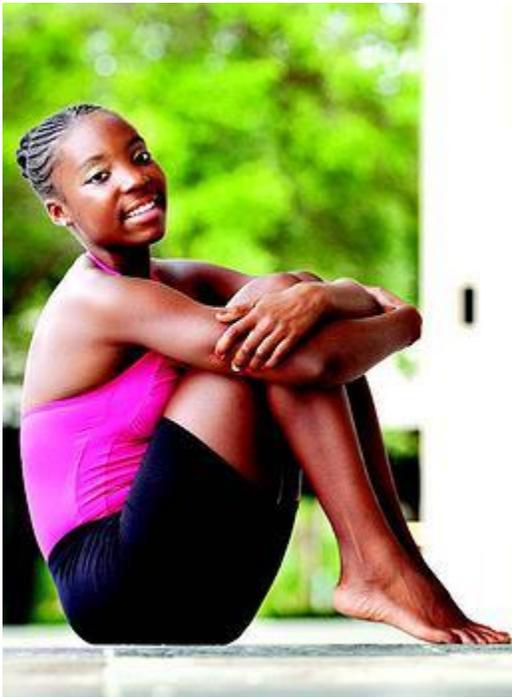


St. Pete's Finest: Taylor Barnes

BY MARCY PALMERI
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ST. PETERSBURG — Fifteen-year-old Taylor Barnes has been a proud recipient of the Step Up For Students Scholarship since kindergarten and is now about to embark on a whole new world, a future that would not have been possible had it not been for the program. Taylor began dancing at age two and has been a lover of the arts ever since. She is interested in ballet, pointe and jazz, although her favorite types of dance are contemporary and modern. She also takes voice lessons and loves to sing.



As a child she started experiencing severe headaches and seizures; doctors discovered she had an Arnold-Chiari malformation, a structural defect in the part of the brain that controls balance. When she was in the fourth grade she underwent brain surgery. Overcoming adversity, rising to the occasion and not taking “no” for an answer is what the life of Taylor and her mother, Shannon Coates, has come to embrace. She did not let her health issues stop her from realizing her dream. And if you were lucky enough to attend the AKA Academy’s Showcase and Awards program June 1, then you witnessed Taylor flying through the air on the shoulders of two young men. She dominated the stage with her ballet and contemporary dance moves. She recently graduated from St. Petersburg Christian School where she received help with tuition from a Step Up For Students Scholarship.

Step Up For Students is a program created for low-income families to empower them to choose what school is best for their child based upon their individual needs. “Money should not be an obstacle between a child and quality education, said Tampa businessman John Kirtley, of KLH Capital and chairman of Step Up For Students. Step Up For Students believes children learn in different ways and parents need to find the best school for each child. “It’s all about parents having choices,” said Kirtley.

Overcoming adversity

After a recent ballet audition, she was offered a \$45,750 scholarship to attend the prestigious Idyllwild Arts Academy (IAA) in California. However, tuition for this Julliard-like high school is \$55,750. “My daughter’s education is my number one priority,” Shannon Coates said with deep conviction. She toyed with the idea of holding a fundraiser, and continued to brainstorm until she became aware of an angel in the wings. Kirtley and Coates have worked closely together over the years in order to meet Taylor’s academic needs. Coates considers him as a part of the family, and when Kirtley saw that a family member was in need, he took it upon himself to cover the funds out of his own pocket so that Taylor could have the opportunity to realize her dreams. “Upon learning of this opportunity by someone on the staff, I didn’t hesitate,” Kirtley replied. For the last several years, both Taylor and her mom have been unofficial spokespersons for Step Up For Students. Taylor has performed for two governors, Jeb Bush and Rick Scott, and held her own in a crowd of over 1000. “They’ve availed themselves for countless interviews and have spoken

to numerous parents about the program. If you're in a position that has afforded you the luxury of being well paid, you have an obligation to use that money to pay it forward," Kirtely said.

TWC: Why did you decided to put your child in private school?

Coates: "I chose the top 5 schools that would be the best choice; both fundamental and magnet. The school system called me to tell me I didn't receive any of my choices, but told me what was left. My daughter was going to be stuck with a school at the other end of the county. She was 5 years old, but with her health issues, she looked more like two or three, not to mention her chronic asthma. I couldn't afford private school on my income and didn't know what else to do. A school principal told me about Step Up For Students and I applied. Because I waited too long to apply, the funding was not available, but the principal told me to bring her in and pay what I could."

TWC: Where did you garner the strength to press forward until you found the right school for Taylor?

Coates: "All my strength comes from God and Taylor is my motivation. She makes me want to succeed and I want her to succeed. In 2006, I earned my Bachelor's Degree in Mass Communications from USF; Taylor was nine. It took me nine years, but I did it. Step Up changed my life and made me realize that just because I don't make enough money doesn't mean Taylor's education should have to suffer. I work as a teacher at a small private school. My ultimate goal is to work with at-risk girls. I want them to know that their circumstances don't have to dictate who they become."

TWC: What would you say to other parents who recognize the need to explore nontraditional methods when seeking out a school for their child?

Coates: Step back and see what environment your child needs in order to learn. Don't pick the first school. Visit the school in and out of session. Meet the faculty, parents. Don't rush and don't let finances steer you away. Step out of the box and try to make it work. Because I sacrificed, my child has received the best education and that is priceless. When I found out Mr. Kirtley decided to do that for my daughter I was about to cry. It's amazing. I was speechless. He's known Taylor since she was small and knows that she's serious and knows what she wants out of life.

TWC: From one mother to another, what are you going to do once Taylor goes to California?

Coates: Taylor thinks I should take some time for myself. I think I'm going to go back to school and get my master's degree, concentrate on my dreams, write a book to share my life story, which will inspire others.

TWC: Is it still your daughter's dream to attend Julliard?

Coates: Taylor said she has to go to the school in California to prepare her for Julliard.

For more information about Step Up For Students, please visit www.stepupforstudents.org.

A Florida Tax Credit Scholar, Taylor is westward bound where she will continue her lifelong dream of becoming a dancer at the Idyllwild Arts Academy (IAA) in California. IAA is an internationally-acclaimed boarding school that offers both pre-professional training in the arts and a college prep education.