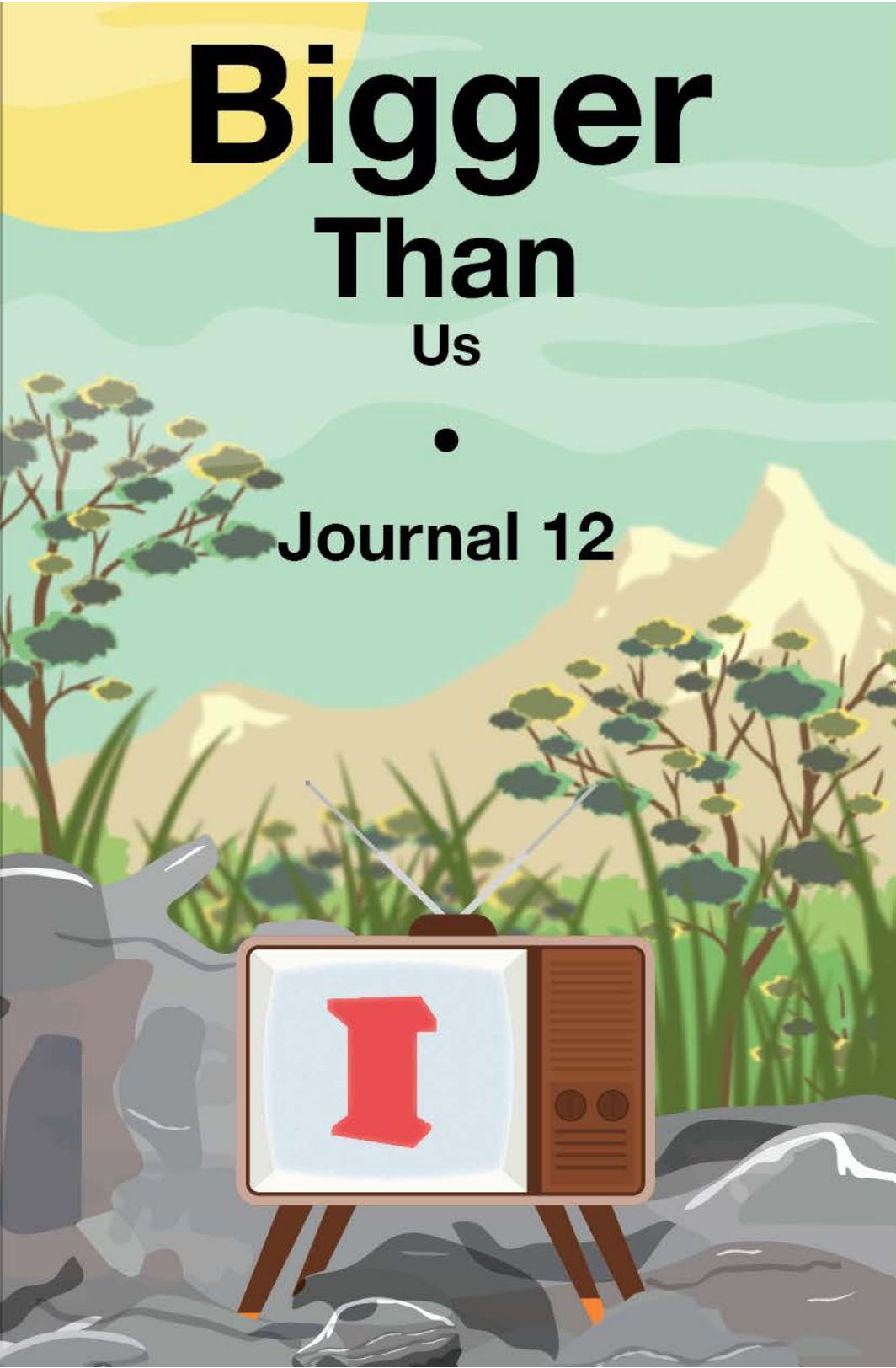


Bigger Than

Us



Journal 12



Greetings Podium family, friends, and students,

And a most gracious salutation to the reader! Welcome to the 12th publication of our beloved Podium Journal, featuring poetry, stories, debate, and many other mediums of expression our young people have generated with us over the past two school years.

