



# PRESS RELEASE

From the Louisiana Office of Student Financial Assistance

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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

Date: July 29, 2015

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## Louisiana Students Attend First Lady's 'Beating the Odds' Summit At the White House

BATON ROUGE – Darius Spurlock and Oscar McClain, both 2015 graduates of Scotlandville Magnet High School, were among the 130 college-bound students from across the nation who were welcomed by First Lady Michelle Obama to participate in the 2015 'Beating the Odds' Summit last week, as part of her Reach Higher Initiative.

Spurlock and McClain both also served as 2014-15 State Officers in the LA GEAR UP program administered by the Louisiana Office of Student Financial Assistance (LOSFA). The students were accompanied to an evening networking reception on July 22 and to the White House Summit on July 23 by LOSFA/LA GEAR UP Program Coordinator Timenee Thomas.

These students were sponsored by 70 non-profit organizations, representing a mix of urban, rural, foster, homeless, special needs, and under-represented youth who have overcome substantial obstacles to persist through high school and make it to college. The event focused on sharing tools and strategies to successfully transition to college and the resources needed to persist and complete the next level of education.

The day-long event included a panel moderated by *E! News* host Terrence Jenkins, which featured the First Lady, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, musical artist Wale, and Manuel Contreras, a rising senior at Brown University and co-founder of [1vyG](#). Additionally, students participated in workshops and panels led by the U.S. Department of Education, Google's Jaime Casap, and other leaders in K-12 and post-secondary education.

The students were also treated to a concert by Wale, AND a surprise appearance by President Barack Obama!!

In reflecting on the experience, the trio representing LOSFA said:

"The 'Beating the Odds' Summit gave me an immeasurable amount of determination to achieve my goals and to reach higher for success. During the Summit I was fortunate to meet the First Lady and President of the United States which was a once in a lifetime opportunity. First Lady Michelle Obama was encouraging saying, *'If you want to make the most of your potential, then summer can't just be a vacation. It's really a time to try to get ahead.'* I plan to take her advice and start getting involved in activities that will help promote me in my future endeavors. Summers for the next four years will not just be for vacation, but a time for getting ahead through summer courses, volunteer work or internships."

– Darius D. Spurlock

“The ‘Beating the Odds’ Summit was a once in a lifetime opportunity. For me, it meant greatness and pride because my accomplishments were the main factors for me having this wonderful opportunity. It showed me how all of my hard work paid off. On this trip, I learned that I should reach higher towards a post-secondary education because it determines my future. I also learned that if an African American born in Hawaii by the name of Barack Obama can become president, then there is no telling what I can and can't do. President Obama said so himself. Based on what I learned, I plan on encouraging students coming behind me to strive for a post-secondary education because they are the futures of the world.”

– Oscar L. McClain

*‘I believe the children are our future; teach them well, and let them lead the way.’*...and I'm sure you know the rest. Words written by Michael Masser and Linda Creed, made popular by George Benson and the late, great Whitney Houston, are still so relevant. That notion was clearly evident through the convening of over 130 college-bound high school graduates from across the country! As with most of my experiences with students, from serving as a summer camp counselor with Louisiana GEAR UP to teaching students about the world of sports, physical activity, and health to forming students to be leaders in their own light, the pleasure in the work comes from watching them grow to be successful, whether it's learning to dribble with their non-dominant hand or reciting a speech in front of a group of their peers. Although the experience was once in a lifetime, (I mean who else gets to see the President and First Lady at the same place in the same day?!) it meant more to be able to be there with two of Louisiana's most deserving students. I met a young lady who asked me what advice would I give to students like her, first-generation and overcoming obstacles; I told her one of my favorite phrases...*‘You all have unfinished business; this is only the beginning. There are other students out there, whether peers, near-peers, or younger, who are depending on you to be successful. And you have to be there to pull them up as well.’* I've found that there is no clear wrong way to go about reaching a student, besides telling them they can't or not helping at all. We have to reach for them where they are to give them the necessary tools for success. The work we do here at LOSFA and all of college access solidified the purpose of this Summit. It was more than just meeting some of the most powerful and influential people in the world; it was developing and building support from those same people who shared similar experiences, and encouraged students to strive for excellence.”

– Timenee Thomas

The invitation to the event was secured and accepted through LOSFA's membership with the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB). Students were to be class of 2015 high school graduates with plans of continuing on to post-secondary education who have closely worked with LOSFA. Their educational information and a paragraph describing how they “beat the odds” to realize the success they have achieved were required to supplement the submission for White House approval.

Spurlock submitted the following paragraph: “I have beaten the odds in my life by surpassing norms such as being undereducated and lack of discipline, norms that society has placed on black males specifically. Before I realized my true potential, I made average grades and was not the most disciplined student. My only goal then was to finish high school without any plans for the future. However, through certain teachers taking the time to encourage me and motivation from my family, I found my true potential and realized that I could go further in life with higher education. Because of the time invested in me, I now know that I have the ability to be successful beyond high school. In college, I plan to get involved in various organizations and activities on campus and to shadow a successful individual in my career field of interest. Through this, I can flourish in higher education by being involved and preparing for my career. There is so much I would like to do with my degree, but the main thing is to give back. I want to

play a vital role in helping the youth find their true potential just as I have. Beating the odds is not easy! It takes determination and perseverance from everyone.”

McClain submitted the following paragraph: “Throughout my high school years, I have excelled at an innumerable amount of things because I overcame a huge obstacle. During my freshman year, my grandfather passed, and we were very close. He always encouraged me to do great in school because he wanted me to be successful in life. We would always have one-on-one conversations about life in general. More importantly, he would always tell me to stay out of trouble and to surround myself around people that have good leadership potential. It’s true. Thinking of him after his death motivated me to become a better person because I knew what he expected of me. Before he died, I was making all A’s and B’s. After he died, I made straight A’s for two consecutive years. I never made a B again until the end of my first semester of my senior year. Using my grandfather’s death as motivation resulted in me becoming the Salutatorian of my class, maintaining a 4.47 grade point average. When I go to college, I plan to major in chemical engineering and get involved in many activities to assist me with my studies. My goal is to make all A’s throughout college. Once I get my degree, I plan to work at Exxon Mobil to learn how things are polluting the earth and attempt to discover ways to reduce the problem.”

The 130 students who attended the Summit were asked to submit a question for a response from the First Lady. Both Spurlock and McClain had their questions selected, but time restraints resulted in only McClain’s question being posed to Mrs. Obama.

McClain’s question was: “What obstacles did you have to overcome in order for you to pursue your education and your career in the law field?”

The First Lady responded, “The first [obstacle] was the people who doubted me. I decided to apply on my own; counselors would tell me, ‘*You may be reaching too high.*’” The First Lady then recalled that upon stepping onto Princeton’s campus she was met with comments from people who said that she didn’t belong there, that she was an ‘*affirmative action student*’. She went on to say, “I started to realize, ‘*I can do this! I’m smart, I can outwork anyone*’, I had to stop listening to the doubters. You have to start listening to the voice within you.”

Among the highlights of the Summit was a surprise appearance by President Obama who told the attendees, “America succeeds only when every young person in America is able to dream big and has the tools to chase their dreams.” He went on to say that the intent of the ‘Beating the Odds’ Summit was to remind students that they can succeed despite the barriers and real issues they are faced with because this is a land of opportunity.

Spurlock plans to attend Louisiana State University this fall while McClain plans to attend Southern University and A&M College. Both plan to major in Chemical Engineering.

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