

Latoya Gardner

Latoya Gardner, 17, is a junior at Nashville's Maplewood Comprehensive High School. For the past three years, she has been an active member and volunteer of the YMCA of Nashville and Middle Tennessee. Latoya is very involved in the YMCA's P-TAP (Positive Theory Awareness Program) and Teen Leadership Council.

YMCA's P-TAP is an arts program that enables teens to communicate to other teens about making good choices when faced with difficult circumstances. P-TAP uses drama, dance and music performances to address themes like staying in school, preventing substance abuse, resolving conflict and resisting peer pressure. Latoya and her P-TAP peers organize all aspects of their program from writing the scripts to planning, producing and performing.

Latoya also represents the Margaret Maddox Family YMCA on the YMCA's citywide Teen Leadership Council (TLC), made up of teen leaders from the Nashville area's 19 YMCAs. For TLC, Latoya helps plan teen leadership weekends, featuring a variety of educational sessions, and citywide community service projects.

Latoya is just as active in school activities as she is in YMCA activities. She plays for Maplewood Comprehensive High School's track and tennis teams and is a member of the National Honor Society and ROTC. She lives with her parents, David and Willa, in the city of Nashville.

REMARKS OF La Toya Gardener

Good afternoon. My name is La Toya Gardener. I am a junior who attends Maplewood Comprehensive High School. After graduation, my goal is to attend the Air Force Academy and major in Aeronautical Engineering and then become one of the few African American women fighter pilots in military combat. In order to carry out my goals I know that I must work hard and keep a positive attitude and stay focused and close to my Lord and Savior. Out of all the activities I do, two YMCA programs – run *by* teens, *for* teens – have helped me achieve the positive attitude and motivation I need to achieve my future AND daily goals.

The first YMCA program is PTAP (Positive Theory Awareness Productions). PTAP shows teens how to turn negative situations into positive situations. We perform in gyms, churches, schools and other centers for other middle school and high school students. In PTAP, we use acting, singing, dancing, rap and motivational speaking to show youth and parents the consequences of the abuse of drugs, alcohol, sex, racism and violence.

PTAP makes a big impact on our audience and on the performers. I see that when the lights come up at the end of a show and I see tears in people's eyes. We in PTAP feel that these shows catch young people's attention because many of the teens we perform for don't relate to other programs that lecture about the same message. Just being in PTAP changes its members dramatically starting with that person's grades. Not only grades but self-esteem, respect for yourself and others, and you also begin to learn what it is like to be a role model and a leader. PTAP has taught me in order to help someone in their life, you, yourself have to live your life right (pardon the rhyme).

TLC (Teen Leadership Council) is another YMCA group of teens who are resources to the community by doing service projects around their hometowns. We plan the projects, like planting trees across the city, and then find other teen volunteers. TLC also plans weekend retreats for teens where teen can take educational sessions on topics from dealing with peer pressure to applying to colleges. Through TLC, I have learned how to communicate with other teens and how to solve our problems with conflict and resolution skills. I have also learned important lessons about how to be a responsible

and respectful leader and follower. These are lessons that every teen needs to know. I, myself, use them everyday whether I am sitting in my ROTC class or hanging out with friends.

Each of these YMCA programs have taught me that I can do more than I ever thought I could before I started attending the meetings of each. I have learned how I can make a difference through the theater arts and community service. I am blessed to have such opportunities. One day one of my own peers came to me with a question that children of all ages are asked everyday: "Do you want to smoke with me?" he said, passing me a bag of something I had never seen before in my life. I turned the substance down. After I said no there was a long silence. My own peer looked at me and said, "That's good I wish I never started."

Through PTAP and TLC I learned the danger of the abuse of such things as drugs, but I also learned through these programs that it is not always easy for everyone to say no to such temptations. Because of the confidence, love, support, and knowledge that I have from my family, friends, teachers and YMCA programs, I can say no, but what about the children who are not as blessed. I thank God for people like my parents, Willa and David Gardner and Roderick Glover and other YMCA teen directors who give me so much. These persons goals are to help us as growing children find out, how we are resources. I know that without them I would not be a balanced young woman with a goal to attend the Air Force Academy to major in Aeronautical Engineering and then to become a fighter pilot in military combat. Thank you.