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Camden Celebrates Remarkable Students from Class of 2017

Resilient Graduates Receive Over \$100,000 in Scholarship Money, Meet College Mentors

June 9, 2017 – Camden, NJ – Last night Camden City School District Superintendent Paymon Rouhanifard joined school leaders, elected officials, and Subaru of America, Inc. to celebrate 22 remarkable young people who are graduating from Camden schools this month and demonstrate what is possible with an unwavering commitment to education. At the **4th Annual Remarkable Graduates Awards Ceremony** on the Camden County College campus in downtown Camden, Rouhanifard was joined by parents and special guests to honor these inspiring graduates and their accomplishments.

While just one in ten low-income, first-generation college students across the country earns a four-year degree, this year's Remarkable Graduates received extra support to help them continue on the path to success. Subaru of America awarded each college-bound student with a new laptop computer, and a \$1,000 scholarship to go towards the cost of living expenses for each of the four years they are enrolled in a college, university, or accredited training program. Over the course of their education, the 22 students could receive more than \$100,000 between the scholarship money and the laptop. The Camden Schools Foundation, a nonprofit that supports Camden schools and students, is administering the scholarship. In addition, the Rotary Club of Camden awarded each student a \$50 Barnes and Noble gift card, and they received certificates of achievement from the District, City, and County governments, as well as New Jersey's 5th Legislative District.

Furthermore, the honored students each met their college mentor, a volunteer professional from the community tasked with providing informal support and guidance as the student navigates the world of higher education and avoids summer melt.

"These remarkable graduates stand out from the crowd; they embody the potential and perseverance that our students bring to the classroom each day," Rouhanifard said. "Congratulations to these students and their families, and thank you to the educators and school-based staff who have guided, supported, and loved these young people on their road to graduation. When we talk about our graduation rate increasing and our dropout rate decreasing, these are some of the students we have in mind. Their success is our community's success, and I'm grateful for this collective effort."

"At Subaru, we strive to make the pursuit of knowledge as attainable as possible for the eager minds in our local communities," said Thomas J. Doll, president and COO, Subaru of America, Inc. "Through this donation, we hope to provide a strong foundation for young learners to follow their dreams towards higher education and pursue greatness."

Students heard words of encouragement from 2016 Remarkable Graduate Krystal Ford, a Camden High School graduate and current honor roll student at West Virginia State University. The keynote speaker was Jamil Miller, a 2012 Brimm Medical Arts graduate who graduated from Rowan University this spring with plans to attend medical school.

The 2017 Remarkable Graduates are listed below in alphabetical order by last name. These students were selected by their school communities. All five of the District's high schools are represented as well as its alternative programs. The School District started the Remarkable Graduates awards in 2014 to recognize the extraordinary obstacles some students persevere through in order to earn their high school diploma and develop postsecondary plans.

Interviews with students and their mentors are available in English and Spanish, and event photos are available upon request. Interested media unable to attend the ceremony are invited to profile or interview our Remarkable Graduates anytime in June. Camden City School District graduation ceremonies take place June 20 and 21, 2017. Times and locations are available on our website, www.camden.k12.nj.us/calendar.

Johana Abril, Gateway to College In 2014, Johana's family home caught fire, leaving the family homeless and unprepared to deal with financial challenges. After two years of moving frequently and switching schools three times, Johana believed that the best way she could help her family would be to drop out of school and get a job. Working with Dropout Prevention Officer Tommy Clark, Johana decided to stay in school and get support for her family in other ways. Johana sought help from the District's Homelessness Liaison, School-based Youth Services, and her Family and Operations Coordinator. With her family's basic needs addressed, Johana decided to attend the Gateway to College program because its flexible schedule meant she could care for her younger siblings, help her family, and earn her high school diploma. Johana, who was originally scheduled to graduate in 2018, will graduate a year early and move on to study business at Camden County College. In the future, Johana also hopes to volunteer her time to help other young people impacted by fires.

Makala Blecher, Woodrow Wilson Excel Academy, Camelot Schools When 14 year old Makala's mom was diagnosed with cancer, the high school freshman put her life on hold to care for her mother. Makala accompanied her mother to every doctor's appointment, chemotherapy session, and hospital visit. When her mother was too weak to manage housework, Makala provided her home care and ran the household. This left little time for school work. Four years later, Makala's mom is in remission, and her health is improving. Having missed so much school to care for her mother, Makala sought support from Camelot Schools' accelerated credit recovery program, which allowed her to make up missed credits and graduate on time. Makala will graduate from high school this month. Caring for her mom through two cancer diagnoses helped Makala become self-reliant and discover her passion for patient care. Makala will attend Camden County College where she will study to become an RN.

