

North Minneapolis' Shawnnise Watkins Wins Ann Bancroft Award

Written by

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18 -year-old girl leader influences peers with support from YWCA of Minneapolis

In 2007, the just turned 14, Shawnnise Watkins came to the YWCA of Minneapolis, to complete the *Girls Resolution and Prevention (RAP)*—an all-girl youth intervention program for first-time offenders—in order to have a disorderly conduct offense removed from her record. Watkins had recently been in a fight that was serious enough for the police to get involved.

“At that time, Shawnnise was a strong, vibrant girl who stood up for herself and her friends and tried to solve all of her problems with a smart mouth and quick fists,” recalled Kyanna Wright a counselor at the YWCA of Minneapolis. “She didn’t like school and she wasn’t doing well at all. She felt all she ever heard was, ‘you’ll never be anything; you’ll never do anything.’ She even recalls a teacher telling her she was never going to make it. Shawnnise loved to write, but mostly kept her talents to herself and used her smarts outside the classroom.”

The RAP program at the YWCA surrounded Watkins with adult role models. They convinced her that she had potential and positively encouraged her to believe in herself. As the first step in her journey, she made a personal commitment to change her approach to school. The process was seemingly simple... but the results were astounding! Changing her attitude resulted in improved grades that convinced Watkins that college was real and achievable. Her life has forever changed.

The *Ann Bancroft Awards*, to be held Thursday, April 28, 2011 at the Hyatt Hotel in downtown Minneapolis, will recognize four recipients for their accomplishments and support of girls and women. Shawnnise Watkins is one of them. The other three recipients are, Susan McCormick Hadley, Pam Borton and Women’s Advocates.

When Watkins talks about her vision for the future, she talks about completing college and

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going into law or social work. Her goal is to be able to help support girls like herself in working to end problems like racism, sexism, violence and poverty. She wants to work on problems that lead to situations where girls think they must fight to retain their self respect but instead just end up getting kicked out of school. She wants to work with schools that don't know how to help many girls of color learn, and she wants to work with girls who choose to get involved with drugs or violence, or who end up raising babies, they never planned for, instead of following their dreams. However, Watkins is not waiting to finish college before she starts creating the future she wants to see.

"I have a little sister and cousins and friends," said Watkins. "Things like bullying, abuse, sexual harassment, having babies too young, fighting, and dropping out of school—that has to stop! I mean, I've had my share of fights and parties, but that's not the answer. I hate watching people get hurt. If I don't do anything, it makes me as bad as the people doing it."

And Watkins is walking the talk. She held a Youth News Initiative Internship in 2008 at KFAI, developing a radio show on teen pregnancy and its impact on young women. She also is a *Girl's Resolution and Prevention* volunteer at the YWCA, inspiring young girls through her experiences. Watkins was recognized last year at Patrick Henry High School with a Star Student Award for remarkably improving her otherwise failing grades. Watkins also plans and coordinates field trips, activities and summer retreats for the YWCA. And she continues share her story with girls ages 11-17 who had been in the juvenile justice system.

"Because they all look up to her, what she does really works," says Erica Sallander, the RAP program coordinator at the YWCA. "It's like having a youth counselor out there on the streets—24/7—doing what all of us only wish we could do. I believe she has literally saved lives by saying something when she knew it had to be said."

The 14th annual awards are hosted by the Ann Bancroft Foundation (ABF), a non-profit organization whose mission is to support girls and women in realizing their highest dreams and potential. The Foundation endeavors to recognize individual achievement and promotes initiatives that inspire courage, risk-taking, integrity and individuality in girls and women.

Proceeds from the event will further the efforts of the ABF. Event sponsors include Best Buy Women's Leadership Forum, Imation, Women's Foundation of Minnesota, KARE 11 and Minnesota Women's Press. For ticket information contact www.annbancroftfoundation.org or call Tracy Adams at 763.479.4499. The reception begins at 5:30 p.m. followed by dinner and the awards program.