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Testimony before the Senate Judiciary Committee
on “Improving Outcomes for Youth in the Juvenile Justice System”

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Good morning Chairman Grassley and Senator Whitehouse and Members of the Committee,

Thank you for allowing me to join you and testify today. I am Jinique Blyden. I am 17 years old and have travelled here from Hollywood, Florida. I'm a PACE girl and proud to be here.

I wanted to share my story with you. When I was younger, I started skipping school because I was very shy and I didn't want to be around the other kids. I thought they were judging me and I didn't want to be judged. And then it became a habit. One day the local police picked me up and brought me back to school. At school, they called my mom and then I ran away because I didn't want to face my mom.

Several days later, I came back home and was told I had to go to an alternative school. I visited the district's primary alternative school and didn't like it because it felt like a jail to me. Then, I heard about an all-girls alternative school called PACE. I went to visit PACE and decided to apply to attend because it seemed much better than the other alternative school. The environment at PACE was so much different than what I was used to. I had been used to leaving school and doing what I wanted without anyone noticing, but at PACE, there is a lot of structure and people actually noticed what I was doing. I didn't like that and I felt overwhelmed, not to mention I was worried about it being an all-girls program because girls can cause a lot of drama. But, I began adjusting.

After being at PACE for several weeks, I made a bad decision. I decided to bring marijuana to school and smoke it. When PACE staff found out, they called the police. Fortunately, in Florida, we have a civil citation program and I was allowed to receive a citation and be suspended from PACE for 10 days instead of going to jail or juvenile hall. This was my fork in the road. My turning point. Although I know they were disappointed in me, PACE never gave up on me.

When I returned to PACE, I returned with a new mindset and, as I opened my heart and mind to the caring teachers and counselors at the Center, I began to like it there. PACE staff not only noticed what and how I was doing, but they also supported me in achieving my goals. I was never one to ask for help, but the PACE staff offered it without my asking. I was able to make a lot of academic progress because my teachers were making sure that I was doing well. I was used to struggling and not asking for help, but they didn't let me get away with that. Even though I made mistakes at PACE, the staff never gave up on me. They wanted me to be there so that I could work on myself.

I realized that PACE was a good place and I got more engaged in their programs. My mom and I joined a mother-daughter group with about 5 other girls and their moms. These meetings helped me build a better relationship with my mom. She trusts me more now and we talk more. I also joined the book club where I talked with other girls about books and we watched the movies after we read the books. Sometimes women lawyers from the community would join us and bring snacks and new books.

PACE also kept me out of trouble and gave me opportunities to help others and prevent others from making bad mistakes, especially when I joined the Student Council. The staff at PACE also helped me to change my attitude. I have gone from being distrustful and somewhat disrespectful to being open, hopeful, and respectful. The reason that I can now show respect towards others is because I now respect myself. I no longer even think about skipping school or using drugs. Doing so would hinder my growth and keep me from reaching my goals. Needless to say, I am truly a changed person.

My transformation has been hard work, but PACE has assisted me every step of the way. The counselors helped me so much. They asked me questions that I didn't want to answer, but I did anyway. I've learned more about myself and how to let other people assist me. I have set some big goals for myself, including achieving a GPA of at least 3.4 or higher. I also want to earn at least 100 volunteer service hours. I am finally able to confidently envision my high school graduation, with me walking across the stage to receive my diploma this spring.

I'm so glad I didn't get sent to jail, because I didn't want a record. It would have been hard to be away from my family if I'd been sent to a juvenile facility. What PACE did for me is keep me out of a system where youth often enter and never escape. My future is bright because of PACE's unique, girl-centered and holistic prevention and early intervention model. Over PACE's 32 years of existence, they have changed the lives of almost 40,000 girls.

I've also heard PACE costs a lot less than locking girls up for running away or using drugs or other things. It costs \$94,000 a year to lock a girl up in Florida, but PACE costs about \$30,000 per year. More importantly, the re-offense rate for incarcerated girls is almost 50%, but for girls at PACE, it is only 8%.

I will attend Broward College this August and, although I don't know yet what I'll major in, I do know I want to help people in some way.

Girls like me in Florida are lucky. We have 19 PACE Centers throughout the state that we can go to. We can get the academic and counseling support we need in a non-residential setting, and when we get back on track, we can go back to our home school then go on to graduate. We live in a state that supports PACE -- including our Governor, the Florida Legislature, and the Department of Juvenile Justice. I have heard that girls and boys in other states don't have a place like PACE to go to. I hope that, in hearing my story today, you'll consider helping to bring programs like PACE to other states. Because I'm a living witness that PACE works.

Thank you. I am happy to answer any questions you may have about me or PACE.