Edwin Espinal, Woodrow Wilson High School Born with a cleft palate that led to a speech disorder, Edwin never let his difficulty speaking clearly get in the way of accomplishing his goals. Due to his personal strength and drive, Edwin has earned a leadership position in his JROTC battalion, which he participated in during all four years of high school. In addition to managing his classwork, Edwin also taught himself how to repair computers. After undergoing surgery this year, Edwin returned to school immediately, ready to work hard to complete his senior year. Edwin will study to be a mechanic at University Technical Institute this fall.

Kyla Evans, Camden High School A unique, introverted, and sensitive young woman, Kyla explains that she's always had problems with bullies in school. Fiercely intelligent with a smile that lights up the room, Kyla is a mature and engaging young person who always felt like an outsider in school. Despite bullies at school and problems at home, Kyla learned to come out of her shell during high school, and began to succeed in the classroom and socially. Just as she was hitting her stride senior year, Kyla became homeless. Estranged from her mother and siblings and with no permanent place to call home, Kyla continues to come to school each day to complete her senior year and earn her diploma. Travelling from Philadelphia to Camden for school has not been easy, but Kyla is committed to earning her diploma so she can attend Temple University, where she plans to study communications and mass media.

Briana Faison, Gateway to College During high school, Briana and her family have been forced to move multiple times; experiencing homelessness, eviction, and a house fire that left them with nothing. During her sophomore year, Briana moved from Camden to Pennsylvania, where she was harassed in school by racist classmates. After seeking help from

the principal, Briana and her mother's concerns fell on deaf ears and her education was interrupted. While struggling to stay on top of her coursework, Briana's home caught on fire, destroying all of her belongings and leaving her and her family homeless. She returned to Camden, but because her mom was ill and remains out of work, their resources are limited and finding a permanent home is an ongoing challenge. Throughout all of this, Briana worked tirelessly to earn the credits needed to graduate while being a vital support for her mother and siblings. Briana will study nursing at Camden County College this fall, with plans to transfer to Rutgers University in 2019 and become a registered nurse. Briana plans to one day own a business providing nursing and healthcare services to individuals and organizations.

Ayanna Greene, Camden High School A self-proclaimed problem child when she entered high school, the Ayanna Greene graduating from Camden High School this month could not be more different than the 14-year-old girl who was suspended for starting fights her freshman year. Disappointed by her father, Ayanna's hurt turned to anger and an 'I don't care' attitude, which led her to missing school, putting others down, and disregarding her education. As a junior, Ayanna saw clearly for the first time how hard her mother worked to give her and her sisters a good life. Ever since that realization, Ayanna's been doing everything she can to improve her grades and be a good role model for her younger siblings. Today, Ayanna plays two sports, regularly makes the honor roll, and helps her mom out whenever she can. She looks forward to becoming an RN, so she can build a successful career and give back to her community.

Pedro Jaquez, Big Picture Learning Academy Born with a rare and little-researched eyesight condition called optic atrophy, Pedro had challenges with reading the board and completing his homework. Despite his desire to just keep his head down, do well in school, and "be a regular kid," Pedro spent much of his young life visiting medical professionals to help improve his vision. With his mom by his side advocating for him, Pedro connected in high school with the Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired, who have provided him a variety of learning aids that have allowed him to thrive in school as an honor roll student. This fall Pedro will study at Camden County College before transferring to a four-year college, where he plans to study graphic design. Pedro's goal is to become a 3-D animator and work for Pixar Studios.

Alex Medina, Woodrow Wilson Excel Academy, Camelot Schools Alex is the first to admit he never took his education seriously. Ever since elementary school, Alex was the class clown. He saw school as a venue to see his friends, eat lunch, and play around. When he was held back in middle school, he was already losing his way. His principal, Mrs. Danielle Phillips, took Alex under her wing and convinced him to work hard to continue on into high school. Once in high school, Alex soon became distracted, and fell behind once again. Over-age and under-credit, Alex finally knew that if he did not take school seriously, he would never amount to anything in life. He joined the Excel Academy, and went from a .58 to a 2.3 GPA in a single marking period. With the support of Mr. Kareem Ali, Alex is now graduating on time and is the first member of his family to graduate high school. He was accepted into six colleges, and looks forward to running track along with studying business management.

