



All youth ready for college, work & life.

READY BY 21™ CHANGE MAKER AWARD

ERIC POLK

Inaugural Recipient, 2008

The Ready by 21 Change Maker award is the highest honor presented by the Forum for Youth Investment. The award recognizes long-term achievement and impact in improving youth outcomes. Award recipients demonstrate a commitment to increasing the quality and quantity of youth investment and youth involvement in their community, state or at the national level. Recipients also promote a “big picture” approach to planning, research, advocacy and policy development.

Eric Polk was selected for this award due to his dedication and commitment to improving the quality and quantity of educational and economic opportunities for urban youth in his community and beyond. Eric became one of Community IMPACT! Nashville's first Youth Mobilizers in 2001. The organization was instrumental in helping Eric enter Wake Forest University in 2003. In 2004, Eric went on the record with the Forum, making a commitment to return to East Nashville to serve his community. “It's important for me to go back and say to young people, ‘I grew up here; I experienced the same things you are right now; I tried to make things better and here I am, willing to give more of myself to this community.’” Eric lived up to his commitment. He is now the Teen outreach Coordinator with the Martha O'Bryan Center in Nashville. His passion continues to shine through:

“I strive to continue to motivate, to inspire and to transform the lives of young people. I work from the mindset that young people are our greatest resources and their voice should not only be heard, but implemented into policies. They have real feelings, real goals, real desires, real lives that they want to see happen and it is my duty as a youth advocate to run that race with them to the best of my ability. Why? Well, the reason is simple: someone ran with me and that made the difference.”

Eric first became interested in Youth Development as at 16 years old when he became involved with Community IMPACT! Nashville, a new organization focused on engaging youth in East Nashville as community leaders. Eric's interest became a passion when he found himself on stage with Former Vice-President Al Gore in Nashville where he spoke on the importance of creating strong youth-adult partnerships. Shortly after, he spoke with the Forum on the importance of 21st Century Literacy Skills at the National Press Club.

CI! Nashville was one of the four affiliates of Community IMPACT! USA that became a part of the Forum family after the Forum and CI! merged in 2002. When the Forum challenged the affiliates to make sure their leadership activities really led to community impact, Eric was one of the youth who welcomed the challenge. “I saw CI! Nashville in the beginning as an organization doing youth-led activities.... Now I can say that it's more youth-action oriented. The youth mobilizers are there not only to create awareness, but to promote change.” Eric and his cohort of youth mobilizers set the stage for the organization's efforts to tackle major community issues from shutting down check-cashing places to increasing college access.

In 2003, Eric began college at Wake Forest University, later graduating with a B.A. in Communication and Sociology. While at Wake Forest, Eric developed his passion for working with young people into a talent. Today, Eric is working as the

Teen Outreach Coordinator with the Martha O'Bryan Center in Nashville, TN. The Martha O'Bryan Center is a Christian outreach ministry that supports and empowers individuals and families in need living in the East Nashville and surrounding community to attain greater levels of well-being and self-reliance, and provides opportunities for people to give through service. The Center's services are targeted to the 1,856 residents who live in 720 apartments in the James A. Cayce Homes, Nashville's oldest and largest public housing development, as well as residents of surrounding East Nashville neighborhoods.