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NEWS FROM SHORE UP! Inc.

**LOCAL TEEN TO ADDRESS FORMER PRESIDENT
GEORGE BUSH AND
FORMER FIRST LADY BARBARA BUSH**

Salisbury, MD--Tuesday, May 17, 2011 will not be just another typical day for Cierra Fletcher. On that day, as the student speaker at the annual Celebration of Reading for the Maryland Family Literacy Initiative, the 18-year old will be addressing an audience of 1300 family literacy supporters that includes former President George H. W. Bush and former First Lady Barbara Bush, as well as the founders of The Maryland Family Literacy Initiative, Doro Bush Koch and her sister-in-law, Tricia Riley Koch. The Maryland Family Literacy is funded by the Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy, whose goals include establishing literacy as a value in every family in America. Each year the Foundation's Maryland Family Literacy Initiative awards grants of up to \$50,000 each to 10 family literacy programs serving low-income, low-literacy Maryland residents.

How did a woman--who three years ago was 15 and pregnant--come to the point where she is giving a speech to an audience that includes a former United States president? Partly through the help of SHORE UP! Inc.'s Wicomico Family Support Center (WFSC) in Salisbury, MD, which has received a \$50,000 grant from the Barbara Bush foundation for Family Literacy for the last two years. Cierra and her two children have all increased their literacy skills through WFSC's Family Literacy program, which used grant funds to implement a comprehensive family literacy program. As a result of writing about her positive experiences with the literacy program at WFSC, Cierra was chosen out of many family literacy program students to address guests at the MD Literacy Initiative's celebration.

Cierra's path in life has not been easy. By the age of 17 she had two small children. Today her son, Ry'keem, is three years old and her daughter is 19 months old. She describes the family literacy program as "excellent." She states, "It builds up communications skills with me and my children. I use everyday activities-like playing games-as literacy tools." In sum, Cierra is now making everything a learning experience.

Cierra explains more about the positive changes in her children. Her son has been diagnosed with a developmental delay. (He receives help for this condition through a program at another organization.) At first he just pointed to objects instead of using words to describe them. However, now his languages skills are improved and he is starting to talk more and more. His speaking has had a positive effect on his sister, who Cierra says is "talkin' up a storm" and picking up on words her brother says.

While her children's education is a priority, Cierra is equally hard at work on her own education. She took exams to earn a General Equivalency Diploma (GED) and passed all except math, which she is brushing up on now. She expects to earn her GED soon and will then enroll in Wor-Wic Community College to study criminal justice. She wishes to become a probation officer. She likes to help people and wants to motivate others not to give up. After all, Cierra herself did not give up. When asked what keeps her motivated to keep working on her goals, she says, "I see other teen mothers struggling worse than I am. If they are going to school, I can too."

"We are very proud both of Cierra and the work of the Wicomico Family Support Center, including its literacy program," says Freddy Mitchell, SHORE UP! Inc.'s executive director. He added, "This remarkable young woman has worked hard to get where she is."

Cierra expounds on the issue of teenage mothers, noting that there are a lot of teen pregnancies in Wicomico County. [The teem birth rate-or birth rate among teens ages 15-19, out of 1,000 live births-for Wicomico County in 2009 was 44.7, according to the MD Vital Statistics Administration. The same source shows that the MD rate in 2009 was 31.7. The Centers for Disease Control reports the 2009 US rate as 39 .] She says that they think it is cute having a baby, but that once it comes, "it is so much responsibility." Cierra's children's father provided child care at one point, but he went to Mexico and she was left to fend for herself. She stresses that she has always taken it upon herself to watch her own children. Taking on so much responsibility at an early age forced her to mature rapidly, she reflected.

When asked what she would say to other teen moms, Cierra does not hesitate with her answer: "Even though it's hard, don't give up. Even if you don't have support systems, realize that there are resources out there. You're not alone. Don't be negative. Keep positive thoughts." Cierra used these ideas in her own life. She found out about WFSC at her high school and enrolled in the program, which serves pregnant women, parents of children ages birth to three, and the children themselves. Children are cared for by WFSC while parents are on site studying, going to parenting classes, or working on job skills. One key component of the center's family literacy program is that mothers and children

spend time reading together. The WFSC receives funding and oversight from the Maryland Family Network, which works with the network of Family Support Centers across Maryland.

Meeting President Bush and the former first lady makes Cierra feel "very excited." She feels that her speaking is "a very good opportunity . . . a very good achievement." While many others might be quite scared, Cierra simply states, without pride or arrogance, "I am confident I can do the speech."

For more information about the Wicomico Family Support Center, call 410-860-9194. For more information about SHORE UP!, call 410-749-1142.

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