



For Immediate Release

CONTACT:

Sandra Toussaint, Youth Communication
212-279-0708 x114
stoussaint@youthcomm.org

ROSIE PEREZ HONORS RESILIENT TEENS AT THE 16TH ANNUAL AWARDS FOR YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE

Speakers included **Council Member Corey Johnson**, journalist **Lisa Evers** (Fox 5/Hot 97), **Eric Brettschneider** (Deputy Commissioner, NYC Administration of Children's Services) and **Jeremy Singer** (Chief Operating Officer, The College Board).

Manhattan Borough President Gale Brewer congratulated the winners at the opening reception.

On Wednesday, May 28, 2014, Rosie Perez joined Youth Communication, the award-winning nonprofit publisher and advocate of reading and writing, to honor 15 teenagers in foster care in a ceremony at The College Board. The teens won Youth Communication's annual foster care essay competition, and received scholarship checks ranging from \$500 to \$1,000. Presenters including Ms. Perez praised their writing, their resiliency, and their service to others.

Ms. Perez introduced Grand Prize Winner Christopher Sanchez, a gay teen who suffered years of abuse and torment, first from being closeted, and then from being teased after he came out. Bullied at a group home, he turned to prostitution to survive, but managed to turn his life around by going to school and working hard at internships and jobs. He is graduating high school only one year behind schedule and is a top seller at Forever 21. Ms. Perez has a long history of advocacy for gay youth and AIDS research, so she was a natural to introduce Mr. Sanchez.



Rosie Perez with Christopher Sanchez, one of 15 young winners at the 16th Annual Awards for Youth in Foster Care.

She then read from her new memoir, *Handbook for an Unpredictable Life: How I Survived Sister Renata and My Crazy Mother, and Still Came Out Smiling (with Great Hair)*, her never-before-told story about surviving a harrowing childhood and living in foster care. At the age of three, Ms. Perez's life was turned upside down when her mentally ill mother tore her away from the only family she knew and placed her in a Catholic children's home in New York's Westchester County. Thus began her discombobulated childhood of being shuttled between "the Home," where she and other kids suffered all manner of cruelty from nuns, and various relatives' apartments in Brooklyn. With the intense determination that became her trademark, Ms. Perez overcame the odds and made a successful life for herself.

Her memoir reading almost seemed like a continuation of Mr. Sanchez's and the other young people's essays outlining their shorter journeys from wretched childhoods to promising futures. Her book and their essays inspire other youth to move forward with pride, not shame.

Ms. Perez noted that writing about painful experiences can heal others who are facing similar challenges. "Tell your story, but tell it when you're ready. Understand that you are sharing a gift with the world," she said. This is a central tenet of Youth Communication's mission.

Other speakers and award presenters included Council Member Corey Johnson, journalist Lisa Evers (Fox 5/Hot 97), Eric Brettschneider (Deputy Commissioner, NYC Administration of Children's Services) and Jeremy Singer (Chief Operating Officer, The College Board).

Manhattan Borough President Gale Brewer congratulated the winners at the opening reception.

The Awards for Youth in Foster Care was created to promote a more positive and accurate image of New York City foster youth among agency staff, youth workers, and the general public. The award is sponsored by Youth Communication and supported by the Sunny and Abe Rosenberg Foundation and the Tin Man Fund.

Over 50 young people from the New York City foster care system were nominated. Each of them wrote about how they would dispel stereotypes about youth in foster care, and how they have helped others despite their own difficult circumstances.

In addition to sponsoring these annual awards, Youth Communication publishes an array of resources to help marginalized teens, including *Represent* (representmag.org), an award-winning national magazine by and for youth in foster care. Youth who join their writing program work closely with a full-time professional adult editor on personal and reported stories. The editing process has been honed over the years to accommodate the trauma that foster youth bring with them and to open readers' eyes to their own strength, resiliency, and good decision-making.

In May 2014, *Represent* was named a finalist in two categories of the 2014 REVERE Awards for educational publishing, sponsored by the Association of American Publishers (AAP): Periodical of the Year and the Golden Lamp. The Golden Lamp is the highest honor of merit in the REVERE Awards competition.