

## CHRONICLE OF CHAMPIONS DECEMBER 2019 NEWSLETTER

### SQUAD NIGHTS OFF TO GREAT START



Our first three Squad Nights were tremendously successful!

The official kickoff of Champions Empowering Champions took place on Sept. 25 on Inaugural Squad Night. Eighteen students and 20 volunteers came together to enjoy an evening that included team-building and networking activities, dinner, conversations and even a fierce rock-paper-scissors competition. The night started with an emotional personal speech by Champions' Executive Director Kimberly Dunn, who showed us that vulnerability can break barriers and ignite the development of deep connections through open communication in a safe setting.

Champions Empowering Champions' mission is to empower college students who have experienced foster care or homelessness to achieve lifelong success. The organization's goals are for these students to 1) Earn a college degree in four years; 2) Develop skills required for academic, professional and life success; 3) Build a lifelong support network and 4) Begin a successful career.

The powerful, touching mantra "Think like a champion, talk like a champion, feel like a champion" was introduced, putting smiles on people's faces. Participants enjoyed connecting with their squads and getting a feel for all the program offers.

The second Squad Night took place on Oct. 23 with a build-your-own-taco dinner. The evening was once again filled with fun team-building and networking activities. This time, it was evident that students and volunteers felt much more comfortable with one another. The turnout was even larger than on inaugural night, with 21 students and 22 volunteers attending.



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Squads branded themselves by coming up with a slogan, logo and name for each team, followed by the opportunity to present their unique branding to the entire group – a marvelous display of creativity and ingenuity.

The group learned that the Champions board chair, Jeff Gordon, is also a rock star in a local band. Before the evening ended, another fierce competition took place. The winner of the first Squad Night's rock, paper and scissors competition repeated his victory as he tied for first place in the "Yank Me" competition, which required contestants to strategically remove an index card placed between plastic cups with the cups securely and neatly stacked after the card has been removed. Congratulations to the winners, Connor and Isaac! To close the evening, everyone gathered around to say the powerful mantra once again.

The third Squad Night was on Nov. 20. In the spirit of the holidays, volunteers cooked a homemade Thanksgiving-inspired dinner for the students. By this time, the atmosphere had become one of easy geniality, with everyone feeling they knew one another and were getting together to see old friends. Volunteers and students mingled across tables, going beyond the boundaries of their own squads. This time, the after-dinner game did not involve competition. Instead, participants drew papers from a cup to answer questions about the people, places and things they were grateful for. This game was a catalyst for deeper conversations, sparking meaningful dialog about how it is not happiness that brings gratitude, but rather gratitude that brings happiness.

The evening's featured speaker was Dr. Roopa Crawford, a member of the Champions board with an amazing story to tell. Roopa left the comfort of her family & friends in Trinidad to come to the United States in pursuit of education & a better life. Her journey to success did not come easily, but she believed that with hard work, a solid goal in mind & perseverance anything was possible. Roopa overcame substantial obstacles, including holding down multiple jobs while simultaneously going to school. She earned a bachelor's degree in psychology from the University of Central Florida as well as master's & doctoral degrees from the Forest Institute of Professional Psychology. Today Roopa is a clinical psychologist based in Boynton Beach & owner of the RPC Consulting Group.

As if these accomplishments were not enough, she is also the mom of two little girls. She adopted one of them after fostering her and is still fostering the other child. Roopa has achieved her dream of creating a life for herself that allows her to devote time to her family and community causes she feels passionate about such as Champions Empowering Champions.

There will not be a Squad Night in December, but volunteers and students are encouraged to continue reaching out to one another and nurturing their relationships through the holidays. Everyone will come together again in January. Happy new year!

## SQUAD NIGHTS IMAGES



Laughter all around on Inaugural Squad Night; hard to believe they met only a few hours earlier!



Students compete in a lively game of rock, paper, scissors during the first Squad Night.



Squad naming and folder making, Champions gather in October for a second incredible Squad Night.



Visibly more united after just 3 Squad Nights, Students Champions pose for a photo to close out November Squad Night.



Volunteer Champion Scott Barlass and Student Champion Sara with Dr. Roopa Crawford after the inspiring talk she made on November Squad Night.

## STUDENT SPOTLIGHT: SARA'S STORY



(Editor's note: Student Champion Sara wrote this account of her journey from foster care to FAU student for publication in the newsletter and blog. We are grateful to her for sharing her powerful story.)

