

## Speech by Doriana Smith

Lincoln High School, Class of 2012

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The GradNation Summit Conference is a gathering of educators, business moguls, students, sponsors and others seeking solutions to end the drop-out crisis, held in Washington, D.C. The America's Promise Alliance, founded by General Colin Powell and his wife Alma in the 1990s, hosted the three day event with hopes of bringing awareness to the issues surrounding America's youth. Their objective and mission were introduced to me and Lincoln Alternative Education Center's Leadership Team by our former after-school coordinator, Harold Bannerman, and soon spread around the school. He and my English teacher, Melanie Blagburn, teamed up and became an informative guide throughout the application process to attend the summit. Through their dynamic teamwork, other applicants and I learned that a limited amount of scholarships were being offered. This elevated the amount of interest for many of us. Though this process was rigorous, it was an awesome one. In late January, emails were sent out to all of those who applied. I was the only student at Lincoln Alternative Education Center who received the scholarship. Reading the email stating that I had received an all-expense paid trip to attend the GradNation Summit Conference was a feeling that was unexplainable. The support I received from my fellow applicants and teachers made that moment even greater.

On March 17<sup>th</sup> my English teacher and I were on our way to that Nation's capital. On a 6 a.m. flight, after a layover in Salt Lake City, Utah, we landed in Virginia. With a short drive across the bridge to D.C. we were at the Marriott Wardman Park Hotel, where the conference was held. On the 18<sup>th</sup>, the youth pre-conference was in full swing. Youth from all walks of life were in attendance. Some were drop-outs utilizing their second chance in receiving and education. Some students of alternative high schools, others were interns, tutors, and college

freshman. I and 53 scholarship winners from across the nation joined in a powerhouse of discussions. We explored alternatives in education, how we felt about our educational institutions, and what we can do in our community to help support the America's Promise Alliance mission.

On the 20<sup>th</sup>, a general session was held at breakfast in the ballroom. Gene Sperling, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, and the President/C.E.O. of Target spoke. Gene Sperling talked about not letting our mistakes determine our outcome and overcoming obstacles. Arne Duncan applauded students and educators who supported the conference and recognized certain people who displayed leadership. Also, Alma Powell shared great appreciation for all those in attendance and congratulated all the scholarship winners. Representatives from over 300 different businesses that helped to make up the 'Alliance' were recognized as well.

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During this session a researcher came up to speak. A map of the United States was displayed on the screen. It was color-coded. Dark green were states that were on board with America's Promise Alliance mission and had improved their quality of education and provided lots of alternatives to youth. Limes green were the states that were still trying to improve their stats when it came to the drop out crisis and showed that they wanted to do better. Then there were the yellow states. These states were those who had the worst drop out rates and were way behind in the race to end the drop-out crisis. California was a yellow state, being one of the worst defenders in the battle against the 'status quo'. I felt a slight embarrassment sitting next to people from different parts of America.

Listening to the researcher and seeing the failure within my state set off a flame. When the session ended, I took the opportunity to speak with Alma Powell. I asked, 'What can I do as a youth to help bring awareness to this crisis and support the Alliance?' She simply said, with a beautiful smile on her face as she patted me on the back, to 'Speak out. Get a group of people like-minded like you to commune, organize and speak out'. She graciously gave me a sincere hug. She took pictures without hesitation as we went about our day.

That night I began to think. I wondered how such a prosperous state--a state that people sit in awe at, can fail their youth. Whether it be due to ignorance of the drop-out crisis, or, as some youth feel, California simply doesn't care. Majority of drop-outs statistically of are those of minority groups. What does that say about California and what does that say about our Nation? These thoughts traveled with me through the duration of the conference and on my way home.

When I arrived at the Oakland Airport, my family greeted me with smiles that showed their pride and appreciation. Now that I am back, what is the next step? Now that the overwhelming feeling and excitement from the trip has begun to dye down and now that i can become more productive, what are we going to do about the drop-out crisis? Budget cuts surely aren't the answer. Why are our students paying for mistakes made by lawmakers and officials? Cheating our students' because of someone's 'oops' and 'uh-ohs' I feel should be unconstitutional. We as youth did not ask to be born on this cracked foundation. We simply inherited it from the last generation.

I was asked to speak because some people feel that I am articulate and smart and passionate. But, there are students that are brilliant and compassionate and may be more articulate than I am who are dropping out of school. Those deteriorating in drop-out factories. Those who

have made mistakes but want better for themselves. Some are pregnant, in gangs, homeless, and some aren't motivated. I, at one point in my educational journey, was not motivated, with a G.P.A. as low as 0.20.

*"I want to pose a question. If I was your child in danger of dropping out, not graduating and being underserved in my school district, wouldn't you want to explore every option, utilize every opportunity, and find every solution so that I can receive a quality education and graduate?"*

*I realize that I am not your child. But believe it or not, it takes a village to raise one. When one child fails we all fail."*

But, I was determined to overcome. That is what I wish to tell all young people. That you can overcome. I want to encourage the youth of this nation to be motivated. Yes, I was asked to talk about my trip to D.C. but there is more to be discussed. No, change will not happen over night, but its time for our community to raise a standard and get California on board with the mission. In closing, I want to pose a question. If I was your child in danger of dropping out, not graduating and being underserved in my school district, wouldn't you want to explore every option, utilize every opportunity, and find every solution so that I can receive a quality education and graduate?

I realize that I am not your child. But believe it or not, it takes a village to raise one. When one child fails we all fail: not only as a community and a district, but as a nation. A famous quote by Yoda says, 'Try not. *Do or do not.* There is no try.'



*Known as "big mama" to family and friends, Dorian Smith has a "big voice" which she uses to speak up on behalf of others and to make positive change. She plans on a career in teaching. With her is Principal Alex Harp.*