

# **Akerman and National CASA/GAL Association for Children Announce 2021 Recipient of Academic Excellence Scholarship for Foster Youth**

Akerman LLP, a top 100 U.S. law firm, and the National Court Appointed Special Advocate/Guardian ad Litem Association for Children (National CASA/GAL Association) today announced Tawanna Brown, of Verona, New Jersey, an incoming freshman at Seton Hall University, as the 2021 recipient of the Akerman Academic Excellence Scholarship.

The Akerman Scholarship, which awards \$2,500 a year for up to four years of higher education, is funded through an endowment established in 2015 as part of the firm's historic \$1 million pledge to the National CASA/GAL Association. The endowment supports young adults who have spent part of their childhood in the foster care system, by helping minimize the financial burden of higher education. The honorees demonstrate outstanding academic commitment and readiness for success. The scholarship endowment is currently supporting four scholars, contributing \$10,000 annually to their educational pursuits.

"Tawanna has faced more obstacles in her 18 years than most people do in their entire lifetime, yet she found the strength to persevere and rise above it," said Beth Zafonte, chair of Akerman's Philanthropic Council. "Tawanna's struggles have motivated her not only to work hard, but also to help others who are currently in similar situations. She is truly an inspiration and Akerman is honored to award her with this scholarship."

“Assisting youth who have experienced foster care as they continue on their path to success is an important initiative of the National CASA/GAL Association. The scholarship provided through this partnership with Akerman is one of the many ways that we are able to offer tangible support to help youth achieve their full potential,” said National CASA/GAL Association CEO Tara Lisa Perry. “Tawanna has an incredibly bright future ahead of her, and we are honored to support her in her educational endeavors.”

Brown is a steadfast advocate for children in foster care, having entered foster care herself at 12 years old. As such, she is a devout member of the New Jersey Department of Children and Families Youth Council. The council was created to provide children who are currently in or have been in foster care with a voice. On this council, Brown is responsible for curriculum review, webinars, training courses, and the development of new policies, agendas and course programs. Additionally, she participated in the Essex County Prosecutor’s Office Summer Internship and the Howard University Crump Summer Law Program, working to get closer to achieving her dream of becoming a lawyer and continuing her advocacy work.

“We are so proud of Tawanna. She is a great example of what belief in oneself and the pursuit of excellence can yield even in the face of adversity,” said Marla Higginbotham, executive director of CASA for Children of Essex County.

Studies demonstrate the invaluable benefits a CASA volunteer brings to a child’s life. Children with a CASA/GAL advocate are more likely to do better in school. Only 50 percent of youth in foster care earn a high school diploma, compared to 91 percent of all students nationwide. Only 15 percent of foster youth attend postsecondary institutions, with only about three percent completing college due to insufficient support, lack of appropriate guidance, and unmet financial needs. The goal of the Akerman Scholarship is to help these

students afford higher learning so that they will be more successful after they age out of foster care and live independently.