And what a time it has been. From March 2020 forward, we all have experienced one adaptation after another. Whether facing screens year-long in virtual learning, increases in unemployment, or a plethora of political and social battles, we have birthed a renewed sense of awareness and urgency to act in the truest interests of the American people. We have made peace by adjusting to what we now know to be our new norms. Altogether, we have had a rough go, but through it all, we as a people stood firmly with our values. As a Podium family, we have remained steadfast in our mission, purpose, and truest sense of selves. We know why we are here, but just who are we?

The short answer is that we are Podium RVA, a non-profit organization blooming in Richmond, Virginia and dedicated to the education and expression of the city's youth through writing, creative expression, and leadership development. We host workshops every week, all year-long, and the academic, creative, and professional writing produced by youth is highlighted in Podium's regional publications and showcases. The longer answer is that Podium engages with youth in ways unlike any other program. We create safe, holistic spaces where, not only do youth feel comfortable sharing their work and expressing who they are in an unlimited variety of ways, but they are free to express what they know as the most authentic versions of themselves. Podium cultivates spaces where youth can tell their story and be an active part in the direction of their lives.



The results speak for themselves. Many former participants return as alumni project leaders who are prepared to get involved and re-invest in the same programs that impacted them as middle or high school students. There is no better validation of the work we do than by having the same students we once served come back to complete the cycle by serving others. That is the reward.

Acknowledging this, Podium works diligently to create even more spaces to nurture teen and alumni engagement, from having alumni come back to help facilitate programs, to hosting mentorship programs, summer internships, and our annual Teen Professional Conference. These opportunities help both current and former Podium youth explore career and higher education pathways and connect them with community leaders currently excelling in their fields of interest. We give, they give back, and we provide continued support. The cycle continues.

For 13 years, Podium has been a catalyst for change and growth for Richmond youth. Representing, mentoring, and helping our younger generations has always been my passion. With the Podium family, one of the strongest and most dynamic forces in the Richmond area, I am honored to be a part of what Podium does best: serve the youth. Without further distraction, I extend a most warm welcome to our Journal #12. Thank you, and please enjoy.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ray', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Raymond Martin III, Podium Program Lead and former Young Professional Board Co-Chair

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- David L. Robbins – Podium Co-Founder, Board Member, & Author
- Jerry Howard – Podium Board Chair & The Specialty Companies
- Joni Albrecht – Little Star Communications

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Partners and Special Thanks

We thank the students, teachers, administrators, and parents of Richmond City and Henrico County Public Schools, volunteers, mentors, community partners, stakeholders, and the many businesses, individuals, and local officials who have helped make Podium possible. We extend an incredibly special thank you to the following individuals:

- **2020 Board of Directors Leadership:** Bob Halloran, Deanna Lorianni, Kim VanHuss, Kristin Walinski, Lindy Bumgarner, and Rob Shinn
- **Podium Alumni Leadership:** Daeron Bacon, Destiny Brown, Destiny Hall-Harper, Kavin Jackson, RaJahne' Harris, Savon Thompson, Tracy Fleming, and Tristan Wynn
- **Program Volunteers:** Abigail Wakeland, Ashley Harden, Caroline Richards, Cassidy Glading, Ciara Carr, Danielle Arze, Jonathan Nichols, Kaija Craft, Lilly Cook, Lilly Wood, and Lindsay Goodrich
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Additionally, Podium extends a heartfelt thank you to our corporate and foundational supporters who fund Podium programs all year round, year after year.

- *Community Foundation for a Greater Richmond*
- *Culture Works Inc.*
- *Dill Family Foundation*
- *Dollar General Literacy Foundation*
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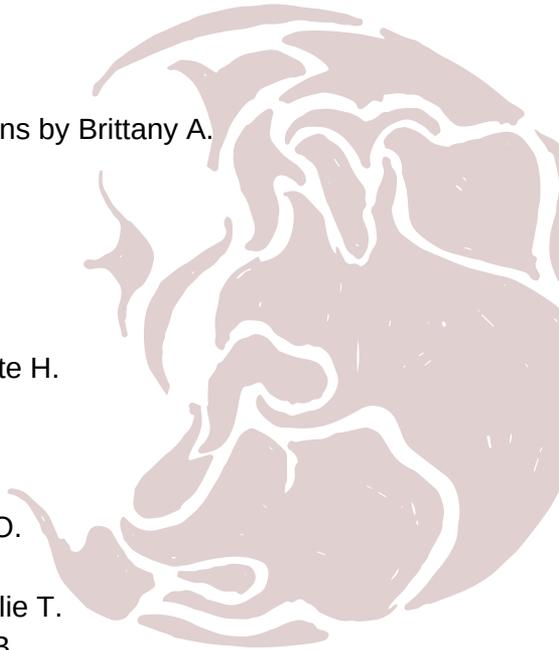
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Youth Ages 10 - 13

