

East High student with mom in prison to graduate

Renaja

She's also got college acceptance letters

Justin Murphy Rochester Democrat and Chronicle | USA TODAY NETWORK

Renaja McDonald's mother has already let her know she won't be there for prom night. That's June 1 for East High School and her mother isn't due to get out of prison until six weeks later.

She hasn't specifically said, though, that she'll miss Renaja's graduation. That's June 23, and who knows whether she's accumulated some time for good behavior in the last 16 months?

It's possible. Renaja hasn't heard otherwise.

Whenever she gets free, Renaja is going to take her out for a meal, or shopping. Never mind that Renaja, 17 years old, isn't sure how she's going to pay this month's utility bill, which seems high, or her car insurance for that matter. Never mind that she's trying to save some money for college next year.

"I'm going to take her out," she said. "Because I know she ain't been having fun."

Whether Mom is there or not, Renaja will walk across the stage later this month to receive her high school diploma, the first McDonald she knows of ever to do so.

She'll do so with a 3.6 grade point average, a résumé full of extracurricular activities and a handful of college acceptance letters. She'll have in the audience her surrogate mother, an administrative assistant at East who took Renaja into her own home for weeks at a time this year. And she'll have her vision for the future, clear in both what she wants and what she's determined to avoid.

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East High senior Renaja McDonald gets a hug from Lorna Washington, the special assistant to the East EPO superintendent. McDonald is mostly on her own and her mom is in jail but she will be graduating and plans to go to college. PHOTOS BY CARLOS ORTIZ/@CFORTIZ_DANDC/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER



Renaja McDonald cleans up the culinary facility at East High.

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“My whole family is looking up to me; they know I’m the one who’s going to college,” she said. “I don’t know how this all has affected me. But I know I’m not going through it ever again.”

‘I’d adopt her if I could’

“BOOM!”

That’s how Renaja college admissions essay begins. It’s the sound of police bursting through the front door and taking her mother to the floor when Renaja was 12 years old.

She asked that her mother’s name not be published, but her abrupt arrest in 2013 and eventual sentencing in April last year on drug-related conspiracy charges sent Renaja and her three brothers reeling.

They stayed with an aunt for a while, but she now lives with her two older brothers, ages 19 and 24. Renaja pays her portion of the household bills with earnings from a part-time job at Rochester General Hospital.

She also plays sports in all three seasons, including softball in the spring, and is part of East’s renowned culinary program.

Her grades fell off in eighth grade when her mother’s legal trouble first began but she since has maintained a grade point average of 3.0 or better every marking period.

“The best child in the world,” East High Principal Marlene Blocker said. “I’d adopt her if I could.”

Irene Turner, an administrative assistant at East, has nearly done so. When Renaja had her wisdom teeth removed over the winter, Turner invited her to stay at her house for several weeks.

“It’s just like with my own boys,” Turner said. “Whatever I give them, I give her.”

Since then Renaja returns for a night or two at a time — when she needs the support, or just wants to be part of a family.

She described the first time she went to Turner’s house: “I didn’t have that feeling in a long time. Just — nice.”

Even apart from raising herself, Renaja had a difficult time getting into college. For one thing, schools wanted a parent to sign the applications and she doesn’t have one around.

Some asked for proof of her mother’s incarceration, an innocuous-sounding request that presented yet another hurdle.

“I’m 17 and I have to work to provide for myself,” she said. “I know everything’s not handed to you, but I don’t feel like I deserve to be going through all this right now.”

She hopes to attend the State University College at Buffalo, become a social worker and help children like herself who end up in precarious situations. In 10 years, she said, she’ll have a career and a house, possibly a family. She’ll be “making myself feel welcomed.”

A good mom

She wants her mother to be part of that life, even though she’ll have missed her prom and probably her graduation.

“My mom is really a good mom. She is,” Renaja said. “I know she didn’t mean to do this stuff. She was doing what she was doing to provide for us.

“I want to do the right things, and my mom didn’t have that option. She got on the wrong path and it was too late. ...

“I want to be more. Because I can’t be like my mom.”

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Renaja McDonald talks to her culinary instructor, chef Jeffrey Christiano, at East High.

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