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Essay Contest Winners Claim Prizes – Three high school students claimed prizes at the awards ceremony for the 6th Annual FirstCare Medical Plan Autism Awareness Essay Contest. Pictured from left to right are: Marcia Newball, Executive Director of REACH Bahamas; Shenae Davis, REACH Representative; Alexandria Rolle, Grand Prize Winner; Aretha McDonald, First Runner-Up; Corinna Neely, President of FirstCare Medical Plan; Vanria Jack, Education Officer, Ministry of Education, Science & Technology; Marcellus Taylor, Acting Director of Education, Ministry of Education, Science & Technology. Not pictured is Second Runner Up, Joseph Townsend, 11th grade student of Sir Jack Hayward High School in Grand Bahama who could not attend this year's ceremony.



Grand Prize Winner Alexandria Rolle and First Runner-Up Aretha McDonald jump in excitement with prize packages at the awards ceremony for 6th Annual FirstCare Medical Plan Autism Awareness Essay Contest



Grand Prize Winner Alexandria Rolle, an eleventh-grade student at St. Augustine's College, reciting her winning essay.

FirstCare Announces Winners of 6th Annual Autism Awareness Essay Contest

FirstCare Medical Plan, The Ministry of Education and REACH partner once again to host essay contest for high school students.

Nassau, Bahamas – FirstCare Medical Plan, The Ministry of Education and REACH Bahamas announced the winners of the 6th Annual Autism Awareness Essay Contest at an awards ceremony held this morning.

This year's contest challenged high school students nationwide to pen a 1,500 word essay under the theme "If you had the power to pass two laws that would better the lives of children with Autism, what would they be and why?"

Entries were received from students throughout The Bahamas, including Grand Bahama.

"Better knowledge of Autism leads to more understanding, tolerance and acceptance," stated Corinna Neely, President of FirstCare Medical Plan. "Our goal remains to challenge students to expand their knowledge on Autism and create a society that is empathetic and promotes inclusion for those affected by this disorder."

The essay contest is held every April, internationally recognized as Autism Awareness Month. Autism remains the most rapidly growing critical developmental disability within The Bahamas.

"Too often in our society, people are only worried about "moi", but life does not only entail "you", but more of how you can use your talents and abilities to advance and mobilize others to do the things that are made for the common good", Marcellus Taylor, Acting Director of Education. "Even if we have made some intervention with a student and they're still unable to make a positive contribution to the community, we as a society, have a moral responsibility to help those who can't help themselves. In any society, we are only as good as how well we take care of those who can't take care of themselves."

A panel of judges from The Ministry of Education and REACH poured over the essay submissions to select the three winners. The winners were awarded cash and prizes valued at more than \$2,000.

Alexandria Rolle, an eleventh grade student at St. Augustine's College, was named the grand prize winner. Rolle received a \$300 cheque from FirstCare Medical Plan, a tablet courtesy of Custom Computers, and gift certificates from The Shoe Village, John Bull and AML Foods Ltd.

In her essay, Rolle proposed that there be an amendment of the Education Act to legislate mandatory inclusion for students with Autism and other special needs in the regular classroom, noting, "Autistic students would learn to assimilate into society and develop social skills with the help of their parents, teachers and

peers." Rolle also proposed that the Education Act be adjusted to include mandatory lessons on Autism for all students at the Primary and Junior High School levels, so that "students would learn what Autism is and now "normal people" should treat those with the disability".

First runner-up, Aretha McDonald, an eleventh grade student at Aquinas College, and second runner-up, Joseph Townsend, an eleventh grade student at Sir Jack Hayward High School in Grand Bahama, both received a \$200 cheque from FirstCare Medical Plan, as well as gift certificates from The Shoe Village and AML Foods Ltd.

"This year, government offered us Crown Land, praise God, and it's a critical step forward for us", Marcia Newball, Executive Director of REACH admitted. "We see it as part of our vision being completed in the "cradle to the grave" program that we have planned for children on the Autism spectrum, so that after the summer camps and other training, the children can become young adults living independently of their families, able to support themselves. Our children are a part of our world, they should not be seen a world a part. We have a lot on our plate and we wouldn't have gotten this far without continued support from organizations like TriStar. We look forward to continue working with TriStar, the schools, children, volunteers and parents."

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