

## TARAE GRAVES

California State University, Fullerton  
Criminal Justice/Women's Track & Field  
Nominated by: Sabrina Sanders

Tarae Graves has achieved a 3.5 GPA at Cal State Fullerton and has earned her way into academic honors for the last four semesters in a row. She writes eloquently about the support that she has received from coaches, administrators and teammates. What she has not been able to enjoy is support from her family. Tarae was removed from her home and placed into foster care almost as soon as she was born because it was determined that she had drugs in her system at birth. Six of her siblings were separated and placed in foster care as well when her parents were deemed incapable of providing appropriate care for their children. She has been in three different foster homes but never felt like she actually had a home to call her own. She lived in one of the homes for twelve long years and during that time she was not allowed to participate in school activities, watch television, or have contact with people outside of school and the house. It must have felt more like living in a prison than it did living in a home. As a result, she had attempted suicide three times before her 18<sup>th</sup> birthday as a result of depression and feelings of hopelessness.

As bad as it seemed inside the foster homes, becoming emancipated at the age of 18 didn't turn out to be much better at first. Tarae was suddenly treated as if she were a responsible adult but she been taught precious few of the skills that she needed in order to survive as an adult. She did not know how to cook, how to do laundry, or how to manage money. She recognized that she needed a support network and she turned to track and field in order to find that support. At long last she felt that she was part of a larger family and that there were people who truly cared about her. She is part of the Guardian Scholars program that targets children who came from foster care or institutionalized care and supports them as they progress toward college graduation. Tarae now volunteers her time with youth who are in the foster care system and helps them to understand that they too can have goals and achieve great things. In her essay Tarae wrote that her Coach helped her to realize that she "wasn't looking at what I did have, instead of what I did not have". This realization has stayed with her to this day and she now recognizes that she has the support of friends, family and a support network of coaches and teammates that help her on a daily basis. She still has moments where she feels lonely or depressed and often wishes that she could share her honors and accolades with family, but she is thankful for the many people in her life who do care about her and celebrate her achievements with her. As a criminal justice major she is working toward the day when she will be able to make a difference in the lives of those who come behind her and to help make the world a better place for those who seem to be facing insurmountable challenges as well.