

KEYS SCHOLARSHIP STUDENT: 'I WOULD HAVE BEEN ANOTHER KID LOST IN THE SYSTEM'

By Charlotte Twine - September 27, 2021

Edian Hernandez is a Keys kid with a dream. He is currently attending Orlando's Universal Technical Institute for auto mechanics. It's five days a week from 6 to 9 in the morning, then he goes to work at Seminole Toyota immediately afterward.

"I come home, change and go straight to work until 6:30," he said. "I come back. Shower. Eat. Sleep. Repeat."

But he has a mission, and it's the motivation that powers him through his tough schedule: He wants to return to Marathon and open his own auto repair business. But Edian wasn't always so directed in his life.

"Without Take Stock, oh man ... without the scholarship, I would have dropped out of high school. I would still be in the Keys in a bad situation with a couple of bad things on my record. The scholarship gave me an opportunity and changed my life. The scholarship is for poor kids with good grades. I don't think they realize how much they helped me. I would have been another kid lost in the system."

Take Stock in Children is a statewide Florida nonprofit that identifies students from low-income families in middle school and offers a contract for the student and parents to sign. If the child stays in school, out of trouble and maintains at least a C average, Take Stock will pay tuition for two years at a Florida state college and then two years at a state university.

But what many don't realize is that Take Stock also pays tuition for vocational schools. Marathon Rotary Club donated \$25,000 to Take Stock in Children Monroe and designated Hernandez as the 2021 Marathon Rotary Named Scholar specifically because of his interest in auto mechanics.

"Marathon Rotary has been supportive of career technical education in the past and Edian was a perfect fit," said Chuck Licis-Masson, executive director of the Monroe County Education Foundation for Take Stock in Children. "They liked the idea of Take Stock in Children going into a technical field with an auto or marine focus, supporting students locally to come back to Marathon to work."

"Edian is one of the only students going to technical school recently," said Katrina Wiatt, his Take Stock college success coach. "We're excited he's on this path."

However, the path to a Take Stock scholarship wasn't always smooth sailing for Hernandez.

"I was supposed to get into Take Stock in my middle school years, but I had trouble with behavior," Hernandez recalled. "I had a lot of stuff going on and trouble with grades. I had stuff in the house going on. But in high school I got taken in by foster parents — Michelle Smith and Brooks Dopps. They took me in and took care of me for a year and a half. They were the only reason I was able to get the scholarship. I never had a figure like that to keep me on track. They got strict with me and helped me get the scholarship."

Hernandez had a few Take Stock mentors, including during a period when he moved to Key West in 10th grade and his foster parents had moved to Jacksonville. Wiatt stepped in shortly after he moved back to Marathon for 11th grade.

"It was good to have somebody to talk to and express myself," Hernandez said about Wiatt.

"He came to our program as a ninth grader. He had been on Take Stock's watch list for a couple of years," said Wiatt. "Teachers said the program would give him focus. He lived with an unofficial foster family, which put him into gear. He was a classic gifted student, smart enough to get acceptable grades, but he didn't want to do homework; and attendance was an issue due to his family."

Toward the end of his high school career, his attendance was still a problem. But Hernandez told Wiatt about his dream to go to auto mechanics school, and he promised that his behavior would change.

"We as adults put too much emphasis on what kids do in high school," said Wiatt. "We forget they can be far more successful after high school. I've had a few kids like

Edian: 'Should we remove him from the program?' Sometimes we don't know until after. We gotta hang onto them and give them a chance. He was the type to be successful after high school, and he's proving me right."

For now, Hernandez is happy with his life in Orlando with his girlfriend. He will graduate with an associate's degree from Universal Technical Institute with the certifications needed to be a mechanic. He has tentative plans to stay in Orlando for a few years, get experience, then bring an auto repair business to the Keys.

"I grew up there and it will always be my community," he said. "It would be nice to have something to go back down to."



CHARLOTTE TWINE

Charlotte Twine fled her New York City corporate publishing life and happily moved to the Keys six years ago. She has written for Travel + Leisure, Allure, and Offshore magazines; Elle.com; and the Florida Keys Free Press. She loves her two elderly Pomeranians, writing stories that uplift and inspire, making children laugh, the color pink, tattoos, Johnny Cash, and her husband. Though not necessarily in that order.