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Scholarship helps Middleburg kid find success

By Mike Ford



MIDDLEBURG – Shayla Penna, 15, was getting in trouble at school and at home. She didn't like her teachers or other students at Lake Asbury Junior High and was sent to an alternative school. On the home front, her mother couldn't handle her, so Shayla went to live with her grandparents, who enrolled her in a private school.

Now, the once-troubled kid is a model student, carrying a 4.0 grade point average who aspires to attend the United States Naval Academy.

Dennis and Sherri Forrest refer to themselves as "more old school." They're giving their granddaughter structure and discipline that she wasn't getting – including a private education paid for with a scholarship from Step Up for Students. The Tampa-based nonprofit awards scholarships to low-income students, as well as those with special needs.

Penna started at High Point Christian Academy in eighth grade. She finished the year with a 4.0 gpa, which carried over to her freshman year.

"I got a new start by getting out of the public schools. I wasn't getting along with other students or my teachers, but it was mostly because of my attitude," she said. "I decided I was tired of getting in trouble and I decided I want to be an astronaut, but I need to become a pilot first, so I joined the Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps in ninth grade."

The turnaround may not have lasted long, if not for Step Up for Students, according to Penna's grandmother.

"We put her in the private school before we got the scholarship. She wasn't doing well in public school and we

belong to the church that runs the school, so we put her in there and it's working – she got very focused and is doing great," Sherri Forrest said. "She started doing things differently and she started setting goals. Now, she wants to go to the Naval Academy."

Penna first set her sights on the Navy, but her JROTC group took a field trip to Parris Island, S.C., where the Marine Corps conducts basic training. She became enamored with the corps, so she now wants to be a Marine. She can still work toward attending The Naval Academy – it would simply be as a Marine rather than as a prospective Navy officer.

"When I went to Parris Island, I just loved it. I want a challenge. I don't want something from page 3

simple and I want to be a Marine because they're the baddest," she said.

Step Up For Students enables Penna to remain enrolled in a private school her grandparents can't afford, by awarding an annual scholarship worth \$5,677 this year. Step Up Public Relations Manager Sherri Ackerman said there are 16 Clay County schools accepting the organization's Florida Tax Credit Scholarship and 352 participating students. She said Penna is one of them, despite already having been enrolled.

"Some families do enroll in the school first and hope they receive some type of help. Sometimes they learn about the scholarship, but it's too late to apply for that school year. Our annual application season for new families is in the spring before the start of the new school year. The family qualifies based on income and renewals take place in October," she said.

Shayla Penna of Middleburg said the nonprofit Step Up for Students has helped turn her life around. Once troubled and prone to bad behavior, Penna aspires to attend the U.S. Naval Academy.