

# YI-CHIN CHEN

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, FRIENDS OF THE CHILDREN-BOSTON

“Good evening. My name is Yi-Chin Chen, thank you all so much for being here tonight.

I could use my time on this stage to tell you how the challenges in our country impacted our Achievers. Like how our Achievers have to walk by fully masked federal agents in military garbs on their way to school; or how our families had to visit 3 or 4 different food pantries a week in order to not go without ; or despite the historic high graduation rate in Boston public schools, 80% of black and brown students are still not reading on grade level.

There is no amount of time enough to tell you all of the things that make it inherently difficult for our Achievers to get ahead. So instead, I'll tell you about the people you met this evening.

Like little Mydas who greeted you at the door and how he told a joke about a cookie going to the hospital at our talent show (it felt crummy);

And Paula, who sold you a golden ticket and how she spent an entire weekend delivering 30 pairs of snow boots to our Eastie Achievers so they could go to school after a big snow storm.

And Franny, our caregiver engagement specialist, helped more than 30 families avoid evictions.

And our mentors Stefan and Isaac who started a cooking club with four of their boys making delicious meals for all of us.

In moments of peril, these things are protections against hopelessness. In the last 365 days, our team spent **27,986 hours creating a safe barrier against all of the uncertainties in the world.** When our Achievers are with us, they don't have to choose between survival and hope.

And because of that, **our program graduates are 30% more likely to pursue post secondary education compared to their peers; 99% of our program graduates are working or in college; and 86% of our Achievers report feeling hopeful for their future even when the odds are stacked up against them.** So many of you have helped make it possible this year. From the bottom of my heart - Thank you.

All of the volatility of the world keeps us up at night, but our Achievers' future is what we wake up for each day. Tonight, I stand before you with a challenge: more than 240 kindergarteners are waiting for a spot in our 12.5-year mentoring program. The support we raise tonight means we can say yes to more children whose hopes and dreams deserve to be protected regardless of how many storms they must weather. I know you care deeply - otherwise you wouldn't be here. So I hope you choose to give generously.



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# MARY KATE

## ELEMENTARY PROFESSIONAL MENTOR TO THE ACHIEVER OF THE YEAR

“Good evening. My name is Mary Kate Sullivan—though Kamara used to call me Mary Cake. I am the Assistant Director of Program for our Elementary Cohort, and I had the privilege of being Kamara’s mentor for six years. We are honored to present this year’s Achiever of the Year Award to Kamara Rodriguez - a young person who has defied the odds and demonstrated remarkable growth during her time at Friends-Boston.



Kamara was the first Achiever that I was matched with over 10 years ago, and she has shaped me into the mentor I am today. She was a shy and playful girl who struggled to regulate her feelings. Our outings became sacred times where we worked through things that upset her. Art has always been a passion of Kamara’s, so we channeled this into a coping skill that helped her.

Kamara’s elementary years were filled with a lot of transitions. At one point she had to commute from Nashua New Hampshire to Roxbury just to go to the school and for our outings. We leaned into her art as an anchor of stability. When the pandemic hit and we couldn’t do regular outings, we would spend hours sitting on her porch where she’d show me the impressive animals she made out of the rubber bands.

During our time together, she taught me the power of consistency and patience. There were countless moments when her life would go sideways, and I learned that showing up every week, fostering her passion, and giving her a space to express herself freely was more valuable than anything I could say. There is truly no one more deserving than Kamara.”

# KADIJAH

## ADOLESCENT PROFESSIONAL MENTOR TO THE ACHIEVER OF THE YEAR

“Good evening, my name is Kadjiah, and I became Kamara’s mentor almost two years ago when she transitioned into her adolescent years. I learned pretty quickly that Kamara loves art, does not enjoy sports games, and has a true gift for storytelling. Most afternoons Kamara and I would spend our time discussing her future goals and aspirations while she casually created artwork I believe belonged in a gallery.

Initially, Kamara didn’t see college in her future. We talked about the future she wants, and that she is both capable and deserving of the opportunity to go to college. It was through these conversations that I learned the full extent of Kamara’s resilience. She shared stories from a childhood marked by difficult moments, loss, and transitions—but she also shared stories of joy, strength, and love. She showed me that hardship is just a small part of a young person’s story.

