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YMCA OF GREATER LOUISVILLE RECOGNIZES 2018 YOUTH CHARACTER AWARD HONOREES

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (November 2, 2018) – The YMCA of Greater Louisville announced the 2018 Youth Character Award honorees on Thursday, November 1, presenting awards to 15 outstanding youth from the Louisville area.

Recipients of The Youth Character Awards were selected for exemplifying exceptional leadership and commitment to strengthening our community, embodying the Y's core values of caring, honesty, respect and responsibility. The honorees were also recognized for their contributions to academics and athletics, as well as their roles in volunteer- and leadership-related activities.

The Youth Character Awards, which celebrates exemplary teens ages 13 through 17, come with a \$1,500 scholarship. Brief profiles of each of the honorees can be found below:

Grace Bagga – Age 17, Kentucky Country Day (KCD)

Nominated by: Candace Medina

Grace Bagga is team captain of The Louisville Youth Philanthropy Council, president of the KCD Honor Council, where she manages cases and presides over hearings, and has received The Caementum Award at Kentucky Country Day (KCD) for three consecutive years. This summer, Grace was invited to participate in The Governor's Scholars Program, where she was honored by a guest speaker for raising more than \$5,000 by shaving her head for pediatric cancer. Grace has also served as co-chair of Louisville Girls Leadership for three years, successfully organizing the girls-only Galentine's Dance at KCD. Next year, the dance will be offered city-wide, enabling more girls across Louisville to experience camaraderie and inclusiveness within our community.

Jolene Ballard – Age 17, duPont Manual High School

Nominated by: Jill Ballard

Jolene Ballard is an exceptional senior who has worked at the YMCA Swim Access program for two years, teaching and mentoring young children who would not otherwise have the opportunity to learn

to swim. At duPont Manual, Jolene maintains a high G.P.A. while taking college prep classes and balancing her commitment to athletics as the captain of her varsity soccer team. This summer, Jolene was chosen to participate in The Women's Leadership Academy hosted at Spalding University. Over the last four years, Jolene has participated in The Black Achievers program at the YMCA, using it as an opportunity to become more engaged in the community. Jolene has overcome a genetic eye disease and spends most of her free time babysitting her young cousin and encouraging others to participate in YMCA programs.

Lorena Bonet Velazquez – Age 17, Fairdale High School

Nominated by: Fairdale High School

Lorena Bonet Velazquez has touched lives through her volunteerism, activism and leadership. She came to the U.S. from Cuba in the third grade not speaking English and has since organized and managed The English Action Group, which works with teachers, students and parents to offer one-on-one tutoring to ESL students. For two years, Lorena has been involved in The Adelante Hispanic Achievers: once a participant, she now works as a mentor, empowering Hispanic youth and their families. As a Mindfulness Ambassador, Lorena works to raise awareness of mental health issues through advocacy and service at school, teaching strategies for managing stress. In 2016, Lorena became involved with Educational Justice Activists, mentoring and inspiring others. Lorena is a bilingual student focused on academic excellence and community engagement, constantly uplifting others as they build on their own education and self-improvement.

Christiana Brown – Age 15, Central High School

Nominated by: Brittany Bryant

Christiana Brown has been a participant and youth leader in the YMCA's Y-NOW program. She attended the 2018-19 retreat as support staff, helping new Y-NOW youth participants and providing support, encouragement and understanding to her peers in a way adult volunteers and staff could not replicate. She is a focused freshman at Central High School and a Whitney M. Young Scholar, a recognition reserved for students with exemplary academic achievement. Over the summer, Christiana attended a two-day Champs Camp, a relationship education program focused on positive life outcomes for Kentucky youth. Christiana plans to attend college to pursue a degree in nursing, desiring to work with children with disabilities.

Taurino Castaneda – Age 16, Louisville Male High School

Nominated by: Vicky Schweickhardt

Taurino Castaneda is a member of Educators Rising at Male High School, where he and a teammate researched learning disabilities in the classroom and presented their findings to JCPS, informing recommendations for improving classroom success for these students. The project was awarded first place locally and second in the state. Taurino also tutors and mentors other immigrant students at the Y's Newcomer Academy and has served on The Muhammad Ali Center Council of Students since 2017. In this capacity, he has facilitated positive social change for the Hispanic community by engaging in dialogue with leaders seeking equitable solutions and through collaboration with activists developing community justice projects. Since 2014, Taurino has volunteered at Adelante Hispanic Achievers, assisting with presentations and workshops on issues important to the Hispanic/Latino community. Taurino plans to study environmental engineering, with the intention of helping underserved communities in the U.S., Mexico or third world countries.

