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## Foster youth celebrated in ChildNet's graduation ceremony



Serenity Jones, 18, center, recently was recognized during ChildNet's Palm Beach County Foster Youth Graduation Achievement Celebration. (ChildNet/Courtesy)



By **Jan Engoren** · Contact Reporter  
South Florida Sun-Sentinel

ChildNet's Palm Beach County Foster Youth Graduation Achievement Celebration recognized 47 students who received their high school diploma, GED, vocational certification or college or graduate degrees.

Little Smiles, an organization which provides gifts and fun activities to children impacted by serious illness, homelessness or tragedy, donated 47 new Lenovo laptop computers to them.

"It's days like this that make it seem all worthwhile," said ChildNet CEO Larry Rein. "This is the most impressive, astounding and rewarding event that I've been associated with.

"This is a testament to all the great work of so many contributing organizations, including the Palm Beach County School District, Best Foot Forward, Place of Hope, the Children's Home Society and everyone who contributed to the success of these kids.

"We have a beautiful combination of a strong and resilient children who accomplished their goals aided by the support of our community," Rein said.

One of the students was Maria Batista, a graduate from Palm Beach State College in Lake Worth, who entered into foster care at age 9, and was later be adopted by her foster parents. She is a junior at Florida International University and hopes to one day become a social worker.

Ashlee Varney, program manager at Little Smiles, said, "As soon as we learned of this opportunity, we jumped on it. This is in alignment with our mission and we wanted to make these kids realize we value and support them.

"So many kids in foster care are often forgotten, or have odds stacked against them. We're so proud of these students for graduating."

Palm Beach Lakes High School graduate, Serenity Jones, 18, is another one of the graduates.

In the fall, she plans to attend Florida Southwestern State College in Fort Myers to study criminal justice and social work.

She hopes to become a behavioral analyst or child care worker.

To show her gratitude for those who helped her along the way, Jones presented thank-you plaques to her case manager, to the staff at Best Foot Forward and the Camelot Community Care Center.

"I'm grateful to ChildNet and everyone who helped me along the way," she said.

Through ChildNet's Keys to Independence program, they helped her with driving lessons, obtaining her license and insurance.

"They all helped me a lot over the years and I wanted to show my appreciation," she said.

What advice does she have for others in a foster care or group home situation?

"Take advantage of the services that are offered," she said. "Especially the therapy. It's not good to hold on to your feelings."

In extended foster care until age 21, Jones will be able to take advantage of the services until then.

Call 561-352-2500 or visit [ChildNet.us](http://ChildNet.us).