

Scholar pushes ahead with eyes on community

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LaTISHA PROPHETE

18, Newark

And the award goes to...

LaTisha Prophete has received many awards and honors throughout her young academic career. Leadership and excellence are a part of her everyday life -- she is a former class president, salutatorian of her graduating class at Weequahic High School, a member of the Marion Bolden All Star Academic Team, and a member of Who's Who and the National Honor Society. But her most recent honor, receiving the Ophelia J. Berry Award, is special to Prophete. Not because she is the first to receive it, and she is, but because she's now connected to a woman, Ophelia J. Berry, who proved anyone can overcome obstacles and influence a community.

"I don't know how to put the feelings into words," Prophete said in response to being the first person connected to Berry. "To be nominated, it was like wow, they believe in me. I made myself proud and felt like I accomplished something."

Background

Ophelia J. Berry's daughter Judith is founder of the fund. Ophelia grew up in Mississippi in the early 1900s, where she was denied education because of the color of her skin. But her family moved to Chicago, where Judith eventually graduated from the University of Chicago, which is why her daughter created a fund for high school seniors who best exemplify determination, willingness to help others and "creative action in the face of obstacles." These were all traits Judith saw in Prophete, as the young student stepped up to read a eulogy for her high school's late principal, Ronald Stone, who died unexpectedly last fall.

"She makes lemons out of lemonade," Judith said. Prophete also showed determination by applying to colleges beyond the city and state, a big factor in her selection, she added.

The eulogy



LaTisha Prophete, 18, was named the first recipient of the Ophelia J. Berry Award.

Prophete didn't have time to digest the news that her principal had passed away before she was asked to write a eulogy for the man she considered a mentor. In fact, she was in disbelief that it was only a weekend before that she was watching Stone actively play volleyball.

"I wasn't familiar with that style of writing, so I just let my pen hit the paper," she said. "I never mentioned missing him. I celebrated him and raised a challenge to live up to what he stood for."

And this is an easy task for the Weequahic graduate, as she shares the same ideals of giving back to her community.

Personal obstacles

The eulogy was one challenge in Prophete's life -- she said she found her voice. But she said a lot of her obstacles are not unique for a typical teenager. It's peer pressure, being labeled a geek, Prophete said.

"My high school years weren't the most fun," Prophete said. "I didn't go to parties, football games. I was studying." And she wants students to know this is okay -- she said this is her passion.

Laws of change

Since the third grade, Prophete remembered wanting to be a lawyer. She wanted to go to Harvard because it was the best -- and her mother always encouraged her, being her greatest motivation. But as she got older, became editor of her school newspaper she realized what is best for her community is what is best for her.

"College isn't just to benefit me, but my people," Prophete said. "I will always come back to my community."

Her path still includes law. Now, she wants to use a law degree to change the school system. And although she was accepted to many colleges, her path will start at the College of Saint Elizabeth because she feels at home there.

Other interests

Prophete's number one interest is making a difference in her community. This is why she worked hard in school and with volunteering. During her freshman year of high school she was a member of Weequahic's first class of Pathways to College, an after school program designed to help students achieve a college education -- membership is also a requirement to receive the Ophelia J. Berry award. Prophete also has many trophies from softball.

Family

Prophete said she is inspired by her mother, Lenora, and she has twin sisters, LaTonya and LaShawa, 14.

