

## **Advocates for Children of New York Spring Benefit May 21, 2019**

Good evening, everyone. Thank you all for being here tonight and for honoring me with this award. I am really proud to be AFC's 2019 Education Champion.

My name is Tayloni Mazyck, and I am a victim of gun violence due to gang retaliation. On May 31, 2013, I was shot in my neck and face by a stray bullet in front of my apartment building in Brooklyn. I was 11 years old and about to finish the 5th grade. Due to the shooting, I was paralyzed from the neck down. I was the only survivor of 26 shootings during that weekend. And even though I was "lucky," my life has never been the same.

I spent most of the next school year in the hospital, recovering. When I was getting ready to go back, I needed an accessible school, special transportation, and for there to be a nurse on call. When my mom asked the Department of Education for help, no one seemed to know where a school like that could be. Well, it ends up, that's because the ONE school like that in NYC didn't have any available spots. So, my mom had to search for schools on her own. She was so discouraged. Luckily, someone along the way handed her the names of three places that might be able to help us. The first name she picked to call, and she admits it was at the top of the list, was Advocates for Children, and right away when she told my story, we were given a great attorney by the name of Allison Guttu.

We eventually found a middle school, and even though it was not fully accessible, and they were reluctant to accept me, with Allison's help we made it work. I was in general education, just like before the incident, but now I also had to squeeze in physical therapy, occupational therapy, as well as counseling to help me with my trauma. The school's answer to fit it all in was to pull me out of classes like Math and English, and of course my grades started to suffer. Allison, along with the law firm DLA Piper, sued and I was given 180 hours of private tutoring to make up for that missed time. They also pushed so hard that the school fixed my schedule so I could get all my therapies without having to miss class. My grades started to pick up and I was so much less stressed out about missing my work.

I am not going to lie — middle school wasn't easy, but I am proud to say I found myself, and my voice. I made friends at school, did well, and was chosen to be the speaker at our 8th grade graduation. I even graduated with honors and won the 2016 Malala award, named after Malala Yousafzai, the Pakistani girl who won the Nobel Peace Prize for showing great bravery in pursuing her education.

When I started looking at high schools I was filled with hope. As an honors student my biggest worry should have been the same as the other kids' — would I qualify, were my grades good enough. But I knew from experience that whether a school was accessible or not was going to be my #1 obstacle.

Out of 590 New York City high schools, only 145 are accessible, so already my options were extremely limited. Fortunately, AFC knew what to do and Allison helped my mom and me look for schools that would not just be accessible, but were also focused on something that I wanted to learn.

At that time, I thought that I wanted to be a lawyer. But I am not so sure now. With AFC's help, I applied and got into a high school with a law focus about 70 blocks away from my home.

I was excited to start high school! But the same issues that made junior high school so challenging for me had not been fixed by high school. And I felt left out at that school, like there was no place for me. It was just too big, and I got "lost in the sauce."

Finding the right high school for me has been really difficult. Even though the law talks about accommodation, it often feels like it's me and my family who are expected to make accommodations when it comes to my education. There have been plenty of moments where I have wanted to just quit, like the countless times I waited for the school bus that has a wheelchair lift to pick me up in the morning, and it would come like an hour late, and I would miss my first class, or it would leave school early, and I would miss my last class, spending hours each day traveling to and from school, so stressed out and tired I could barely do my work when I came home. Or, when I would be sent to look at schools whose only accessible entrances were in the back of the building, or dark and strewn with garbage. Even my sophomore year when I tried home instruction, I had to wait two months before a teacher was assigned and I could start school. I was not allowed to follow the full 10th grade curriculum, and I was even denied the opportunity to sit for the only Regents exam I was taught that year because the DOE never put me down for the exam, and so no one brought it to my home, as promised. I'm not even capping!

But I don't quit. I keep on going, because I know that if I give up, and if I don't finish school and get my education, that there will just be nothing. And I know that I deserve a lot more than "nothing" in my life.

For my junior year, my mom and I decided to look for a high school that was accessible, would allow me to attend all my classes AND my therapies, where I wouldn't miss school because of the bus, and where I would fit in and have a real chance to make friends and do well. After visiting at least four schools, we finally found Thurgood Marshall Academy.

It's just very easy and normal. I could go in the same entrance, at the same time, as everyone else. I didn't know it at the time, but AFC had to make a lot of calls to the DOE to even get me an appointment to visit this school because it was already full. But I really liked it, so Allison and AFC worked with the DOE to make sure I was given a chance to apply, and thankfully I was accepted.

I started at Thurgood Marshall this past fall and I LOVE IT! They are so welcoming and it's in my neighborhood, so if there's a problem with the bus, I can get there fast. Thanks to AFC, my school has made a lot of progress making accommodations that are modified to fit my needs. I am doing well in my courses, and I am on track to receive a Regents diploma in June of 2020. I am planning to attend college. I am a really good student, you know!

And through it all AFC has never let us down. I would not be here without them. My mom always says, "Tayloni, don't let your mishap define you. If you're having a problem, get AFC on the phone! Allison will talk to the school and the problem will get solved."

Seriously, Allison makes sure we understand what we are supposed to get, and then we know what to fight for. She has taught me to become my own best advocate! Allison is there at every single appointment and stands by my mom's side to help us work out stuff, not only with the DOE, but also with medical and other education-related supports. She has even found me a service that will give me a loaner chair while mine is being repaired, and a group that runs an accessible college tour program!

Because I won this award, I have been given a paid summer internship with the law firm Weil Gotshal. I had the opportunity to visit them and I have to say, this is what accessibility looks like! They have done everything they can to make sure that their offices work for me and I am really excited to start!

So, I hope you have learned something about me and my experiences trying to pursue my education as a person with a disability. I am pretty sure I never thought about it before, but now I think about it every day. It shouldn't be this hard to get a good education, and a good education should not be denied to you just because you have a disability.

I know that you are here tonight because you have donated and that you support AFC. Thank you for making it possible for AFC to be here to help me and my family and all the thousands of other kids like me who need AFC's help.

I want to thank a few people before I go. I hope you know from what I have said here how eternally grateful we will be to AFC and Allison. Thanks also to the DLA Piper law firm for helping us. I want to thank my teachers, and everyone at Thurgood Marshall Academy, my para Ms. Lane who talks to me like my mother when needed (two people that I cannot fool), the deans who always make sure I'm having a good day and keep my spirits up, and to my principal Mr. Fareed, thanks for always making sure I'm following the dress code. Thank you to my amazing mother, Priscilla Samuel, who never takes "no" for an answer when it comes to getting me what I need. Thanks also to my father, Robert Mazyck, my siblings, and my friends, for never letting me give up. Without all of you fighting for me I don't know where I would be today. Thank you and good night.