

Mackenzie Stewart



“As you grow older, you will discover that you have two hands, one for helping yourself, the other for helping others.” These inspiring words may have come from Maya Angelou, but having spent some time with this Courage Award recipient, I could easily believe that this quote was hers. I am proud to introduce Mackenzie Stewart, a senior at Compadre Academy.

Mackenzie has overcome a variety of trials in her young life. She has lived in shelters and has experienced death in her family. She was diagnosed with ADHD, moved between schools, and is now a teen mother to little Zaiah. Despite her challenges, Mackenzie is motivated by the depth of her own wisdom gained in just 15 short years.

Mackenzie realizes that she has the choice to figure out what she wants and needs in her life. Amidst the chaos that finding the path through these life challenges can create, Mackenzie advises anyone going through similar trials to remember that everything becomes easier when you get your priorities straight and focus on the end goal.

From the early days following Zaiah’s birth, Mackenzie has had little support raising her baby. Mackenzie knew it was important to finish high school in order to create a promising future for herself and her son, so she researched various ways to make this happen. In her unrelenting search, Mackenzie found Tempe Union’s Teen Age Pregnancy and Parenting program (aka TAPP). The TAPP program not only offers services to pregnant and parenting teens, but it also provides reliable childcare on

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campus. Knowing that Zaiah would be cared for provided the reassurance and stability Mackenzie needed to take action. After begging her mother to enroll her, Mackenzie started her junior year at TAPP. This year, now that Mackenzie is a senior, Zaiah is attending off-campus childcare made possible by the Open Horizons scholarship paid for by Tempe Community Council.

Zaiah, is a precious source of love, light, and motivation on Mackenzie's most challenging days. He is the reason she pushes herself to be the best mom and student she can be. According to one of Mackenzie's TAPP teachers, "you will not find a more grateful teen." Mackenzie finds the silver lining in any hardship and manages to keep love in her heart. When Mackenzie is caught up with all of her school work, she can often be found reading books to Zaiah and other babies in the daycare. Mackenzie regularly attends support groups and parenting classes. She spends her time making others feel welcome and comfortable, and she'll often lend her support to new students especially if they are pregnant or parenting. Mackenzie is a natural leader, and despite what she's going through, she is always ready to help and encourage others. She has also been known to provide donations to the TAPP program.

Mackenzie has a three-hour round-trip commute to and from school, something most people would consider an enormous hurdle, but not Mackenzie! With Zaiah in tow, she rides two city buses and the light rail, in addition to doing a lot of walking. Mackenzie is determined to continue on her path. When asked how she manages to

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stay so focused, she simply replied, “you just have to acknowledge that difficult times don’t last forever.”

When MacKenzie is running late to school and her mom is unable to provide transportation, MacKenzie takes this in stride and credits her mom with being a good role model for independence. From instances like this, MacKenzie has learned the hard lesson that relying on others can only take you so far, and that this is what her own two hands are for.

Zaiah’s father has taken a more active role in the baby’s life which MacKenzie knows is a great thing. When Zaiah contracted COVID-19 during one of their visits together, MacKenzie spent time away from her baby for 3 weeks, worrying about him and deeply missing him as he recovered from the virus. Difficult times indeed.

MacKenzie holds down a job five days a week while helping to raise her younger sister and staying on top of her chores to show appreciation for having a place to live. MacKenzie continues to pursue her goal, and she is so proud to say that she has earned all her academic credits which puts her on track to graduate high school in May 2021- even through a pandemic!!

Outside of work, school, and mothering, MacKenzie enjoys doing her nails and playing with her pet rat. She also says that, as a girl from Austin, Texas, she’s passionate about music. She also loves science, genetics, and everything related to cells. She is considering joining the National Guard or securing a job in the Air Force

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while pursuing a medical career through the goal-focused path she has created for herself.

Humbled and surprised by this Courage Award nomination, MacKenzie feels strongly about thanking and recognizing the TAPP program- Mrs. Whitmyer, Mrs. Carmody, and Mrs. Wright- for everything they do for her. Teachers, like them, take time out of their day to pull her aside, discuss her grades, remind her of her path, let her sit in their classes (prior to COVID), lean on them when she needs a caring adult, and even give her diapers. As Ms. Whitmyer said, “Kenzie has such gratitude when you do things to help her, even though she’s earned them. She is grateful to the core. It makes you really want to walk with her on her journey.”

Mackenzie Stewart, I am moved by how you have used your two hands to help yourself through these very challenging days and how you also seek ways to lift up people in need. So, on behalf of the City of Tempe, and in honor of your resilience, your gentle and caring heart, and your ability to inspire others, I am proud to present this 2021 Youthfest Courage Award to you.