

CIS Student Finds Hope for Her Future



Denise Cook, a senior at West End Performance Learning Center.

Denise Cook, a student at Communities In Schools of Atlanta's West End Performance Learning Center, was one of six students who received awards in December for their entries in the Student Achievement Month contest sponsored by CIS of Georgia. At the awards ceremony, Denise presented her contest entry, a poster-sized piece of artwork, and explained it to her audience saying, "This poster represents the past, present and future for me. Before CIS, my life was like death. Everything around me was dead. The CIS staff have been my heroes. Now, I have a future and I know that I'm going to make it."

Last May, Denise gave up any hope of a successful future when she dropped out of Grady High School. Just a few weeks before the school's graduation ceremony, she found herself short on academic credits, unable to pay her senior dues and homeless. Denise's mother had substance abuse problems that resulted in a long period of unemployment and the eventual loss of their apartment. What should have been a happy time for Denise became a time of loss and uncertainty.

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While Denise's mother entered a shelter, Denise opted to live on the streets. "I was out by myself. Sometimes I stayed with friends, but I was never in the same place for long," said the Atlanta teen.

After months on the streets, Denise entered the shelter with her mother. "I got tired of not doing anything. I wanted to get help so I could go back to school. I knew that going back to school was the only chance I had to get where I wanted to get in life," Denise said with quiet determination. With assistance from counselors in the shelter, Denise entered the West End Performance Learning Center (PLC) in August.

The West End PLC operates as a partnership between Atlanta Public Schools and Communities In Schools of Atlanta. This nontraditional school helps teens who have dropped out or who are at risk for dropping out earn their high school diplomas.

Four months after entering the West End PLC, Denise is just one semester away from graduating. When asked about her plans for the future, the soft-spoken 19-year-old smiled saying, "I'm going to Georgia Perimeter College for two years, then transferring to Florida A&M University. I want to study journalism because I love to write." ■



Denise's winning artwork depicts her life before and after enrolling in the West End PLC.