THE FUTURE LOOKS BRIGHT

“I plan on going back to Liberia to visit someday, and eventually spend time in both places,” says 19 year-old Jared Kolleh.

Before fleeing his home in Monrovia, Liberia five years ago with his mother, Jared spent his first 14 years enduring the bloody civil war there. They struggled for survival, as the war dragged on, starting and stopping over and over. “It was pretty hard because we had to run through places where shooting was going on, trying to find food and things - we went through a lot,” he recalls.

Desperate for a better life for her son, Jared’s mother sent him to neighboring Cote d’Ivoire for two years, but the French-speaking country was no refuge for a young English-speaking boy. So he returned to Liberia, having fallen farther behind in his schooling. “That’s why I am 19 and in 11th grade, but I am going to stay in school because I know that’s the right thing to do. Education is very important,” he says.

Thankfully, the Kollehs had family in Savannah and were able to relocate for good. They stayed with relatives for more than a year while Jared’s mother worked hard to gain their independence. They moved into a place of their own and, some four years later, Jared feels at ease with his new life. But it took some time to adjust to his new culture, even the little things were an anomaly. “When I came here, at first I didn’t like pizza. Now I am hooked on pizza! I can’t let go of pizza. I learned to love it,” he beams. And it went with many of the experiences Jared faced as a newcomer, perseverance was key. He spoke English well, but his accent made it difficult for others to understand him. Likewise, native accents made it difficult for Jared to understand others, too. “School was pretty different...and I had to get used to certain teachers because they talked fast. But I am doing well,” he says.

Jared credits much of his success to Boys and Girls Clubs of the Coastal Empire – Frank Callen Unit. “When I first got here, I went straight to school. Then they brought me to Boys & Girls Club about halfway through the year and that’s how I got started,” he recalls. Jared has been involved with the Club ever since; and, through its services, he has traveled the region, acquired leadership skills, participated in community service projects, received tutoring and learned how to deal with life’s challenges the right way. “They helped my confidence and self-esteem. They teach you values about self-worth and not using drugs. It helped most of us understand how to be confident and smart about what we do,” says Jared.
Grateful for all that the Club has given him, Jared has been paying it forward for many years as a volunteer there. “With these kids, I try to teach them when they fight it’s not the way to carry yourself and to approach it in a different manner, so people won’t act so disrespectful toward you,” he says. His selflessness was, no doubt, a factor in earning him nomination for Boys & Girls Clubs “Youth of the Year” award, an honor that was not lost on him in the least. “I think they recognized some things I am doing, that I am carrying myself they way I should.”

Jared now holds a part-time job at Kroger where he’s recently been promoted – which he applied for on the computers available to him at the Club – and is a full-time student, keeping his grades up. Yet he still finds time to volunteer for his beloved organization. How does he do it all? “I just balance it,” he says.

With his eye currently on Georgia State and Morehouse Universities, Jared plans to pursue a degree in Marketing. “There are so many different opportunities in Marketing, and I am a people person,” he says. With his sincerity and positive outlook, there is little doubt he’ll achieve all he aspires to and more.

*United Way of the Coastal Empire is proud to support Boys and Girls Clubs of the Coastal Empire. For more information about their services, please call 912.233.2939.*

-Pfeffer McMaken