Mercy Evanson – Age 17, Central High School

Nominated by: Jana Costner

Mercy Evanson is a scholar, athlete and musician who contributes to her community daily. She played string instruments in orchestra for seven years and was honored with Distinguished status in Solo Ensemble for The Kentucky Music Educators Association (KMEA) Ensemble. She also plays traditional hand drums. This summer, Mercy participated in The Kentucky Governor's Scholars program at Murray State University. She is a finance major through the Central High School magnet program, taking advanced placement courses, as well as a member of the Beta Club and National Honor Society. She participates in community outreach activities, including Healthy Hoops, which educates youth about sports-induced asthma. She also assists the elderly in her neighborhood by helping maintain their lawns. Originally from South Sudan, Mercy puts academics, family and church at the top of her priority list. She serves as a youth leader and Church Elder Co-Chair through the Outreach and Congregational Care Community Committee.

Jordyn Gibson – Age 17, duPont Manual High School

Nominated by: Dennis Robinson

Jordyn Gibson is an exceptional senior at duPont Manual High School and the Youth Performing Arts School (YPAS). Her first leadership role occurred during the YMCA's Child Enrichment Program, where she led group activities. For six years, Jordyn was a participant and counselor for Bridging The Gap Learning Academy, serving as a junior leader for campers. Jordyn also served as Digital Media Intern at The Kentucky Science Center through the Summer Works Program. Jordyn has a passion for dance she shares with organizations such as The Gilda's Club, Home of the Innocents and various churches and JCPS schools. She is also Vice President of the YPAS Chapter of the National Honor Society for Dance Arts and a member of the University of Louisville Academy of Dance. Jordyn has represented YPAS at the regional and national High School Dance Festival and performed with the Louisville Ballet, Moscow Ballet Nutcracker program, Nashville Ballet, Butler University Summer Dance Intensive and Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre Summer Intensive.

Briana Johnson – Age 15, duPont Manual High School

Nominated by: Cindy Johnson

Briana is a sophomore vocal music major at duPont Manual High School and the Youth Performing Arts School (YPAS), studying to be a classical and opera singer. Briana is active in her church as a Praise & Worship and A.L.I.V.E. enrichment program leader. She is also a student in the Black Achievers program and member of the National Beta Club, where she serves as a mentor and tutor at Cochran Elementary. She is in her second year as an Educational Justice Activist, tutoring scholarship-sponsored students and her first year as a member of The Muhammad Ali Center Council of Students.

Alyssia Leach – Age 17, duPont Manual High School

Nominated by: Dennis Robinson

Alyssia Leach is a successful entrepreneur with a thriving business selling makeup products—an experience which led her to launch an empowerment and education group called TeenBOSS. TeenBOSS began as an idea to connect high school-aged entrepreneurs with a network of likeminded professionals and has grown to include more than 100 members led by Alyssia, who hosts training sessions and webinars and plans to sell eBooks to teach future TeenBOSSes. Alyssia has been named a Star Student at JCPS, a YMCA Groundbreaking Emcee and recipient of the Volunteer Award of Vacation Bible School. She also serves as a Manual Student Ambassador and holds memberships in the National Society of High School Scholars, Black Achievers, Louisville Urban League, Students First, Black Student Union, Peer Leaders, YMCA Black Achievers Teen Senate, Leaders of Tomorrow and Family, Career and Community Leaders of America (FCCLA) organizations. In addition to her school work and business, Alyssia is currently the CEO of The Black Rose Effect, LLC.

Jackson McArthur – Age 17, Trinity High School

Nominated by: Tony Lewis

Jackson McArthur's greatest accomplishment has been his Eagle Scout Project, which collected more than \$10,000 in school supplies and backpacks for the refugee students of Catholic Charities. Jackson maintains a high G.P.A., takes advanced placement classes and is a member of the National Honor Society, Beta Club and the Social Studies Honor Society. Jackson is active in the Kentucky Youth Assembly (KYA), sponsored by the Y-Club at Trinity, KYA and Kentucky United Nations Assembly (KUNA). He volunteers his time with the Saint Joseph of Arimathea Society at Trinity, which provides funeral services to indigent people. Jackson is on the swim team and participates in Trinity's Student Ambassadors program, where he serves as a tour guide at Open House and other school functions.

