

STATEMENT OF
JAMEELA ROLAND

BEFORE THE
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON WAYS & MEANS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON HUMAN RESOURCES

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Subcommittee on Human Resources
Committee on Ways & Means
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Davis, and Members of the Subcommittee on Human Resources:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before your hearing on Opportunities for Youth and Young Adults to Break the Cycle of Poverty. My name is Jameela Roland. In August of 2015, at age 24, I was homeless. For two months, my mother, my dog and I bounced between relatives and motels. I was working full-time to support the three of us, and I had only one goal: survive. Because I knew this trial would come to an end if I held it together and stayed strong in my faith for a better future.

The thing about surviving, however, is that it is vastly different from thriving. While both only require a pulse, the difference is in the quality of life you experience. And I've always known that survival is essential, but after getting a taste of how bitter it can be, I wanted more than that; what I wanted was to thrive. I wanted survival to be distant memory, no longer my goal for everyday life. I wanted the richness of life that comes when you have the security of employment in a career that encourages growth. I wanted to contribute my voice and my experiences to the world. This experience with homelessness was my wakeup call.

So, I began looking for opportunities. I'd heard of Year Up several years before, not long after I had graduated high school and was filled with optimism and lofty aspirations. Back then, I immediately wrote it off, convinced that the only way I could succeed in life was by starting out with a college degree.

So, I spent the years after high school bouncing around different community colleges, firm in my belief that this was the only avenue for achieving my goals. The importance of a college degree was ringing through my mind, echoing the voices of my dad, my family and friends, and of course, high-school advisors. My family was always there to support me, but except for my dad, no one I knew had graduated from college. I was lost in the crowd, unable to find the support that I needed to make it work. But I kept trying.

I felt like someone had shown me the door to success, but hid the key. I learned more about what I didn't want than what I did. And the entire time, I was alone. The reality of achieving this critical goal was an uphill battle. Life was teaching me a lesson and after seven years out of high school I came to the realization that maybe the traditional college route wasn't for me.

Through all of this, I worked. I lived. I failed. I grew. The one constant in my life was a hunger for something more. After the trials and tribulations of experiencing homelessness, I wanted to give up on school. I was giving 110 percent of myself and getting farther away from where I wanted to be. Why should I continue to invest my time

and money into a system that wasn't willing to invest anything into me? And I wasn't willing to risk the stability I had just fought so hard to achieve.

So, when my younger sister called me one evening, almost exactly a year ago now, to tell me about Year Up, I knew that I had to explore this opportunity. After all, my previous standards about how to succeed hadn't gotten me anything but debt and disappointment. At this point, I was exhausted. I had a lot to lose, but even more to gain.

When I started Year Up, I realized this program was like nothing I had ever seen before. I had one chance to take this opportunity and do what I hadn't: thrive. Because Year Up had my back like no one else had before.

Year Up has a high support, high expectations environment. During the first six months of the program, that meant I had to be at class every day, on time, and fully engaged to the process. If I didn't hold up my end of the bargain, I was held to the contract that all Year Up students sign. If I was one minute late or missed an assignment, I would lose points and, more importantly, dollars from my stipend. When I met, or exceeded the expectations, I was rewarded. And I learned that nothing was being given; everything was earned through hard work and dedication. Year Up did their part to eliminate or minimize external obstacles through the services of support staff that were there to assist me so that I could stay focused on the rigorous academic program. I attended classes Monday thru Friday from 8:30 – 3:30, completed daily assignments, collaborated regularly with my classmates, and participated in weekly feedback sessions – teachable moments that helped me grow as an individual and as a professional.

From the beginning, the staff represented Year up as more than a schooling opportunity. They represented a movement, created to change the lives of those who are going through struggles like mine. Walking through those doors every day, I know my peers know the Struggle. The staff and mentors know the Struggle. They took the time to get to know me and my goals and dreams, to laud my strengths and bring focus to my growth areas. They gave guidance and advice and kept me focused when I was too tired to see straight. They taught me what it takes to navigate a corporate environment. Not just as an entry level contributor, but as a young black woman moving into a realm dominated by older white men.

And then during the last six months of the program, they placed me at my internship at Microsoft. Microsoft! To many, that may not seem so big, but for me it meant so much. Before joining Year Up, I was earning a minimum wage and the huge opportunity Microsoft represented was beyond exciting. They placed me with a team dedicated to helping me achieve my goals, to learning more every day, and to helping me get a sense of my own power. After my internship, I was hired on as a vendor as the Studio Technician for the Microsoft IT Showcase Stock Room Studio, and was just recently hired as a full-time employee as a Business Operations Associate earning four times more than I had before!!

And I haven't forgotten about that degree. I'll be taking classes at my own pace, with a clear goal ahead of me. At Microsoft, my mentors Jim and Daniel were the perfect Dr. Who's to my Martha Jones. Al, my manager, kept me inspired and noticed my potential from across the pond. My Year Up coaches kept my ego in check, while my fellow coachees kept my perspective in check.

By telling my story today, I hope to inspire the committee to understand that given opportunities, more young adults can achieve more for their lives. Year Up provided me a hand up and in one year, I went from earning a minimum wage and being homeless to living comfortably above the poverty line. Now here I am in front of you, no longer fighting to survive. I'm a young, responsible, working woman with a fantastic new career trajectory in front of me that will allow me to achieve my fullest potential. One year ago, I joined Year Up and made the choice to learn to thrive; it was the best decision I have ever made.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jameela Roland', written in a cursive style with a long horizontal flourish at the bottom.

Jameela Roland