

## PACE Center for Girls

### TEACHING JORDAN HOW TO BE JORDAN

It was difficult to know Jordan Cooper when she was in ninth grade at Florida State University School in Tallahassee, Florida. Shy and very quiet, she had few friends and seemed to shrink even further inside herself every time she was bullied by the other kids for making good grades in class.

The bullying began to take a toll, and Jordan's grades started slipping. "I kept thinking she was going to drop out, that she was going to be my kid with a G.E.D. — not because she's not smart, but because it got to the point where she had zilch motivation," says Jordan's mother, Bernetta Ashford-Cooper, a senior paralegal at a Tallahassee law firm.

Things weren't very different at home. With six siblings and six half-siblings from her father's first marriage, Jordan was one of 13 children. She had almost no relationship with her father, who had shut down emotionally when one of Jordan's older brothers was killed by a drunk driver. With her mother, Jordan was uncommunicative and often insolent.

"I didn't want to stay with my mother anymore. I wanted to do my own thing," Jordan recalls of that period. "And in school, I didn't talk to nobody. Those kids were different from me.... They weren't people I could hold onto."

When someone recommended the PACE Center for Girls, Bernetta was skeptical. "I thought PACE was for *bad* kids." Indeed, PACE (Practical Academic Cultural Education) was founded in 1985 in recognition that girls involved with the justice system needed something other than placement in programs designed for boys. It developed a curriculum using a model that addresses eight primary factors found in research to affect the likelihood of delinquency among young females. Since then, the organization has continued to be research-based, relying on an annual Outcome Measure Achievements study to track success and make curriculum changes.

As PACE grew from one center serving 10 girls in Jacksonville into 17 centers throughout Florida, it broadened its mission to include all girls at risk. Nearly 30 years after its founding, PACE is seen as a national model for improving school success, employment and self-sufficiency for girls, in addition to reducing recidivism.

When she arrived at the PACE Center for Girls in Leon County, Jordan immediately encountered Spirited Girls, a gender-responsive life skills program that includes confidence-building sessions and successive units on six personal domains — physical, emotional, intellectual, sexual, spiritual, and relational — all from a female perspective.

“Being a female is the most phenomenal thing in this world, but in America, they mute us, they tell us, ‘You’re just a girl,’ ” explains Bernetta. “At PACE, they teach Jordan to fight for her future like a girl...to fight for her education. Boys don’t have to fight for a future. They just have one.”

“The girls connect with who they are as individuals — they recognize their own strengths. This is something they may never have done before,” says Lashawn Gordon, the program director at PACE Center for Girls in Leon. “We do a lot of exercises to teach them how to find their voices so they learn how to be advocates for themselves.”

In addition to Spirited Girls, Jordan also connected with PACE’s academics. “I think I got a lot more done than in a regular school setting,” she says. “It was less students...I was more focused. I love the way the teachers work with us one-on-one.” It wasn’t long before she made the school’s honor roll.

But while Jordan’s school life was improving, according to Bernetta, “things went from bad to worse at home. At first, I couldn’t stand PACE. I didn’t like all their talk about mentorship. I wanted them to teach my kid, I didn’t want them to be in her life. I didn’t think that anyone could mentor her besides me. I kept thinking she was just being a 15-year-old and that I shouldn’t call the school because it had nothing to do with them. But at the end of the day, I couldn’t do anything with Jordan, so I finally decided to call her counselors.”

That’s when Bernetta’s opinion of PACE began to change. “They showed me that schools are not just about education, but the whole life of the child. How are you learning if it’s all about what’s in a book? They’re teaching her more than what the book says.”

Jordan’s counselor, Suzanne Caldwell, began meeting regularly with Jordan and Bernetta. “For Jordan, I think the biggest thing was that there are a lot of kids in the family,” says Lashawn Gordon. “She wanted enough time with Mom and wanted to make sure that Mom is proud of her.”

Suzanne encouraged Bernetta and Jordan to spend more time together, and Bernetta started to leave work early to pick up Jordan at school. “Those days were great for Jordan,” says Lashawn. “She didn’t have to ride a bus. She’d tell everyone, ‘My mom is picking me up today.’ ”

“If it hadn’t been for Suzanne, I don’t know where my relationship with Jordan might have ended up,” says Bernetta. “We may never have had a positive relationship.” And as for Lashawn, “Jordan is Lashawn’s baby as much as she’s mine,” Bernetta continues. “I just gave her birth.”

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### **Once a PACE girl, always a PACE girl**

It didn't take long for Jordan to move up to level three in a PACE system that rewards good behavior and academics with privileges, including a trip to an amusement park. At home, the mother-daughter relationship improved dramatically. "Jordan was in a gardening program, and she informed me that we'd be growing vegetables and that everything was going to be organic," Bernetta recalls. "The education they've given her has made her want to be a healthy kid. PACE knows every girl. They know how to pull talent out of them that the girls don't necessarily show otherwise."

After 12 to 15 months at PACE, the young women return to their private or public school. "We have transition counselors who check in with the girls on a consistent basis," Lashawn explains, including phone calls, house visits, and high school visits. PACE also invites the girls back to the Center to reconnect with their PACE friends and to attend workshops on such topics as budgeting, completing college financial aid applications, how to live independently, and child care.

Jordan's re-entry to Florida State University School did not go well. She felt it was too big and cold. "The classes were a lot more difficult. I was struggling to keep up," says Jordan. "I got along with the kids fine, but the teachers were more focused on the whole class rather than paying attention to individual students. After PACE, I wasn't used to that."

"They wanted Jordan to blend in with the scenery," says Bernetta. "They didn't want her to be different. She wasn't going to do that after her time at PACE."

After one year at the mainstream high school, Jordan asked PACE if she could return, and was thrilled to go back for eleventh grade. In addition to the smaller class size and greater personal attention, "PACE has extracurricular activities they didn't have at the other school," Jordan explains, referring to the theater group and a Spoken Word Troupe, both of which she joined. In addition, "We have counselors here — people we can go to when we have problems."

With the Spoken Word Troupe, Jordan engages in community outreach as a PACE Ambassador. This has included a National Girls' Day trip to speak at the Florida State Capitol in Tallahassee, as well as a trip to Orlando to perform for the PACE Board of Directors. "She always has a big smile on her face and she's a girl who believes in the program," Lashawn says. "It's genuine when she's talking to other individuals in the community."

As for the future, Jordan intends to enroll at Tallahassee Community College. "I plan to study to become a doctor — an OB-GYN," she says. "It's something I've wanted to do since I was a child."

Bernetta is very supportive of her daughter's goals. "I'm very proud of Jordan and I'm very thankful for PACE," she says. "If Jordan hadn't found PACE, she probably would have already been pregnant; she would have been put out of my house by now. PACE taught her individuality. They allowed Jordan to be Jordan."