

EMILIE LYNCH | Challenge Program helps GJHS student reach academic success

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Nadirah Smith, a senior at Greater Johnstown High School, is proof that a positive attitude combined with a good work ethic can lead to tremendous accomplishments.

She won The Challenge Program Inc.'s award for academic improvement by raising her grades from mostly Ds and Fs to As and Bs, which earned her a spot on the honor roll.

"The Challenge Program award was my incentive," she said.

The road to success was not smooth, but with the support of her older sister and school principals, she buckled down and set a goal to prove to herself that she could do it.

"I just said, 'From now until I graduate, I have to get all As and Bs to make up for all the bad grades,'" Smith said. "If my sister and principals wouldn't have pushed me, I might have given up. They deserve some credit, too."

In addition to improving her grades, another Challenge Program category – community service – is an important aspect of Smith's life. She is a member of the SADD club (Students Against Destructive Decisions), whose mission is to prevent kids from experimenting with drugs and alcohol as well as making poor decisions such as texting while driving.

Smith also volunteers at the special needs class in her high school.

She has been working since she was 16 and is currently a child-care provider for Child Care Information Services.

Child development is her favorite class, and she hopes to continue her education in a related field.

Smith has a passion for caring for children.

"I really enjoy being around children," she said.

"I don't get bored or frustrated. It's interesting to see their personalities develop."



challenge photo.jpg

In fact, one of the people who inspires her the most is her 3-year-old nephew, who looks up to her as a disciplinarian and friend.

“Now that he sees how happy I am to go to school, he’s getting excited to go to school,” Smith said. “It pushes me to keep up with everything I do. So many kids are not motivated, and they don’t have anybody to motivate them.”

Smith also was motivated to win The Challenge Program award as a way to give Greater Johnstown High School some positive publicity.

She said that her school gets a lot of negative press, and as someone who cares deeply about her community, she was excited to show that there are many great aspects to her school.

“What people don’t consider is that we have a student who graduated from GJHS who is now a player in the NFL (LaRod Stephens-Howling),” she said.

“We have a shop where people can bring their cars to get worked on, and we have clubs that go out and help give back to the community.”

Because they served as her inspiration and provided motivation for her to achieve the award, Smith treated her sister and brother-in-law to a celebratory meal.

The remainder of the award money went toward educational expenses.

“The Challenge Program award was my incentive to do better in school,” Smith said, adding that she will not soon forget the hard work that led to her success because she sees it every day.

“It’s now in a frame in my living room, and I plan on taking it with me to college.”

Emilie Lynch is a senior at Pitt-Johnstown majoring in professional writing with a concentration in business. She is the treasurer of UPJ’s chapter of Sigma Tau Delta – the national English Honor Society – and also is the opinion editor at The Advocate, UPJ’s newspaper. She is currently an intern at The Challenge Program Inc.

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