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**JA NEW YORK 2011 STUDENT
HONOREE
12TH GRADE**

**JFK HIGH SCHOOL,
PLAINVIEW, OLD BETHPAGE,
LONG ISLAND**

Good evening. My name is Melissa Benenson and I am a senior at Plainview Old Bethpage JFK High School in Plainview, NY. Earlier this year, Junior Achievement swept into my life, and I have not been the same since. It is truly my honor to be here speaking to you as one of Junior Achievement of New York's Students of the Year. I believe that an achiever is someone who is goal-oriented and strives for success in his or her life. To me, achievement is also measured by how much you give to others as well as yourself. I am an achiever because I always strive to do

my best in all aspects of my life. Academically, I challenge myself with courses I choose to take. I volunteer both at school and in my community. Achievement requires hard work and dedication, but it is a focal point of my life. It keeps me motivated and focused on my goals, both academic and personal. Please allow me to take you on a journey to tell you how I have come to stand before you tonight.

My greatest challenge both in school and in life has led to my greatest reward. I suffer from debilitating knee pain that keeps me from participating in gym and after school sports. This was quite a difficult adjustment for me as I used to be an avid swimmer and athlete. In the seventh grade, I began to have severe knee pains. After endless visits to countless doctors, I was finally diagnosed with juvenile rheumatoid Arthritis and a muscle tracking disorder. I endured painful and unsuccessful shots, therapies, acupuncture and surgeries. Now I just live with pain on a daily basis.

As a result, I found myself on the sidelines of school, and often, life. I was tired of letting this pain stand in my way and preventing me from being able to participate in gym and all of the sports I once enjoyed. I decided it was time to get off the bench and find something I could get involved with. It was then that I found DECA, a marketing club that I became extremely involved with. This is what led me to Junior Achievement. DECA is a club that holds business competitions and lends itself to my interest in accounting. It also plays a large role in community service and fundraising activities, another area that I feel passionate about. The combination of marketing and helping others seemed like the perfect new experience for me to try. It turns out that these old knees led me right where I belonged.

For DECA junior year, I competed in the Financial Literacy Promotion Project at both the state and international levels. For this project, my teammates and I partnered with Junior Achievement of New York's High School Heroes Program and taught financial literacy to the youth in our school district. The JA

New York High School Heroes Program gives High School students the opportunity to teach Junior Achievement's curriculum in their local elementary schools. We chose Junior Achievement's More Than Money curriculum which is designed for grades 3 through 5, and went to work. The More Than Money curriculum teaches the basics of finance and managing your own money, including balancing a budget, managing a bank account, and starting a business. As I taught this program, I was surprised to see how little the students knew about money. This opened my eyes to how necessary it is for young people to know the basics of financial literacy at an early age.

One of my favorite memories from teaching the students was watching them get excited to share their strategies for spending & saving their money. In fact, two of the students I taught last year still talk to me about how much they enjoyed their experience. In addition to volunteering as a High School Hero for the past two years, I also took the lead in organizing the events, including recruiting volunteers, communicating with administration, and

coordinating dates and times with several schools. My involvement in this program has confirmed my decision to pursue a career in business and accounting.

My work with Junior Achievement of New York and the High School Heroes Program has inspired me to become more involved in my community. For example, I volunteer on Sundays at a Sports Inclusion Program at the local Jewish Community Center. The kids involved all have Aspergers Syndrome and other Autism Spectrum disorders. During the sessions, I talk with the participants about their days or what may be on their minds at the moment. I also play sports with the kids; the activities range from kickball to basketball to relay races. It is so amazing to see how much fun everyone has. *I have made many friends with the kids there – we even text!* It is fulfilling to be able to pursue my passion for sports through my work at the JCC. It has brought sports back into my life, and I couldn't be happier.

When I began my work with Junior Achievement of New York, I never expected it to take me this far. I was so affected by

the experience I had with Junior Achievement, that I wanted to continue my involvement with this vital organization. In fact, I have already coordinated & completed a second High School Heroes event this past October and have plans in the works for a third event next year. Junior Achievement improved my confidence in my public speaking abilities and awoke a passion within me to help others that I did not even know was there. From the basics of organizing the events to teaching the students, every aspect of being a High School Hero is fulfilling. This experience has taught me invaluable lessons I know I will use in the future.

Sometimes in life, you never know how things will turn out. It's like Forrest Gump once said, "Life is like a box of chocolates – you never know what you're gonna get!" Thank you.