

Exchange honors Kaeley Kays as 2007 A.C.E. of the Year

Kaeley Kays, of Charleston, S.C., accepted the 2007 National A.C.E. of the Year award at the 89th national convention in Portland, Ore. A.C.E. is an acronym for Accepting the Challenge of Excellence. The award recognizes high school students who have overcome difficult times and obstacles, yet managed not only to graduate from high school, but to excel.

It is always difficult to do justice to the hard work and determination that characterizes our A.C.E. award winners. Kaeley's case is no different. However, her difficult life is best summarized by Jim Yates, guidance counselor at Academic Magnet High School:

It is human nature to want to achieve excellence. However, circumstances in one's life often force compromises to those of lesser character. There are those, however, who manage to stay focused and overcome abysmal conditions in order to become the success we all strive to be. Kaeley Kays is one of these dynamic people.

Kaeley has never been in a secure family. Her mother, an alcoholic since 15, had several relationships with men that

resulted in children by different fathers. When Kaeley and her twin brother were 3 years old, their mother left her husband and moved away from Colorado with the children. Kaeley's new stepfather was abusive and her mother remained drunk most of the time. Many days, Kaeley and her brother waited for hours at school for their mother to pick them up, but she was often too intoxicated to do so. Some mornings, her mom was too drunk to take her to school and told her to just stay home. Kaeley knew, even at a young age, that she needed an education and would find a way to get herself to school.

In eighth grade, Kaeley was separated from her twin brother and forced by protective services to move to South Carolina and live with her sister. Kaeley shared a small two-bedroom apartment with her sister, her sister's husband, and two small children. In time, her sister's marriage dissolved and Kaeley stepped into the role of caretaker for her two nephews. She also worked when and where she could to contribute to the household. She did all of this while attending school.

Not only did Kaeley choose to be a success, she actively pursued the most demanding education that she could get. Kaeley applied to the Academic Magnet High School and was accepted. The school is Time Magazine's 10th-ranked high school in the United States in terms of rigor and academic excellence. Kaeley has taken all honors and advanced placement classes with an eye on getting admitted to a good college and earning scholarship money.

Last year, Kaeley's apartment burned down and the family lost everything. In the midst of this devastation, Kaeley took care of her extended family while managing to continue her education. Kaeley refuses to compromise her dreams. She is going on to college next year and will begin a new stage in her life as an independent young woman with the inner character to succeed.

Eyes on the goal

As Jim Yates noted, education is a big part of Kaeley's plan for the future. Kaeley herself wrote about it, as well as her goals, in the following narratives for her A.C.E. award application:

Proudest moment

In my 18 years, I have overcome a tremendous amount of obstacles, more than what most people are faced with in their entire lives. Because of the situations of my life, I learned at a



Kaeley Kays

very early age that a good education would be very important if I wanted to make a better life for myself and my future family. I am proud that even growing up in a dysfunctional family, the drunkenness of my mother and abusiveness of my step dad, surviving a horrific car accident (drunk driver), coping with the suicide of my brother, dealing with a fire that took the lives of two young children, and the task of having to help my sister raise her children hasn't kept me from maintaining my focus on school.

I know how important school is, and while the events in my life have been both painful and difficult, I wouldn't change them because they have made me a stronger person and have taught me that if I wanted a better life, I would need to work hard in school to earn one.


I am proud that even though it would have been a lot easier to just give up on school, I didn't. I maintained my focus. I have stayed out of trouble. I attend the 10th most rigorous school in the nation. I have made good grades and I am going to college next year! I am proud that I have not let the circumstances of my life keep me from maintaining my focus on school.

Plans for the future

In the near future, I plan to continue my work with the middle school youth group at my church, where I volunteer at least once a week. I love working with these children, because I know how influential I can be for them. I could be that one person who will help them to learn and grow from their situations, in the same way the people in my life have helped me.

I would like to get into a ministry that helps families of alcoholics and abusers cope with the pain and rejection of the disease. Since I have been through it and I am mature about the situation, I feel that I would be beneficial in helping others cope.

I plan on attending Charleston Southern's School of Nursing next fall. I want to be a nurse because I want to help people. I have been in and out of hospitals for both myself and my family, and I know that the nurses who have helped to take care of us have made a difference. I want to do that. I want to help save someone's life in the emergency room. I want to comfort families in their mourning. The way I have been comforted.

Someday, I want to be an amazing wife and mother. I want to be able to give my husband the love and respect that my step dad didn't receive. I want to be able to give my children the care and love that they deserve. 



Kaeley Kays, second from right, with her adoptive father and sister at left, Foundation President Ken Warner, and National President Kim Hodges.

About the National A.C.E. of the Year Award

The process for selecting the National A.C.E. of the Year begins at the club level. It is intended as a monthly recognition of determined youth in the communities where Exchange Clubs meet. At the end of the year, monthly honorees are reviewed and a winner is selected to compete with others in the district. The District A.C.E. of the Year then goes on to the final selection of National A.C.E. of the Year.

As the 2007 National A.C.E. of the Year, Kaeley went to Portland to accept the \$10,000 scholarship from the National Exchange Club Foundation. She addressed hundreds of Exchangites at the National Youth Recognition Luncheon on July 19.