Despite all she has faced, she’s even grown in how she showed up for herself and for others. Kamara, who once struggled to articulate her own emotions, is now supporting others as a leader in our Youth Leaders in Mental Health program, helping elementary students navigate their own mental health. I am so proud of her perseverance and courage to build a future for herself. Her hard work paid off when she was accepted to not one, not two but four colleges, and she will be attending college full time studying chemistry in the fall!

Kamara, You have shown the world that you don’t have to be defined by your circumstances. I am so excited to see all the remarkable things you will do. We can’t wait for you to meet her, here is a little snapshot of the amazing Kamara Rodriguez.”

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# KAMARA

ACHIEVER OF THE YEAR

“Hello My name is Kamara Rodriguez. You may know me as the achiever of the year. Thank you for the opportunity to share my story tonight. 12 years is a long time. I learned many lessons at Friends of the Children that schools don’t teach you. I am very lucky to be a part of Friends of the Children because every kid deserves to have this kind of support in their lives.



I felt misunderstood growing up. My family and I went through a lot of challenges and I had a hard time expressing my emotions. Because of that, a lot of my teachers and adults didn’t think I was capable and smart. But not at Friends. They were always there for me and supported me for who I am as someone who is funny, smart and creative. When I struggled with emotional outbursts, Mary Kate helped me use art to express myself better. When I felt lonely and sad in middle school, Shane helped me understand and accept all of the changes in life. And when I felt like giving up in high school, Kadijah reminded me of my goals and not let me give up on myself.



They make me feel like I can do anything I put my mind to even when life is hard. When I had the opportunity last summer to go to Japan to study Manga, they supported me and made sure I could go without any worries. It was an amazing trip that I’ll never forget.

I want to say thank you to my mom who worked hard and for putting me in Friends more than 12 years ago. I am excited for my future. I know college will be hard but I have overcome a lot of obstacles/Hard things and I will face it with confidence. Thank you for supporting this organization that has changed my life.”

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# ANTHONY

## ELEMENTARY ACHIEVER

“My name is Anthony. I am 10 years old. I have been with Friends of the Children since first grade. I love break dancing, playing the guitar and playing with my mentor Kenny.

I really like my mentor Kenny because he is my best friend. He helps me with math and my English. And he plays with me and makes me feel better when I have a bad day. He helps me work on my goals. When I grow up, I want to be a bus driver because a lot of people ride the bus and I want to make sure they can go home to their families.

When I am older, it will be my turn to take care of Kenny. We are going to have tea together. I am excited to go to 4th grade next year. It will be harder but I can do it and Kenny will help me. We need more mentors like Kenny because there are a lot of kids who need people to be kind to them and help them.

I had so much fun playing Twister and Cornhole with the State Street volunteers at the Day of Joy! I also remember one of the volunteers Omaira who helped me when I was having a hard time! Thank you Omaira for being so nice.”

# KENNY

## ANTHONY'S PROFESSIONAL MENTOR

My name is Kenny. I am Anthony's professional mentor, and I have been with Friends of the Children for almost 2 years. As a mentor, I get to provide my Achievers with a supportive friend, role model, and invested partner in support of their goals.

My proudest moment being Anthony's mentor is helping him sit with his feelings and realize that he is still okay even on bad days. Children are often made to feel like their feelings aren't important and I am really proud that all of my Achievers feel comfortable telling me things. I enjoy being Anthony's mentor. He is a natural leader, and he is kind, caring and so funny.

I am excited that Friends of the Children is growing to reach more children and families. We are all one community and benefit from every person with the opportunity to live up to their full potential. We need partners to do this, and tonight's honoree State Street is the perfect example of a partner who steps up to make the world a better place. Not only do they support our vision through their charitable giving, their employees roll up their sleeves as volunteers, board members, and allies regularly. They host a Day of Joy where they spend the day at Friends to bring joy to our Achievers through play. I love seeing the State Street volunteers sit on the floor with our Achievers over a fierce game of UNO and Connect Four! It really speaks to their core values and beliefs.

Anthony and I are proud to be the ones to present this year's Power of One Award to State Street!



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