Being in foster care was always rough. I remember always feeling like the black sheep; I never fit in anywhere and I had no sense of belonging. I felt more like a waste of space than a human. In foster care, my biological family members and my foster parents always made me out to be the problem. Everything was always my fault. When I was in foster care I wasn't allowed to be a normal kid and make normal mistakes. Every little thing that I did, I would be severely punished for and screamed at. I was constantly being told that I'm lucky I was taken in since no one else wanted me, and was emotionally abused for several years of my life.

I did poorly in high school, and I almost didn't graduate. I remember being told that I'd never make it to college. I remember being told that I'd end up pregnant before I turned 18 and on the streets. This was never an option for me. I promised myself that I would go to college.

When I was adopted I was 17 and it was the summer before my senior year. I remember applying to colleges in September and praying I'd get in. I was accepted by FAU, I worked hard the rest of my senior year, and I made it to FAU. My first semester was difficult. My adopted family wanted me to live at home, but I couldn't drive and I'd have to take the train and a few buses from South Broward up to Boca. I had class five days a week, spent about four hours a day on public transportation, and it was the middle of summer so it was always insanely hot and humid. That was the most difficult summer of my life because I had no one pushing me except myself, and my advisor, Jasmine Moore. Jasmine was a life saver. She helped me figure out my financial aid so that I could afford to live on campus and not have to commute four hours a day anymore. She assisted me through my first two years of college, always acting as a mentor to me. She's part of how I came so far. No matter how poorly I may have done in a class, no matter if I may have run into some trouble with an RA, she never judged me or made me feel bad about my situation. She would help me out of it and encourage me to do better.

I joined Champions Empowering Champions at the start of my third year of college. I met Kim Dunn, and she made me feel like family. She goes above and beyond to make sure that I and every other member of Champions are taken care of. Champions also motivates me because I know I'm not alone. There are others who have struggled like me, and they're here trying to rise above and pave their own paths to success as well. Because of my experience, my long-term career goal is to be to others what Jasmine and Kim have been to me. I would like to start my own university department that assists refugees with the transition to university life. I would like to help them figure out how to navigate college, how to be self-sufficient, how to rise above the situation you were born into and pave your own path, how to understand that where you came from isn't your fault and that you have the power to determine where you go in your life.

Now that I'm an adult, I understand why my childhood was the way it was. I understand that nothing was my fault. I understand that my childhood was my childhood to teach me to be strong, persistent, determined, and never give up. It taught me to rely on myself and it taught me that I need to push myself and celebrate my own accomplishments.

## FOUNDER SPOTLIGHT: KIMBERLY DUNN

### WOMAN WITH A MISSION



Every worthwhile endeavor begins with an idea in the mind of a visionary who has the drive to make it become reality. Although Champions Empowering Champions was officially launched at FAU on Sept. 25 when squads came together for the first time, the organization actually traces its origin to a time before that, when it was a dream being nurtured by Dr. Kimberly Dunn.

In the middle of a highly successful career on the faculty of Florida Atlantic University's nationally respected School of Accounting, Kim felt the need to do something more. She had been involved in the foster care community for years, first as a young child experiencing the emotional upheaval of being temporarily removed from her parents' home and later as the mother of two boys, Brandon and Caleb, who came to Kim and her husband, Ray, through the foster care system. For years, the thought of doing something to help a larger population of foster children had been on her mind. The question was, what?

The answer came to Kim in the spring of 2018, when she was having lunch with Dr. Evonne Rezler, an FAU colleague. Both knew that the FAU student body includes hundreds of young people who have experienced foster care or homelessness and are struggling to move ahead on their own without adequate family support. This would be the ideal group for an outreach effort. "These students need more than a mentor, they need a champion," Evonne said. That word – "champion" – stuck in Kim's mind, and a few months later while at a yoga retreat she wrote a dream statement about creating an organization called Champions Empowering Champions.

From that moment on her dream blossomed with the enthusiastic support of others at FAU, including Joe Murray and Jasmine Moore of the Office of University Advising Services who were already supporting these students through an organization called Educate Tomorrow. Others were quick to jump on board, and soon Kim had more than a dozen allies from the university and the greater community.

The next step was to obtain enough funding to get the organization off the ground. As a longtime College of Business faculty member, Kim was aware of the annual Launch Competition sponsored by FAU's Tech Runway that offers thousands of dollars in prize money to new enterprises. She put together a proposal so convincing that the judges departed from their customary practice of focusing on businesses aspiring to profit-making status and included Champions Empowering Champions in the 2019 entrepreneurial class. This brought the fledgling organization a \$15,000 cash award and a year's worth of hands-on start-up assistance.