Hailey Miller – Age 17, Butler Traditional High School

Nominated by: Jonathan Joseph

Hailey Miller has a passion for civic engagement and the electoral process and aspires to be a future Secretary of State. Hailey had two bills successfully signed into law by the Governor of her respective KYA conference and has been successful in mock legislations at KYA/KUNA Conferences, also serving as an organizer, leader and mentor for meetings and in acquainting new students with the Y-Club. She is an active member of the KYA delegation and organizes voter registration drives in her community, in addition to volunteering each week at a local elementary school in one of the poorest and most drug-prone areas of Louisville. She attends all Y-Conferences and leadership camps and was also nominated to attend Hugh O'Brian Youth Leadership Conference and the American Legion Kentucky Girls State, where her fellow delegates elected her Secretary of State.

Keith Phillips II – Age 16, Eastern High School

Nominated by: N'Namdi Paskins

Keith Phillips II (KJ) is an exemplary role model for today's youth, serving as the first ever two-term president of the Louisville Kappa League—a mentoring program of the Louisville Chapter of Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity. As president, KJ presides over business meetings, oversees finances through an elected treasurer and documents meeting minutes through a chapter secretary, while providing general oversight of the organization and being the final authority in decision-making. KJ leads the group in community service projects, including street cleaning on a dedicated street in downtown Louisville. KJ is involved in his church, where he serves as a youth leader, leading the annual Youth Day and assisting with the weekly Children's Church ministry.

Allison Rogers – Age 17, South Oldham High School

Nominated by: Laurie Rogers

Allison Rogers leads her church's Operation Christmas Child by organizing and disseminating information to church members and her school. This experience inspired her to organize a collection of items and coordinate a shoebox-packing night. Allison has brought church and school communities together to bless children in other countries with items for Christmas. Recently, Allison earned her Gold Medal of Achievement in Girls Ministries, becoming only the seventh girl in Kentucky to accomplish this honor. Since sixth grade, Allison has participated in KYA and KUNA, serving in a variety of roles, such as delegate, bill author, global village advisor and resolution sponsor. At school, Allison is a Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA) leader, class Historian Advisory Board member and the secretary of the Crocheting and Knitting Club, which recently finished making hats for premature babies at Norton Children's Hospital.

Tori Vestal – Age 17, duPont Manual High School

Nominated by: Michelle Leslie

Tori Vestal founded a bilingual literacy/summer camp for immigrant children from Honduras, Cuba and Mexico at La Casita—Louisville’s largest Latino/Hispanic Cultural Center. She created a documentary with the Guatemalan Consulate/Embassy in Spanish, called “The Golden Children,” to understand children’s transition into living in the U.S. and Latin America. Tori also trains the Louisville Metro Police Department on how to respond to emergency calls in Arabic and Spanish. She is a valedictorian at duPont Manual and serves as president of several organizations, including: UNICEF and The Human Rights Council, The Spanish Club/Sociedad Honoraria Hispanica and Rho Kappa (National Social Studies Honor Society). Tori is also a policy advisor to Mayor Greg Fischer’s Louisville Implementation Team. She teaches people how to use the power of helping others to create great change.

Morgan White – Age 17, Eastern High School

Nominated by: Stephanie Morgan-White

Morgan White is a natural leader, maintaining a high G.P.A., while serving as senior class president and president of her chapter of the National Honor Society. One of her most meaningful contributions comes from her devoted service to Best Buddies, which is the world’s largest organization dedicated to ending the social, physical and economic isolation of those with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Now the president of Best Buddies, Morgan leads the organization to uphold this mission. Her greatest impact in this capacity is the example she sets as a social mentor to her “Buddy,” Catelynn. In addition, Morgan’s dedication to service in the mission field has taken her on many trips around the country and to Hungary. She volunteers at the Wayside Mission and the Baptist Fellowship Center in Portland.

About the Louisville area YMCAs

The Y is the nation’s leading nonprofit committed to strengthening communities through youth development, healthy living and social responsibility. The YMCA has been listening and responding to the needs of our communities for more than 160 years. The Y is dedicated to building healthy, confident, connected and secure children, adults, families and communities.

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