

# 5 young women: Rickards senior Zenani Johnson is a champion for teens

Democrat staff writer 12:33 p.m. EDT March 27, 2016 (Photo: Special to the Democrat)

For Rickards High School student body president Zenani D. Johnson, community service is encoded in her DNA. Zenani, one of the *Tallahassee Democrat's* “Five Young Women to Watch” this year, has been volunteering since she was 7 years old — “because, that’s just how my family is,” she said, “always giving back.”

Her efforts began more simply, feeding the homeless or working with outreach programs at her church and the Special Olympics. Over time, however, Zenani took notice of the concerns voiced by community members, especially her peers. And they, in turn, looked to her for leadership. She knew students who didn’t know where their next meal was coming from, so she led awareness campaigns about food insecurity at the state Capitol.

She advocated for health and wellness issues with the Leon County Youth District Advisory. As an inaugural ambassador for Youth Health Leadership, she piloted health education initiatives geared toward her peers, participated in physical exercise sessions with elementary and middle school students during after-school programs and led forums on childhood obesity.

“I began to take on this role as a leader not really knowing how to do it,” she said. But the support of her family and the sage wisdom of her grandmother, Zenani explained, keeps her “grounded.” “Because of them, I learned that in the midst of obstacles you can still be successful,” she said. “They make me want to keep going. Now I hope to inspire others.” In high school, Zenani realized her passion for law and the justice system, ultimately creating a legacy for younger Rickards students and mapping future goals.

One day, a close friend told her he was chased by the cops, at a time when Tallahassee’s violent crime rate had spiked. He wasn’t doing anything wrong, she said, but, “it was his immediate reaction, to run.” She then sought to break that barrier between youth and law enforcement.



## TALLAHASSEE DEMOCRAT

Tallahassee student bridges gap between teens, police

In 2014, Zenani introduced “Teens and the Law” at Rickards, with the goal of bringing law enforcement officers and students together to engage in informed discussions. With her help, school leaders in other states have launched similar programs.

As she spoke with more teenagers about their concerns regarding law enforcement, the project became personal. Zenani began to direct her own field research, conducting surveys throughout Florida, on how people’s perceptions of cops vary, based on location, socio-economic status and other factors.



**Buy Photo** Rickards High School student body president Zenani D. Johnson speaks to local high-schoolers gathered at City Hall for a youth leadership forum which she organized Wednesday. (Photo: Joe Rondone/Democrat)

Now, the Duke University hopeful, who holds a 4.0 grade point average at Rickard’s International Baccalaureate program, plans to major in forensic psychology. Her classmates responded well to the debut of “Teens and the Law,” and for the next two years, [she saw the program’s expansion](#), with the help of a \$1,000 [Awesome Tallahassee](#) foundation grant.

## TALLAHASSEE DEMOCRAT

A day at City Hall, high-schoolers learn about leadership

In March, students from area private, charter and district schools participated. In addition to the workshop with law-enforcement officials, she organized the first Youth Leaders Forum, held at City Hall, where student government representatives met with local leaders in business, public and non-profit sectors and learned to develop their leadership skills. In a few years, Zenani has garnered numerous accolades — which she will not mention unless asked repeatedly — including the U.S. Presidential Volunteer Service Award, Senator Bob Graham Service Award, 2015 Florida Girls State delegate, Youth Making a Difference Mayor’s Award, James S. Rickards Student Volunteer of the Year and Oasis Center Girls Can Do Anything Award. She is also a [Best and Brightest finalist](#). “She is ahead of her time,” said Principal Doug Cook. “She is always setting that example and shows other students that they owe it to themselves to do what is right.”

Contact Amanda Claire Curcio by email at [acurcio@tallahassee.com](mailto:acurcio@tallahassee.com) or [follow @MandaCurcio on Twitter](#).