

City Tech Alum establishes nonprofit to help at-risk teenagers in East Flatbush

"What would you do with your life if you knew you could not fail?" That's the question Ijana Nathaniel, 30, an alumna of New York City College of Technology (City Tech), asked herself well before she graduated last June.

Her answer was to start an East Flatbush-based nonprofit youth organization called Dare

2 Dream Leaders (D2D) with the goal of encouraging teenagers to become community leaders. In just one year, Nathaniel, serving as president, assembled a five-member board of directors (including two City Tech alumni), partnered with the Cerebral Palsy Associations of New York State, set up a student internship program

with City Tech and saw two local schools, IS 240 (Andries Hudde) and Erasmus High School for Services and Learning, adopt the D2D program.

Nathaniel recently helped coordinate Career Day at IS 240 for the entire eighth grade class, and she spoke at the event. "I had all of the students do 'vision boards' in which they explored their dreams and how to realize them. The event was a huge success!" she exclaimed.

Additionally, D2D has sponsored Jeans 4 Teens, a community-building clothing drive in collaboration with Aéropostale clothing stores and Dosomething.org. Young volunteers helped to collect over 500 pairs of jeans for teens in shelters and orphanages. It also held its first fundraiser in mid-January, the proceeds of which are being used to fund the D2D



Ijana Nathaniel

programs.

D2D was born out of Nathaniel's desire to help people, strengthened by a family tragedy. She started volunteering at the age of 12 and her commitment to giving back to her community was heightened when, in 2003, she lost an older brother to street violence.

"I felt that the streets raised him and other youths in East Flatbush, and I wanted to be a part of the solution," she said. "I

wanted to show teens that there is something more out there."

The idea for D2D percolated in Nathaniel's mind for about five years, she said. "But it wasn't until my final year in college that I began to really believe in my dream and myself," she explained. "I was motivated by my City Tech professors, as well as my fellow students, who told me I had what it takes to make this happen."

Nathaniel said she also drew inspiration from her mother. "My mom was a very strong, independent woman who always told me I could do and be whatever I wanted to be. She also taught me that if I wanted something I had to earn it." Her mom passed away in 2009, but Nathaniel feels "she is watching over me and smiling down on me."

Nathaniel described D2D's mission as "equipping our youth, ages 11 to 18, with life, self-sufficiency and entrepreneurial skills, then linking them to the community for collaboration and community building." She says D2D participants leave the program with confidence, hands-on experience and knowledge of various topics, including financial literacy, business plan and résumé writing, mock interviewing, public speaking, self-marketing,

(Continued on Page 39)