It is May 15. A student walks out into the Clarke Central High School bus loop after failing another test. They’re struggling, and their options are dwindling fast. As they trudge to the bus, an administrator notices their troubled expression and asks them what’s wrong, seeking to help them out. The student reacts with skepticism: why would the administrators care?

Little do they know, CCHS Assistant Principal Tamika Henson has had her fair share of experiences with life’s challenges. Growing up in Nellie B. Homes, a low-income Athens neighborhood, Henson dealt with widespread challenges, including poverty, family struggles and her teen pregnancy. “(My pregnancy) never was an obstacle to my growth. It was (like) fire. It was what ignited me, pushing me to excel, to be all that I could.”

“I actually was an adult before I was an adult. I became an adult student who had a mature mind and who thought outside of high school (because), at that point, I could no longer think as a teenage girl. I had to think as a responsible parent. So I had to grow up very quickly.” Henson said.

“Because I didn’t. I wasn’t a part of any clubs, or nothing like that. I didn’t have to juggle classes with working for the district as a bus driver.”

“A lot of times, when people feel sorry for you, they tend to support you in ways that may enable you to keep going down a negative path. They will not push you to your full potential because they feel sorry for you,” Henson said.

“I always tell people I can’t give up. Look who my mom is. Giving up isn’t an option. I have to do this. I must do this. I have to succeed,” Payne said. “She’s an inspiration to many, and oftentimes when I tell people our story, they’re really shocked that that’s where we come from. She’s an inspiration, especially (to me). I know because of her (that) I can’t give up on anything. And I know that I can do it. I mean, she did it.”

Henson’s perspective on sympathy and pity shows how her experiences have impacted her ability to understand the people around her.

“(My pregnancy) never was an obstacle to my growth. It was (like) fire,” Henson said. “It was what ignited me, pushing me to excel, to be all that I could because I was (no) longer just thinking as a teenage girl. I had to think as a responsible parent. So I had to grow up very quickly.”

“I have seen her care. I have seen students who are having a very difficult time come to her and she helps them through that difficult time,” Scott said.

“Recently, I had a big conflict. She was there to help me and talk to me about what I could do to avoid a situation in the future,” Faust said. “She (told) me how I’m a good student, that I have a lot to look forward to in life and that I shouldn’t (involves) myself in things that could harm my career.”

Math and Career, Technical and Agricultural Education (CTAE) department Instructional Coach Alexis Scott worked as Henson’s instructional coach when Henson was working in the math department, and has noticed her influence on the people around her.

“I have seen her care. I have seen students who are having a very difficult time come to her and she helps them through that difficult time,” Scott said. “She has 101 excuses of time, continued to work hard on a degree in college (and) became a math teacher.”

“Excuses are a pathway to nowhere. She has 101 excuses that she could have used in her lifetime. But she chose not to, and I applaud her for her perseverance.”

Despite Payne growing up with a single teen mother, Henson worked to make sure her daughter lived the best life possible.

“When I had Jasmine, I knew I had to be a parent. I knew I had to think as a responsible parent. So I had to grow up very quickly.” Henson said.

“High school is like the pathway to the rest of your life. Have fun, but don’t put them in a boat where I feel like they can’t. (However), I want to empathize with them and support them to do all that they can do.”

Henson plans on using her story, mindset and advice to great effect as one of CCHS’ assistant principals.

“I want them to do what they can do. I want them to think about the things I’ve overcome. I hope that they’re inspired by the story. In the end, we’re all in this. We’re here to support them. (We) want to put them in a boat where I feel like they can’t. (However), I want to support them to do all that they can do.”

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-- JASMINE PAYNE, Henson’s oldest daughter

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