**Name: Tess O’Riordan**

**State Title: Miss Massachusetts’ Outstanding Teen**

**Essentials for Success: Helping Students in Need**

 With roughly 1 in 7 children living below the poverty line in our country, it is imperative that we step up to remedy the struggles this presents for kids today. School-aged children are one of the largest age groups impacted by poverty. Without proper clothing or toiletries, items most people take for granted, children are reluctant to attend school, ultimately reducing graduation rates. By working as a community, we can provide those in need with everyday essentials in order to promote confidence, reduce school absenteeism, and increase graduation rates.

I have partnered with a local organization called Catie’s Closet. This group combats childhood poverty by providing students free, discreet, and easy access to essentials. To do this, the organization targets schools in Massachusetts and New Hampshire with poverty rates that are above 50%, and transforms a spare room in the school into a “closet” full of necessities such as current-style clothing, hygiene products, and other items of need. Students are then able to access and “shop” the closet and take what they need. With a boost of confidence and a feeling of fitting in, children are more likely to attend their classes and events, focus on their education, graduate, and build a successful future. During the pandemic, the need for services has greatly increased, and Catie’s Closet has adapted to serving students in hybrid and remote settings as well.

As an Ambassador for Catie’s Closet, I run donation and fundraising drives in my school and community, have volunteered at one of its distribution centers, and spread awareness through social and traditional media and blog posts. During COVID, I modified drives by conducting contact-free pickups across the Commonwealth.

No one should ever feel “less-than” because of their financial status or access to essentials. Another way that I combat this is by posting “Tips with Tess” articles and videos on my social media. With this campaign, I provide affordable and trendy hacks that allow kids and teens to feel a sense of belonging regardless of their situation.

As Miss America’s Outstanding Teen, I would take my advocacy a step further. Using various social media platforms to appeal to different demographics, I will continue to promote Catie’s Closet and similar organizations, encouraging donations, volunteerism, and corporate sponsorships. My goal is to attack this issue in a variety of ways so that every student has access to the tools they need. While the in-school resource closet is a successful model, it’s not possible for every community. In some instances, distributing individual care packages is a more realistic approach. I would meet with school, community, and elected officials to explain the opportunities to them and develop programs that work best for their communities. In fact, I have already begun this conversation with my school’s Homeless Liaison. Since different approaches are needed, I am also working to create an online information center to share solutions.

I was drawn to this issue because it directly impacts my peers. It’s important to have a voice on this issue and to provide resources in a way that helps reduce the stigma around needing assistance and helps give kids confidence. Kids shouldn’t be missing out on school because they can’t afford basics such as toothpaste, shampoo or a warm coat for the winter. I know that many don’t think twice about these items, but they are not a given for the over 14% of kids living in poverty in the U.S. Especially considering the increased struggle as a result of COVID19, it is important to alleviate as many barriers to accessing education as possible.

An important facet of the Miss America’s Outstanding Teen Organization is providing scholarships and promoting education. I believe we should extend this concept to ensure that all children have what they need to attend school. If we can guarantee that more students will have everyday essentials, we will reduce absenteeism, improve graduation rates, and encourage confidence, giving kids a better chance to succeed in life.

Signature / Date