Lighting the fire within

By Callie Miller, 2007 National Youth of the Year

Two houses sat at the end of the small street. The first one was dark. Only ashes sat in an empty and cold fireplace. A woman sat huddled in her chair, crying over her wasted life. Across the street another house was all lit up. Inside, a cheery fire crackled, spreading light and warmth and energy. A husband and wife sat close at the kitchen table laughing and talking as they worked. The husband was writing another book, probably a best seller. The wife was busy illustrating the front cover while keeping a watchful eye on the three young children. They were dancing around the room, nearly bouncing with enthusiasm. If these two houses each represented a life, which one would you choose? Would you choose a life lit with a fire? Would you want to be sparked with light, fueled with warmth, and bursting with endless opportunities? Of course! A life like this boils down to one thing. It all connects to passion. With a passion, you will suddenly ignite and your life will emanate light, warmth, and energy.


The small boy sat crouched over a small pile of sticks and weeds. The dark was crowding in around him; the dusk was pushing away the last rays of sun. Soon he would be in utter darkness. He furiously began scraping the two small rocks together, watching them closely. Finally he saw it. A dash of color in the gray. A small spark caught the weeds and they ignited in a delightful burst of light. In our own lives, that spark is the lighting of our passion. Suddenly the world around us is illuminated. The darkness and drab dusk fades away. For me, my spark of passion was ignited in a sandy desert. I was thousands of miles from home in Botswana, Africa. For about a month, I was there with 25 other teens from around the United States. We traveled to remote villages, working with the children to teach them about sanitation. Suddenly, I saw the world in a whole new light. The small dark faces of the children are forever implanted in my memory. I fell in love with each and every one of them. The first moment I looked into their deep brown eyes, a spark was kindled. By the end of those four weeks, it had grown into a flame that was lighting up my life. My passion for the hurting children illuminated things around me. I saw clearly for the first time how blessed I am to live in America with a family who loves me and can provide for me. I can now fully appreciate how wonderful it is to have simple things, like a bath, or clean water, or a good solid meal. If a simple spark of passion can irradiate my life, what can passion do when it is fueled?



Callie Miller, left, with Darlene Heller of Atlas World Travel, official travel sponsor of the National Youth of the Year award.

Almost as soon as the small fire is ignited, the boy begins to feel the chilliness riding on the night air. The small fire gives him enough light to gather more wood to burn. Soon the fire is roaring, crackling as the twigs catch fire. The warmth glows and soothes his cold limbs. The boy continues to feed the fire until he is thoroughly warm. A fire can be cultivated only if it is fueled. That fuel has to come from an outside source. Our fire of passion is fueled on by sparking others. As more wood is added to the flames, it soon catches and the warmth begins to grow. In order to change our world positively, our passions for life should be contagious. A sustainable passion comes from reaching outside of oneself and spreading your love. My passion is for helping underprivileged children. That fire in me is fueled by seeing a physical change. In Africa, we handed out shoe boxes stuffed full of toys and hygiene products. The look of utter joy on the small faces brought tears to my eyes. If I can do any small deed to help them, it creates warmth—a glow that continues to spread. I fuel my fire by serving them as much as I can, and by spreading my love for these precious children.

The boy stared into the mesmerizing orange blaze, soaking up the light and warmth. The glow cast flickering shadows all around the camp fire. His marshmallow was beginning to melt into a sweet goop as he sat lost in thought. For centuries, a fire was a necessity for survival. But soon it became so much more than a simple survival tool. Fire has been studied and used to create greater machines, to power engines, to inspire inventions. Once a fire is ignited, its power is limitless. Our passion for something in life is also an extensive power. Yes, passion is essential for day-to-day survival, but it can be propagated and turn into a forcible implement in our lives. When I came back from Africa, I was a changed girl. My life took a shape that was no longer in my form. I am a part of a movement to help these children so that the desperation I saw in their eyes can change to fervor.

When our passion is lit and we take time to fuel it, warmth and light begins to spread into our life. Suddenly that fire is catching on to others, and before we know it our life is a part of something bigger and better than just ourselves. My passion for the needy African children has been lit, it has been fueled, and it has been used to energize me so that I may work for that cause. At the end of my life, I do not want to be the woman crying in a dark empty house. I aspire to be in the house that is full to the brim with life and love and joy and, above all, passion. My whole life will be lit from a fire within. 

About the National Youth of the Year Award

The National Youth of the Year Award provides the National Exchange Club with the opportunity to honor outstanding students who have exhibited excellence in academics and leadership. It is the culmination of an effort by hundreds of Exchange Clubs across the country to identify and recognize the young leaders of our nation.

The process for selecting the National Youth of the Year begins at the club level. It is intended as a monthly recognition of outstanding youth in the communities where Exchange Clubs meet. At the end of the year, monthly honorees are reviewed and a winner is selected to compete with others in the district. The District Youth of the Year then goes on to the final selection of the prestigious National Youth of the Year.

Callie Miller, of Auburn, Calif., is the 2007 National Youth of the Year. Callie, accompanied by her parents, went to Portland, courtesy of official travel sponsor Atlas World Travel, to accept the \$10,000 scholarship from the National Exchange Club Foundation. She addressed hundreds of Exchangites at the National Youth Recognition Luncheon on July 19.

This outstanding student attended Forest Lake Christian School, where she was very active in many school activities, including student government, school publications, music, and athletics. Her achievements at school earned Callie a coveted spot in "Who's Who Among American High School Students," for four years. She is also a member of the National Society of High School Scholars. She also served as editor-in-chief of her high school yearbook. An accomplished pianist and piano teacher, Callie earned a certificate of merit at a level 8 piano competition. She was also active in several school clubs and athletics.

Callie will be attending Biola University, a private Christian university in Southern California, with plans to major in journalism. Ever the active scholar, she is already involved with the English honors program at the university.



Callie Miller, center, celebrates her award with, from left, Kim Hodges, Ken Warner, and her parents.