

EDGE: HHS student gives back to those who gave to her

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Ja'Leeza Canada, 17, is a typically busy Huntington High student in her senior year. Canada is an active member of TACS (Teens against Cigarettes and Snuff), a member of the youth staff for the Region II Middle School Teen Institute, a Certified Peer Mediator through the Cabell County Sheriff's Department, and a member of Huntington High's track and field team.

But life was not always so fulfilling for Canada.

"I'd been a trouble child in the past," Canada said. "I had a bad attitude and I didn't like to listen. I was a 'want-to-do-things-my-way' type of girl."

When she was 13, a cousin told Canada about ArtWorks, one of the Huntington Housing Authority's youth programs available for enrollees in Operation Right Choice, the HHA's 12 month comprehensive program that targets high risk youth living in and around public housing



"She told me it was really fun and you learn some good stuff," Canada said.

Canada is one of more than 100 local teens who have successfully participated in Operation Right Choice (ORC), which is in its 17th year.

"Students in ORC must agree to stay in school, stay off the streets, stay out of trouble and contribute in a positive way to their school and community," said Tim White, Resident Support Services Supervisor of the Huntington Housing Authority.

through the Huntington Museum of Art, a co-sponsor of ArtWorks. The experience opened up a new door for her: The museum has hired her as an art teacher's assistant for their after-school program at the Barnett Child Care Center.

"In Artworks, I've drawn, painted, made plaster molds, taken pictures around Huntington, made projects with cement and clay. I even made my very own paper for the first time," Canada said. "During the last project, Katherine Cox, the museum's Educational Director, talked to me and told me that someone told her I might be interested in going to college for art education. That's when she told me about the teacher's assistant position."

"Ja'Leeza has been a tremendous asset to our program," White said. "She has demonstrated tremendous leadership, monitoring, and enthusiasm over the past six years she has been involved."



Canada is grateful to her mother for helping her get into the program.

"If I didn't get my act together she wouldn't let me go have fun and do the things I wanted to do," Canada said. "I had to really straighten up if I wanted to be in the program."

Canada took the opportunity and ran with it.

"It helped me with my skills and helped me to stay positive," she said. "I got to meet new people, stay out of trouble and land a great job."

Her new status as a role model gives her a forum to try and help others, something she does through her extracurricular activities but also in advice to her peers.

"Try to stay away from all the negativity," Canada said. "Stay in school, never give up and keep your head up. Just try and stick with the good people, stay away from cigarettes, drugs, and alcohol. You don't have to do everything you see on TV."

White sees in Canada a shining example of what can be done through ORC.

"She is a success story," he said. "This is why we do what we do."

"If it wasn't for ORC," said Canada, who wants to study art education or ophthalmology, "I think I would be off running the streets."