had to be the parent for not only her brother and herself, but for her mother as well. Due to her family struggles, Jasmine has become very independent and self-motivated. At this point in Jasmine's life, her future is very bright, but is still riddled with uncertainties. Jasmine has attended Crossroads for 3 years now. She came as a disgruntled freshman with only 3 credits and has blossomed into a beautiful young lady who realizes the power of her choices. She is poised for and choosing success! Jasmine herself inspires me. She comes to school daily and rarely is without a smile. To talk to her, you would never know that she has faced and is still facing so many challenges. She is genuine and works diligently to cultivate a culture of inclusion of all people at our school. She is a natural leader and has honed and developed those skills during her time here at Crossroads. She challenges all others in the building to not only lead, but to lead in the right direction. Jasmine's future plans are to become a certified preschool/early childhood education teacher. For her passion project, she researched what would be needed to begin an early childhood program for children of Crossroads students. She is having to put off college for a year to get her living arrangements and guardianship issues handled. Once she gets started, she will be an amazing preschool teacher.

## **Austin Faunce** **Fordyce School District**



I met Austin Faunce, a young man that was headed down the wrong path of life that was leading into destruction, death and incarceration. Austin was shy and not talkative. Who would have thought he was a young man headed to such destruction by his own account and he almost lost his life. Now let me tell you about the joys Austin has brought to the Fordyce High School "Leap to Reap" program. Austin has turned his life completely around. He holds group meetings during lunch to talk about social problems and challenges that each of them face. He helps students with ideals and solution that make for better homes, schools, and communities. Austin's grades were failing when he came to Alternative Ed and he didn't think about his future and then one day he came and sat down with me and said he had to do things differently because he wanted to graduate from high school and make his mother proud of him once again. I saw that passion in his eyes, and he finally felt comfortable talking and sharing his struggles with me. He said that I was the only one that made him feel special and shared with him that life was more than crime. Austin wanted to become more, and now he has risen from the ashes like the phoenix and is an ambassador for alternative education. Austin is proud that he "Leap to Reap" for the highest goals. Austin will be the first in the program to graduate with Honors. He will further his education by attending the University of Arkansas at Monticello where he wants to major in Psychology.

## **Cole Jones** **Lakeside School District**



Cole began school in first grade. At that point, he had not participated in any formal education. Because he was the correct age for first grade, he was placed in a first grade ALE class. Cole struggled, especially with reading and writing, even in the ALE setting. He moved to my ALE class when he was in second grade. Cole continued to struggle. I began to teach him reading and writing in a one on one setting. He continued in my classroom for third and fourth grade. During his fourth grade year, after meeting with Cole's parents and Cole several times, we made the decision to retain him so that he could repeat fourth grade. He is an incredibly hard worker, but he was still not on grade level in reading and writing. Our goal was to help Cole get on grade level and then transition to a traditional classroom. This year, Cole re-entered fourth grade. He continued with his fantastic work ethic. He is now on grade level in all subject areas and is attending classes in a traditional setting. Cole loves science and wants to be an engineer when he "grows up." Cole is the hardest working student I have ever taught. He has overcome many challenges with a good attitude and a sweet spirit. Cole has many friends and his classmates in the ALE classroom always looked up to him as an example. Cole has always put his whole heart and whole effort into meeting all the challenges placed in front of him.

## **Jalen Hunter**

### **Arkadelphia School District**



It is with great admiration that I recommend Jalen Hunter for this year's Diamond Award. Jalen has been in the (AACE) Arkadelphia Alternative Classroom Environment Program for 3 years. Jalen came to Alternative Education with failing grades, low self-esteem and no desire to thrive in life. He was nonverbal and refused to speak to anyone for any reason. He also had symptoms of withdrawal. He would work on written assignments but would not attempt to socialize or communicate with his teacher or school personnel. He would not speak to peers or answer any questions from anyone. He failed to communicate orally with anyone. This was a 13 year old that was nonverbal and would only shrug his shoulder in an "I don't know" manner. When he entered the AACE program he was placed in Counseling. After speaking with his father I discovered that he was verbal up until a few years ago and something happened to cause him to be nonverbal. He moved from Arizona to Arkansas but had become nonverbal before that time. He had a personal experience that affected him and left him speechless. He entered the AACE program with little expectation of being successful. After being in the program for about 6 months, he soon realized the opportunities available and the support he had of the staff, and he began to excel. By the time he was in his second year he was ahead of the class. He was developing friendships, working on class projects, participating in class discussions, sharing oral reports, helping others and the list goes on and on. His grades have skyrocketed. He now has A's and B's but started out with D's and F's. When asked what brought on such a change, he stated that the AACE staff became his family, and he had found people that genuinely care about him and want the best for him. He said that he doesn't mind trying when he knows people believe in him.

