

## "I Kept Pushing Through"



Mekhi with his diploma, earned six months early, through Gateway CC's "Gateway to College" dual enrollment initiative.

Manson. She said Cynthia was there for her and her son through the good and the bad - during incarceration and eventually when he returned home.

"Cynthia motivated Mekhi. She stayed with him the whole time and she's been supporting our family ever since. I can always reach out to her. She did everything for him to keep him on the right track."

When Cynthia met Mekhi at Manson, she could tell right away that he was an exceptional young man with high ambitions, but he got derailed by environmental factors both in and out of his control. Cynthia remembers that first meeting.

"Building a rapport with him it became clear that Mekhi wanted to do the right things. He had aspirations of being an engineer, going back to school, college was a goal."

While Mekhi is bright, Tameka said her son's prior experience in school was like a "roller coaster."

"It was hit or miss. He would fall behind because there was always some drama at school. He would get suspended, or he just didn't go or would attend but just didn't do the work. So I think it was a reality check when he went to [Manson] and then having the support of others like Cynthia and her team definitely changed him for the better."

"My lowest moments as a mom, just my meltdown from what I went through with my son, Cynthia was always a phone call away," Tameka said of the time her son Mekhi, a high school senior, was incarcerated at Manson Youth Correctional facility but is now set to graduate high school in June 2025.

"Cynthia" is Cynthia Middleton, a Pupil Services Specialist with DCF's Juvenile Justice Educational Unit (JJEU). The unit's team of Pupil Services Specialists (PSS) play a vital role in helping youth in detention or juvenile justice facilities achieve better outcomes by offering guidance, education, and emotional support.

This includes ensuring a youth who is incarcerated has continued access to educational opportunities as well as support with transitioning back to their communities, staying on track to graduate and building a solid foundation for life after release.

Tameka said Cynthia came into their lives after her son, Mekhi, fell in with the wrong crowd and was eventually locked up at

Six months before he was released from Manson, Cynthia and Mekhi started building out a plan of action for his return to school and his community. Initially, he wanted to reenroll in his traditional high school but those "environmental factors" were a concern for Tameka and Cynthia. Mekhi resisted but they put their foot down and convinced him to enroll in Gateway Community College's "Gateway to College" dual enrollment initiative.

"We were concerned about peer pressure, the normal teenage things. We toured Gateway and because Mekhi has a great team around him, we were able to convince him to try Gateway for 30 days," Cynthia said.

"He did everything in his power not to go to Gateway. We told him, no, [returning to your old high school] isn't an option. When he did enroll in the program, he did amazing and realized for himself it was the best thing for him," Tameka said.

When the 30 day "trial period" came to an end, Mekhi did not want to leave. Despite the initial push back, Mekhi said he was happy to accept the new challenge and graduated the Gateway program six months early.

"Mekhi not knowing anybody there and not acclimated to a college campus, understandably, he was anxious about it. Now, he's graduating early and even has an opportunity to get an associate's degree for free through Gateway," Cynthia said.

Cynthia noted that Mekhi was bonded out of Manson, not released on a judge's order, so he is under less scrutiny. He is already off probation and continues to make all the right decisions - which says a lot about his drive and commitment to staying on the right side of things.

"His mom bonded him out and he's been out ever since. Youth who aren't bonded out have to do check-ins, wear a monitoring bracelet, etc. Mekhi still has to check-in but it's not as stringent. He got off probation early. So, he has a lot of leeway and opportunity to excel, do well in school and excel as a teenager.

At the end of the day, Mekhi had to want it for himself, and he did. He is sticking to the path that Tameka, Cynthia and his team helped him blaze. And, he is continuing to grow as a person.

"I can't blame anybody, I put myself in that situation. Cynthia was my support mentally and physically. [That experience] was tough love but at the time it taught me a lot. Cynthia was always just making sure that I'm good. If I needed anything I could contact her and, when I did, she came through for me."

For her part, Tameka has also seen that growth in her son and is grateful he had access to a PSS like Cynthia, the resources that go along with the involvement of JJEU team and, ultimately, the



second chance it provided for Mekhi. She is a "happy parent" and encouraged other youth and families to welcome that support if they find themselves in the same situation.

"Take advantage of it because it definitely helped. I'm glad Cynthia became a part of our lives. I'm so proud of my son. I have something to brag about now."



On top of attending Gateway, Mekhi is working full-time. He is also eager about the future. Just like Mekhi, that future looks bright. He "likes numbers" and said he is going to use his second chance to continue postsecondary education at Gateway so that he can eventually own his own business and be his own boss.

"I changed a lot, I've grown. I'm just doing my best to stay in a good pattern. It's not easy but I'm doing it," Mekhi said. "I recommend this program to anybody in the same position because not everybody who has made bad decisions should have that used against them. Everybody deserves a chance."

"There were a lot of changes, a lot of family issues but I kept pushing through. Just put your best foot forward and keep driving."