

Isles Youth Institute Graduates Embrace Alternative Pathways to Success

Igniting the spirit of celebration, the resounding beats of the West African djembe drummers set the rhythm for the 17 graduates as they processed into the Isles Youth Institute (IYI) graduation. After varied and unsuccessful attempts to succeed within the traditional school system, these students had persevered to earn their high school diploma, launching them on the path for a brighter future. Adding to the chorus of accomplishments, 12 students proudly claimed construction certifications, while four attained CNA (Certified Nurse Aide) qualifications.

The event pulsated with a resounding theme: the power of collective effort in propelling the graduates to new heights and inspiring them to make indelible impacts in their communities. Keynote speaker and Isles Board Member Austin Edwards emphasized that "Whatever you choose to do, whether it's art, whether it's construction, whether it's engineering, follow your passions and follow your dreams, but never forget about the reason that you're here. Never forget about the people who got you here, and never forget about all the experiences that got you here."

Each of the students sought out IYI, searching for an alternative to the traditional educational system that was not able to meet their needs. Whether they were struggling with difficult situations at home, unmet learning differences, or just needed a more individualized approach, these were students that had fallen through the cracks of the public school system. As senior speaker Ahvia Mooring said, "I was the mixture that couldn't be baked because I didn't have the right ingredients.



So, I had a choice: either I get thrown away or I add the ingredients I needed to become something greater. I added dedication, much more time, lots of motivation, and with Isles being the perfect baker, I'm a graduate."

Three exceptional individuals emerged, their unique contributions to the community earning them well-deserved accolades:

Kabeera Lawson, a beacon of optimism and courage, earned the Elizabeth Gray Erickson Memorial Award. This prestigious honor paid homage to Liz Erickson, an indefatigable Isles volunteer and Trustee who wholeheartedly dedicated herself to the welfare of IYI students and their families. Kabeera will attend William Paterson University in the fall to study health sciences, driven to become a neonatal nurse practitioner and empower the tiniest lives with her compassion and expertise.

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Jayceon Johnson proudly claimed The David Styner Memorial Award as a recognition of his leadership and unwavering perseverance. David Styner was a local construction manager who helped to develop the IYI model of combining education and construction job training. He helped to launch Isles YouthBuild nearly 30 years ago, New Jersey's first. Sadly, he passed away in 1995, before IYI's first graduation. After earning both his high school diploma and his construction job certification, Jayceon accepted an internship in the Isles construction workshop.

Elevating the significance of holistic wellness, the Paula Taylor award was created this year, honoring Anika Hill as its first recipient. Paula Taylor, principal owner of Arlee's Raw Blends, stood as a luminary advocating for wellness and healthy living. Her dedication to educating marginalized communities and fostering youth growth resonated deeply with Anika's transformative journey.

Overcoming adversity through a shift in eating habits and prioritizing mental health, Anika personified her saying: "a healthy body creates a healthy mind." Her path now leads her to Innovate Cosmetology School at the end of the summer.

All the graduates attributed their success to the support of their family and friends, as well as the dedication and devotion of the IYI staff. Students remarked that staff consistently went above and beyond to help them reach their academic goals, while simultaneously helping them overcome the obstacles that had held them back. Graduating students consistently said that the support of the IYI staff, the ability to work at their own pace with lots of flexibility around their own circumstances, and having school in a safe space with food and other necessary resources helped them to earn their degrees. We are so grateful to be able to provide some of the resources that these students need to graduate and take next steps in their career and life trajectories, and we look forward to seeing all that they do to contribute to the community in the future.

Acting Director Chantea Hobson and the teaching, training, and support staff were applauded by the students for their incredible efforts working with the students. We also recognize volunteer tutors like Doug Schoenberger, who works with math students, for their valuable role in supporting and encouraging the students. If you are interested in volunteering as an IYI tutor, please contact our office.