## **Katlyn Parrish**

### **Piggott School District**



Katlyn Parrish is a 17 year old native of Piggott, Arkansas. She is a junior at Piggott High School who is enrolled in Inspiration Academy. Katlyn babysits a two year old after school and during the summer months. Her future plans are to attend college and major in nursing. She enjoys spending time with her boyfriend. Their favorite thing to do is to go out to eat Mexican. My name is Melissa Hopkins. I am nominating Katlyn for the Diamond Award because she has been an inspiration to me. She comes from a low socioeconomic background and has faced some adversity in her short lifetime. She was resilient when it came to getting her life back in order after a setback last year. She would come to school and be so down and distant from everyone. I was worried about her health and welfare. Her grades were slipping and she struggled to stay awake in her classes. I was afraid she was going to drop out of school and just be a child who fell through the cracks. This school year, Katlyn has blossomed into a model student. She is extremely self-conscious of her academic progress and strives to do her best. This hard work has earned her a spot on the Honor Roll for her first semester for all A's and B's. She was on a team to help organize a luncheon for community leaders that was hosted by Inspiration Academy. Because Katlyn has experienced so much during her own lifetime and has worked so hard to improve her situation, I feel that she is an excellent example of a student who deserves the Diamond Award.

## **Cadence Ledford**

### **Norfolk School District**



Webster's Dictionary defines overcome as to get the better of, or to gain superiority. When applied as a noun, overcomer means to succeed in dealing with, or gaining control of some problem or difficulty. It is not a shocking fact that when a student enters an alternative education classroom that they have something to overcome. Choosing to be an overcomer is an exceptionally hard task, because it isn't easy. In fact, it is the hardest decision you can make, to not let your circumstances be in control of you and the decisions you make. Cadence Ledford is an overcomer. When I first met Cadence in 2017 I didn't know much about her, other than that she might need some help in some academic areas and that she had some tough personal circumstances she was dealing with. I was shocked upon my first few meetings with Cadence because she showed such determination and perseverance that I had not seen in a student in a long time. She would not give up. Through frustration, that often resulted in tears, she kept going. Cadence battled as hard as she could to remain at a level of academic excellence that put her in the proficiency level on all areas of her state mandated testing. Cadence has been dealt a very difficult hand in life. One of poverty and hardships that would cripple the hearts of any person who took in her story. Despite being given every opportunity to succumb to these circumstances, Cadence has made a conscious choice to face every battle she encounters head on. That does not mean that it is easy for her. It is quite the opposite. Cadence works hard on a daily basis to not only overcome every circumstance thrown at her, but she also supports her peers selflessly. Cadence is the first to offer help, she is the first to offer a "job well done," and she is the first to lend a sympathetic ear. Cadence has improved my life by entering it, and I hope that I can do the same for her.

## **Shane Wilkins**

### **Booneville School District**



Let me introduce you to Shane Wilkins! He is a smart young man, but has had some struggles. Shane was a student that never came to school, was in trouble at school, home and with the law. Shane found himself in front of a judge that ordered him to a program to help him make better choices, but he came back no better! In the fall of his 10th-grade year, he was given an opportunity to enter the ALE. We had a heart to heart talk with Shane and let him know we were here to help him, and that we cared about him and his future. Shane got going on assignments and has not stopped growing from that point! He made up credits he had lost, worked hard to get back on track and learned he was smart and could do this! Shane seldom misses school, is making very good grades, and has not had any office referrals at all. He is the most polite and hardworking student and he encourages others in our program to work hard. We are currently helping Shane get a driver's license and apply to colleges or the Navy. Shane has made such changes in life at school and at home that he is proud of his accomplishments. I believe if Shane was not in the ALE he would not be in school; he would be in jail, and he would never have seen that he is very smart and capable of doing WHATEVER he wants to in the future.