From there, Kim's dream took off in earnest as a committed advisory board came together and 22 students and 22 community volunteers accepted invitations to join the inaugural squads. There can be no doubt that much more lies ahead. FAU's Student Champions have just begun to embark upon their journey to academic, career and life success.

Reflecting upon her own experiences and how they inspired her to reach out to others, Kim says: "It is my hope that my story will serve as motivation for each of you [Student Champions] to relentlessly pursue your dreams and know that every challenge that you face in life is for a purpose and can serve you."

## VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT: JEFF GORDON

### MEET BOARD CHAIR JEFF GORDON



Jeff Gordon, founding chair of the Champions Empowering Champions board, is one of the kindest people you will ever meet. Although he grew up in Philadelphia and went to college in Atlanta, today he considers himself a true Floridian. He moved to Florida in the 1980s to attend law school at the University of Florida (UF) and never looked back. It was at UF that he met Gay, his lovely wife of more than 30 years. It didn't take long for Jeff and Gay to realize they had more in common than they ever imagined. They got married while studying to pursue ambitious careers – he became a lawyer and she became a highly specialized physician.

Although both had strenuous study and work schedules, this incredibly driven duo had no plans to put starting a family on hold. They had four children strategically spaced in order to keep up with the demands of their professional and personal lives. With a little help from both sets of grandparents, Jeff and Gay raised not only their four biological children, but also 19 young foster girls. They obtained their license to foster in 2010 after reading a newspaper article explaining the need for foster parents. The timing seemed right, as three of their children were already paving their ways into successful careers. So, with an almost empty nest, Jeff, Gay and their eight-year-old daughter, Rayna, embarked on their journey in fostering.

A highly successful board-certified trial lawyer, Jeff is affiliated with the firm of Lesser Lesser Landy and Smith in Boca Raton. Since 1994, he has been an adjunct professor at FAU, teaching at least one class per semester in courses such as civil litigation, criminal law and personal injury. As if work and family were not enough to keep him busy, Jeff is also deeply involved in community service. A hands-on dad, he has coached more than 50 youth sports teams while also serving as a board member or volunteer for various organizations, including Kids in Distress and Friends of Foster Children. When asked how he wears so many hats without missing a beat, he recalls his high school days when he was captain of both the basketball and tennis teams, while still earning good grades. It takes a tremendous amount of self-discipline and grit to accomplish all Jeff has accomplished throughout his life.

Last and certainly not least, Jeff plays guitar in a classic rock band, The Fast Crowd, performing at a number of venues in Boca Raton. Talk about not missing a beat!

Rock on, Jeff! Thank you for all you do for our community. You truly are a Champion who inspires other Champions.

## COMMUNITY SPOTLIGHT: ABERDEEN



Thank You, Aberdeen Friends!

Through their philanthropic program called Aberdeen Gives From The Heart, residents of Aberdeen Golf & Country Club in Boynton Beach helped our Student Champions get off to a great fall semester start by generously donating essential supplies. Every member of the inaugural class received personal hygiene and household cleaning items, along with the good wishes of the Aberdeen community.

Helen Bass, coordinator of the program, said, “Aberdeen Gives From The Heart selected Champions Empowering Champions because it is amazing to help, even in the smallest way, those who are trying to better themselves. Keep up the good work!”

“This donation is especially meaningful to me because my husband Ray and I lived at Aberdeen for nine years,” said Champions Executive Director Kim Dunn. “We deeply appreciate the support of our former neighbors.”

Kim was an active member of the Aberdeen community, serving on the finance committee and winning the ladies’ golf championship five times. She’s gone from being a champion on the golf course to being a Champion at FAU!



## DONOR SPOTLIGHT: ERIC H. SHAW, PH.D.

If you're looking for a worthy cause to support with an end-of-year donation, please join the Champions Empowering Champions team. It's easy to do! Just click on the Champions account at the Florida Atlantic University Foundation: <https://fauf.fau.edu/empoweringchampions/>

Consider this testimonial from Champions donor Dr. Eric H. Shaw, emeritus professor of business at Florida Atlantic University:

“For me it’s a privilege to contribute to a really worthwhile organization. Champions Empowering Champions is designed to mentor students who have experienced foster care or homelessness to complete a university degree and achieve lifelong success. Not only is Champions Empowering Champions a worthy cause but it is also an extremely well-run organization, attracting dozens of volunteers – so my money goes to the cause and not to marketing or salaries.”

Gifts in any amount will be greatly appreciated. All donations are tax-deductible to the fullest extent allowed by law.

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