Johan, Creative Arts Morgan Village Academy Johan's parents moved to America in the 1990s to offer their two young sons a good education and a better life. In his senior year, Johan applied and was accepted to multiple colleges. Only upon completing his FAFSA did Johan face the startling reality that without permanent citizenship he would not be eligible for any financial aid and would be unable to pay for or enroll in a traditional four-year college. Rather than let his immigration status and finances deter him, Johan made plans to attend community college while he waits for his visa application to process. Although he has been on the waiting list for years, Johan has faith that if he does the right thing and lives a good life, he will ultimately be granted legal resident status in the country he calls home. Johan worked hard in school to honor his parents' sacrifice, and he still plans to become a psychiatrist dedicated to addressing mental health stigma in the Hispanic community.

Dyrell Mack, Woodrow Wilson High School Known in the halls of Woodrow Wilson High School as "Big Mack," Dyrell's enthusiasm for education and life is a force to be reckoned with. As a younger student, Dyrell learned early on that he needed to work hard to overcome speech and learning disabilities. Dyrell credits his improved pronunciation and reading skills on spending many hours reading the Bible as an elementary school student. His most recent challenge? Meeting the state's new, more rigorous graduation requirements. Not using his special education status as an excuse, Dyrell studied hard to improve his math score, and is now ready for his next challenge as a college freshman this fall. A

naturally inquisitive scholar who lives by the saying that 'knowledge is power,' Dyrell is a member of the National Honor Society and looks forward to studying history at Bloomfield College this fall.

William Mann, Brimm Medical Arts High School Growing up in Paterson, NJ with his family members addicted to drugs, William spent much of his early life abandoned or abused. William and his sister were regularly alone and locked outside of their house during the day and at night. Finally, when William was 11, he and his sister were removed from their mother, and brought to live with their father and his new wife in Camden. Just a child, William did not understand why he was moving, and if he could trust his new family. William's father and his adopted mother dedicated themselves to gaining William's trust, and rebuilding his faith, hope, and self-esteem. Today, William and his sister are both about to be high school graduates, and William will join his sister on the Rowan University campus this fall, where he plans to study marketing. William's degree will be the next step in achieving his dream to become an entrepreneur with a successful skateboard and snowboard business.

Ja'Nayzia Morris, Camden High School Addiction took its toll on Ja'Nayzia's mother, who has been in and out of her children's lives since Ja'Nayzia was young. When her father died suddenly during her 8th-grade year, Ja'Nayzia and her four younger sisters were orphaned. Homelessness, abuse, and poverty plagued Ja'Nayzia and her sisters, making them struggle for everything they have. Thanks to her strong mind and irrepressible personality, Ja'Nayzia's commitment to excellence has never wavered. A role model to her peers and siblings, Ja'Nayzia is a track star, dancer, and member of the Mighty Panthers Marching Band. Committed to education and her sisters, Ja'Nayzia will study education and African-American studies in Pennsylvania at Lincoln University this fall. Despite interviewing with Stanford University, Ja'Nayzia decided to attend college closer to home so her siblings always know their older sister is just a train ride away if they need her.

Briayasha Muse, Big Picture Learning Academy A focused young woman that refuses to let life's ups and downs distract her, Briayasha Muse knew people would expect her to drop out of school when she became pregnant in her junior year. Determined not to let her pregnancy define her, Briayasha attended school right up until her daughter Leila's birth, and was back in class less than eight weeks later. Briayasha is a committed student who studied for tests and fundraised for prom while juggling single parenthood with her 1-year-old daughter. If she had to miss school when Leila was a newborn, Briayasha refused to miss an assignment, asking classmates to take pictures of the classwork on their phones and send them to her. Looking forward to starting her own business, Briayasha plans to attend Camden County College this fall where she will study business and marketing.

Prescilla Prado, Camden High School

Elizabeth Polonco, Woodrow Wilson High School When Elizabeth and her family moved to the United States from Dominican Republic in 2015, Elizabeth was the first in her family to attend school in America. Learning English, overcoming shyness, and getting the grades to graduate high school and attend college were major challenges, but Elizabeth still found time to help the other English Language Learners in her school. She acts as an interpreter for those who know less English than she does, and she helps new students navigate the new culture whenever she can. While Elizabeth still gets nervous to speak up sometimes, she works hard to overcome that anxiety so that she can lead other students to master the English language and learn to express themselves, as she has done. Elizabeth looks forward to attending Camden County College in the fall and plans to study forensic science.