## **Cheyenne Henderson Russellville School District**



Cheyenne Henderson has overcome many obstacles to graduate with her class in 2019. She missed most of her sophomore year due to a family situation. She began at Secondary Learning Center (SLC) in what should have been her junior year and has made great progress since that time. Prior to starting at SLC, she earned a 2.64 GPA in 9<sup>th</sup> grade and received no credit in 10<sup>th</sup> grade. While at SLC, she has completed 14 credits earning 27 "A's" and 1 "B". She has near perfect attendance; only missing school for doctor appointments. She is currently expecting her first child, and the local obstetricians will not schedule appointments after 3:00 PM. Cheyenne has been awarded student of the week, month, and year honors. She is a leader among her peers, and an excellent role model in and out of the classroom. She has a very strong work ethic. She holds down a job, working 25 to 30 hours a week, while attending school and preparing for a baby. Cheyenne and her fiancé are also preparing to move into their first apartment with their baby, which is due in February. She has applied the knowledge she gained in Financial Literacy to save money, apply for an apartment, and create a budget for living expenses. As a member of the class, she openly shared with her classmates how she was applying the skills they were being taught in the real world, and encouraged them to do the same. She does this in all of her classes and can always be depended on to give an encouraging word, offer support, and assist others any time there is a need. She leads her classmates to the answers instead of just giving them the answer. She plans to attend college and would like to pursue a career in writing. Her English teacher, a published author, has worked closely with her and is encouraging her to pursue this path. She has big dreams and we believe she will do astonishing things in this world!

## **Gabriel Cockerham Springdale School District**



I would like to nominate Gabe Cockerham for the Diamond Award. Gabe exemplifies the type of student that should be honored by such an award. I have nominated him because he is incredibly helpful and dedicated to Archer. He continually volunteers his time, participates in club activities and exhibits leadership qualities. He is not as charismatic as many of his peers; however, he is thoughtful and diligent in his actions. I have seen him seek out advice on how to handle a student that is disruptive in class in a way that helps him understand the student better. I have witnessed him help teachers, encourage students and make thoughtful suggestions for making his school a better place. Gabe truly deserves recognition for being an exemplary student. Gabe lives in a single parent home with a younger brother and his mother. Though his mother works, the money is not managed in a way that places the children's best interest first and Gabe has often faced eviction notices. In addition, Gabe has overcome a number of peer pressures as he has distanced himself from bad influences and conscientiously makes decisions that challenge his ideals so that he may grow as an individual. Many ALE students struggle with attendance and Archer's are no different. This being said, Gabe has had perfect attendance so far this year, and his goal is to maintain this for the entire year. He would also like to be the first person in his family to graduate high school. As I have gotten to know Gabe he has expressed interest in becoming a teacher. He truly emulates a student deserving of the Diamond Award.

## **Gavin Barraza** **Farmington School District**



Gavin Barraza was 15 years old and a freshman when he became a father on November 6, 2017. After the birth of his son, Gavin chose to attend the Farmington Cardinal Academy so that he could concentrate on his education (he even gave up football) and graduate. After graduation, Gavin plans on attending a technical school to learn welding. Gavin has stated many times that he wants to be the best “dad” that he can be, unlike his own dad. That is a very mature and powerful statement from someone so young. He is very focused on attaining his goal and has accomplished a great deal since starting the ALE program in January, 2018. Gavin completed all of his freshman classes and has progressed to the point that he is taking some senior classes. He has kept up his grades and attendance despite all of the stress in his life and a home situation that is not ideal.

His mother, Summer, is raising Gavin and his two brothers as a single parent and his dad is not in the picture. Gavin’s older brother, Cesar, also attends the Farmington Cardinal Academy. Gavin’s motivator and driving force is his son, Gavin Barraza, Jr. He takes being a parent extremely serious, and this is evident in the number of hours he spent attending parenting classes. For Gavin to be able to see Gavin, Jr. he was required to complete 16 hours of classes with Family Network, he did about 850 hours. Gavin is a mature, conscientious, and responsible young man that is working hard to doing his best as a parent and student.

## **Tyra Dollarhyde** **Mena School District**



Tyra Dollarhyde, 17, is a Mena High School student. She was identified as GT in elementary through middle school and was in the Mena Marching Band for 5 years. Tyra is very bright but has had numerous obstacles to overcome. Because of very difficult family circumstances, Tyra and her older sister often had to live with several different extended family members separately and at one point attempted to live on their own. As a sophomore, Tyra came to a very dark point. She struggled to find the motivation to come to school due to severe depression caused by her difficult home life and so she began to fail her courses. Her sister had graduated through the CATS Program at Mena High School so she recommended Tyra to join as well. Tyra

actually took a turn for the worse before things got better. On February 21st of 2018 Tyra had taken all she could take and lost all hope. She was hospitalized for several days due to a suicide attempt, but that point changed everything for her. Tyra’s aunt and uncle offered her a safe place to stay so that she could graduate and the program worked with Tyra to make a plan for early graduation. She joined the welding program in August of 2018 and has exceeded all expectations. She has shown enormous talent in welding and has worked hard in all of her classes (8 of them) maintaining A’s and B’s. Tyra is on track to graduate a year early in May and is planning to attend the University of Arkansas at Rich Mountain where she will finish her welding certification. Tyra is a picture of overcoming challenges and making decisions that shape her future.

