The USF student Trump hailed as school choice success came recommended by Betsy DeVos and Jeb Bush

If you watched President Donald Trump deliver his recent address to Congress, you saw him single out a student named Denisha Merriweather, an impressive Florida graduate student who attended private school with help from a school choice program available for students from low-income families in the Sunshine State. Here's what he said:

"Joining us tonight in the gallery is a remarkable woman, Denisha Merriweather. As a young girl, Denisha struggled in school and failed third grade twice. But then she was able to enroll in a private center for learning, with the help of a tax credit scholarship program. Today, she is the first in her family to graduate, not just from high school, but from college. Later this year, she will get her master's degree in social work."

What many people watching the speech may not have known is that this wasn't the first moment in the school choice spotlight for Merriweather.

For years, she has been telling her story alongside famous advocates for education changes, praising the Florida Tax Credit Scholarships program that paid her tuition at a private school in Jacksonville - and she has worked for the nonprofit Step Up for Students, which helps Florida administer the program. She says she is not a Republican but believes in school choice.

Tax credit scholarship programs are one tool in the school choice arsenal that many advocates, including Education Secretary Betsy DeVos, have been pushing for years. Tax credit programs offer incentives for individuals and corporations to donate to organizations that provide money for students to use for tuition and other educational costs at private schools, many of them religious. Voucher programs are similar, using public money directly for private school tuition scholarships. There is only one federally funded voucher program, in Washington, D.C.

Critics say these programs help starve traditional public schools, which most students attend, of public money, and that public dollars should not be used for religious schools.

With her tax credit scholarship, Merriweather attended the Esprit de Corps Center for Learning. It was established in 2001 with a vision, according to the website, that "was birthed from the mind of God in the heart of Dr. Jeannette C. Holmes-Vann, the Pastor and Founder of Hope Chapel Ministries, Inc.," which "included a return to a traditional educational model founded on Christian principles and values." It uses the A Beka curriculum, used widely by private Christian schools and some home-schoolers, according to this listing of private schools published by the Jacksonville Times-Union. A Beka teaches the Bible as literal history.

Merriweather has been advocating for school choice for years. In 2014, for example, she was given the honor at the annual National Summit on Education Reform, held by former Florida governor Jeb Bush's Foundation for Excellence in Education, of introducing him before he gave his keynote address. She said she had just graduated from the University of West Florida with a bachelor's degree in interdisciplinary social sciences and was about to start a graduate program in social work and public health at the University of South Florida. She said in part.

"There are many people responsible for the blessings in my life. One of them is the person who signed the tax scholarship program into law and has fought for it ever since. He was the first candidate for governor in any state with the courage to openly run on a platform of school choice. And because of his courage, it now is the largest private school choice program in the nation. Without him I would not be here today. I can only imagine where I might be instead."

She was, of course, referring to Bush. It was during his governorship that the Florida Tax Credit Scholarships program became law.

In February 2016, she testified before the U.S. House education committee on expanding school choice.

Then, in July 2016, she showed up at the Republican National Convention, where she was part of a panel on school choice, with U.S. Rep. Luke Messer, R-Ind., and DeVos, then the chairwoman of the American Federation for Children. Her appearance was detailed on a Step Up for
Children blog. The post about her noted that Merriweather "works as a family advocate for Step Up."

She has done public service announcements promoting the scholarship program and has been a guest speaker for the annual National School Choice Week, as well as for the American Federation for Children. DeVos was a longtime backer of Bush's, supporting him in the 2016 Republican presidential primaries. Trump, who belittled Bush during the primaries, selected DeVos anyway as education secretary.

After Trump nominated DeVos late last year, Merriweather wrote a piece published Dec. 12, 2016, in the Hill with this headline, "Why we must give Betsy DeVos and school choice a chance," and saying in part:

"I've had the chance to testify before Congress, and earlier this year, I joined DeVos on a panel at the Republican National Convention, even though I am not a Republican. That day, she said there are too many students who, like me, don't fit in traditional schools and are at risk of dropping out. She asked the people gathered in Cleveland to think of the human potential that is lost when 1.3 million children a year quit school. She asked them to think of how stories like mine show how things could be different."

Merriweather has also written on the same topic for other publications, including the Wall Street Journal, and she has been interviewed by news stations including Fox News.

And that's how Merriweather wound up sitting near first lady Melania Trump watching Trump deliver his speech to Congress.

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