Sha'Quana Rogers, Brimm Medical Arts High School Sha'Quana's close relative was addicted to drugs and unable to care for her. So from a young age, Sha'Quana has lived with her grandmother, who was the only member of her family to not doubt her and question her self-worth. This negativity and self-doubt culminated in Sha'Quana's sophomore year of high school, when she tried to take her own life. Thanks to her own self-belief, and the support of her grandmother, aunt, teachers, counselor, and dance teacher, Sha'Quana found the strength to continue on. Sha'Quana will graduate in a few short weeks, with plans to attend college at Rowan University where she will pursue a career in nursing. A caring person who wants to give others the love and attention she never adequately received as a child, Sha'Quana is an inspiration to her classmates and will be the first in her family to attend college.

Kendya Russ-Still, Camden High School Camelot Academy Kendya's path to high school graduation this month has been anything but straight. Her childhood included more than a half-dozen foster homes and nine different schools in four different towns. There were times when she was separated from her seven siblings. There were times when she woke up at 5:00 a.m. in order to get to school on time. Through it all, Kendya focused on reaching her goal of graduating from high school. Now, Kendya is heading to Camden County College, where she plans to prepare for a career in medicine, just like her brother Kalyk, who graduated from Camden High and participates in the District's medical apprenticeship program. Kendya is looking to inspire her three-month-old son, Amir. Said Kendya, "I have to go to college and show him how to grow up, because if you show your child how to grow up then they can be like that."

Veola Scott, Creative Arts Morgan Village Academy When Veola skipped the sixth grade, she was a standout student academically, but she suffered from shyness around her peers. However, what her classmates didn't know was that Veola had recently lost her father to cancer, so while she excelled in the classroom, she was working hard to overcome the loss of her beloved dad and first teacher. Home schooled for most of her life, Veola's mother and father were her first teachers and role models. When her father passed, Veola was forced to deal with the emotional and financial impact of his death, along with the unexpected adjustment to a new school and social anxieties that came with it. Veola persevered through that difficult transition by keeping her nose in her books, and remaining dedicated to making her late father proud. Today, Veola is an active visual artist, member of the orchestra, and peer counselor. She looks forward to attending Rutgers University, where she will study occupational therapy, and build a career helping children realize their fullest potential.

John Smith Jr., Camden High School John never knew his mother, so he grew up with his father and four younger siblings. When his father died when John was 11 years old, he was ready to give up. The anger of never knowing his mother and losing his father was powerful, and for a brief time John let it get the better of him. With the support of his aunt and teachers, John matured and came to understand the self-destructive path he was taking. John recommitted to his education and his family and worked hard to be a good role model to his younger siblings. Following in his late father's footsteps, John will use his natural talents in the kitchen to pursue a career as a chef.

Andre Sterling, Camden High School Camelot Academy When his family immigrated to the United States from Jamaica, Andre wound up repeating his freshman year of high school not once but twice. Despite his desire to succeed in America and get his education, Andre began to be weighed down by bureaucracy, lost transcripts, and being the oldest student in his class. When he thought of giving up, however, Andre was reminded of the sacrifice his mom made to bring him and his brother to America, and the potential she saw in him. Motivated by a desire to live the American dream and become a successful engineer and businessman, Andre enrolled in the Camden High School Accelerated Program, and is now a model student who encourages his classmates to reach for the stars and never give up. After taking a year off to work and earn money, Andre will pursue an engineering degree.

Shavonne Williams, Woodrow Wilson High School Shavonne was born with Rickets, a bone disease that causes chronic pain throughout her body. Her two sisters are autistic, and her mother has fibromyalgia, so Shavonne has had an uphill climb since her earliest days. During her teenage years, she was responsible for taking her sister to school, paying bills, buying groceries, and taking care of her mother. Through it all, Shavonne kept her eyes on the prize, and this spring she boarded a plane for the first time and traveled to Paris with her French class. After graduation this month, Shavonne plans to attend Rowan College at Gloucester County and study health sciences.

Ashalee Vo, Woodrow Wilson High School