**Sunnie Jackson**  
**Bradford School District**



My name is Sunnie Jackson. Growing up I had a normal childhood with lots of friends and fun. However, when I was a Jr. I became very sick and had to drop out of school. After a year of being out of school I decided I really wanted my diploma. I moved in with my grandma, who lived in Bradford, after Christmas break I went and enrolled in the Bradford School District. They told me about Eagle Pathways, the ALE program there. I decide to go into the ALE program because I could make up credits more quickly in that program. I was shy, scared, and had my doubts when I enrolled. At times it was extremely tough, but I've made it. I will graduate in May. I haven't decided exactly what I want to do in the future, but I know two things; I will have my diploma and "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. Philippians 4:13".

**Halie Scantling**  
**Booneville School District**



Halie is a young lady that is raising herself! Her mother is a ward of another state, so Halie is homeless! Halie's mother and step-father were abusive to her. Her mother told authorities she had no outside family. She lived with a neighbor waiting for foster care. That is when Halie stepped up and told the truth about a cousin in Arkansas. Her siblings were taken by their grandparents. She was taken in by the cousin and became a student in our program last year as a 10th grader. Halie came to us failing many classes because of depression and being forced to stay at home. We began working to get Hailey enrolled in classes to help her get caught back up to grade level. Before we knew it Halie was a working machine! She completed classes with excellent grades and excelled in Art Class. She expressed to us her desire to go to college so she could someday take care of her three younger siblings. We got Halie in the CNA program and she is about to complete that training. She has recently taken the ACT test and scored a 25! Halie is very smart and is wanting to take concurrent credit classes next year to get a jump start on college. She is very humbled to be living with her cousin, but she also feels she is being a burden to that family. We have involved the cousin in Halie's successes and desires and she is fully supportive of Halie. Halie would like to get a CNA job her senior year to help support herself and work hard to earn college credit to have a good start in college. Halie shared with us her fear that her mother would get out, come get her and make her go back with her. Halie said she would never get this opportunity with her mother in the picture, and she is so thankful for our program and her cousin. I believe Halie would not have found her potential without our ALE program and of course her cousin. I just believe Halie is a prime example of the help, care, and concern the alternative program is for children. Halie is so deserving of this award and she is very humbled!

## Thomas Beck

### Scranton School District



Over the last three years, Thomas (TJ) Beck has become a leader and a role model for younger students in the program. When TJ first entered the Opportunity School, his communication skills were almost non-existent. TJ refused to talk to teachers or other students, which made it very difficult for him to be successful in a traditional classroom environment. As teachers we know that many times quiet students often fly under the radar, and no one notices their struggles. If they do not get things turned in, or do not participate in educational experience, it is almost as if no one ever notices. This was the case with TJ. He was absolutely NOT a behavioral problem in traditional classroom, In fact, he preferred to blend into the walls and disappear. Unfortunately, it was a strategy that had worked for him since he was an elementary student. By the time TJ was a freshman, his grades were D's and F's and he was in jeopardy of missing out, not only on his education, but on becoming a socially and emotionally competent young man. He was referred to the SOS program by the principal, and I have had the joy of getting to know TJ and watch his confidence grow over the last few years. One of the most important activities I have had the pleasure of doing with my group, turned out to be the turning point for TJ. With TJ especially in mind, I took my students to the Ropes Course at Ferndale to work on team building and communication skills. It was a moving experience for every student in my program, but for TJ I believe it was a keystone moment in his high school life. TJ is not what anyone would call a risk-taker, and saying that maneuvering through the high ropes was a terrifying experience for him would be putting it mildly. The communication process when in the ropes course is a critical skill for the students because their safety depends upon it. TJ was responsible for the safety of others, and this made all the difference. I saw a young man who could rise to the occasion. He understood the responsibility he had to others, and he learned he could trust those in his school family. From this point on, TJ seemed to be more confident and to take on more of a leadership role in the program. He is a senior now and he has claimed his seat at the table! He is only in the SOS room for three periods each day, but he has all A's and B's. He has several friends that he socializes with on a regular basis, AND he has a girlfriend who was one of our homecoming royalty. He interacts with the other students in the program, and they look up to him as a role model. He is quiet by nature, and that will always be part of who he is, but he is enjoying his high school life and I could not be prouder of a student!