

# Making a Dream a Reality

## *A story about Haja and her dream to attend college*

Last summer, right before Haja's senior year of high school, her mother was let go from her house-keeping position after working for the same company for over ten years. Without enough money to pay the rent, Haja, her mother Ramatu, and her younger brother, Alie, were evicted from their home in Silver Spring. Originally from Sierra Leone and experiencing their first time without a home, they had limited resources in the United States, so they turned to the county for help. In September, we welcomed their family into the Stepping Stones community.

Although forced to begin her senior year living in a homeless shelter, Haja always remained optimistic and hard-working, impressing and inspiring many with whom she came in contact. During her time here, she dutifully worked with our volunteer tutors twice a week, secured a job at Forever 21, cared for her brother with autism, attended workshops with the parents at the shelter, participated in her school's musical, and succeeded academically.



Lisa Miller from the Jamon Education Foundation, who hosts workshops for our parents, had the pleasure of getting to know Haja in those sessions. She says, "I could clearly see a special spark in [Haja] that would allow her to persevere beyond her circumstances. She is a strong woman with a wonderful attitude about life." One of our tutoring volunteers, Elizabeth Symonds, who was able to work with Haja, including helping with her college essays, states, "During our tutoring sessions she showed remarkable focus, whether she was preparing an oral

presentation on Malcolm X or wrestling with college application essay questions. Her engaging personality makes it a pleasure to work with her. With her college acceptance now in hand, [Haja] is poised to take a major step towards a bright and exciting future."

At Stepping Stones, we've made efforts to empower Haja to fulfill this goal by helping her file FAFSA information for financial aid, covering transportation and accommodation costs for college visits, and helping with college and scholarship applications. Although Haja and her family moved out a few months ago, we're continuing to help her make her dream a reality. In the fall, Haja plans to attend University of Maryland-Eastern Shore to study Social Work, a profession she feels inspired to pursue. Lisa Miller comments, "I am so impressed of her dream to grow up and help this world. When I asked her what she wanted to major in at college, she said she wants to be a Social Worker... 'I just want to help people.'"