The Classroom

Herbert B.

Lucille Brown MS

Classroom

Pencils writing steadily,
Children flaunting paper.
Today, kids will work.
Knowledge for teachers to cater.

Oh, the stress of math!
Children doodle on desks.
The teacher announces,
"What is $2x$ five less?"

Now, sprouts look at confusion.
Teacher notices, so she says again,
" $2x$ five less," with aggression.
One kid says with fear, "Ten?"

"Correct."





A Murder Mystery
Sahara W.
Albert Hill MS

“Oh, Officer, thank goodness you're here! My wife has been murdered! I just got home from work, and from the moment I walked in, I knew something had happened. The furniture was smashed and all of our valuable décor was gone. I thought it was just a robbery, so I waited to call the police until after I inspected all the damage. I went upstairs to find my wife lying on the ground dead with a knife in her back! I called the police immediately. The cameras outside don't show anyone breaking in, so I know the only people who could have done it are the cook or the maid.”

“Thank you, Mr. Robinson. I will now question these suspects.” The officer turns, “Chef, where were you when the murder took place?”

“After I brought Mrs. Robinson her tea, I went downstairs to prepare dinner. I heard someone making a lot of noise in the living room, so I ran outside. I couldn't call 911 because the only phone is inside. Once I thought it was safe, I ran inside to check on Mrs. Robinson and the maid, only to find the maid in the room with the dead Mrs. Robinson!”

“Thank you, Chef. Maid, where were you?”

“I was cleaning the spare bedroom when I heard the chef go into Mrs. Robinson's room with her tea. Not even 10 minutes later, I heard a ruckus in the living room. I was about to run downstairs, but I thought better of it. I ran into Mrs. Robinson's room instead, and there she was, lying on the floor dead! I bolted the lock, so I wouldn't be murdered too. That's why you found me in there when you got here.”

“Thank you, Maid. Now, I'm going to go examine the body. It appears that the knife is the same as the ones stored in the kitchen. The tea is on the desk beside her, untouched. Well Mr. Robinson, I know who the murderer is. Officers, arrest the chef!”



My Stereotype Speech

Sidney K.

Albert Hill MS

"Hi, I'm Sidney, and I'm here to persuade you that we should get rid of stereotypes."

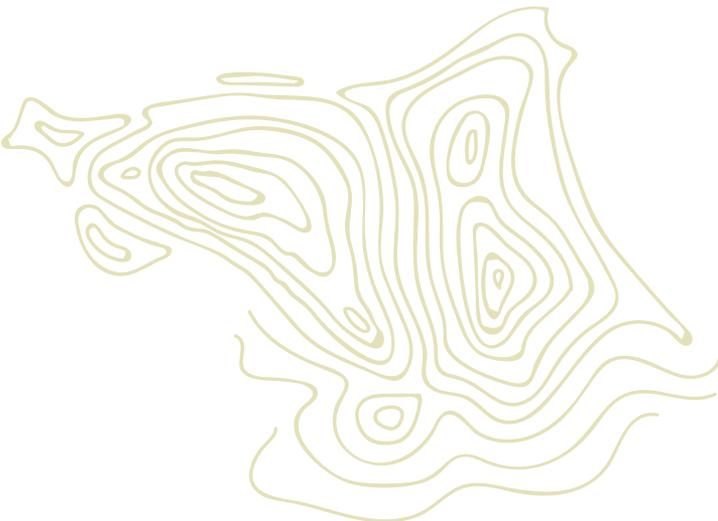
Crowd raises eyebrows.

"First, you all should hate racism. The main reason people are racist is because they heard stereotypes and believed them. Why else do you think kids are being shot by police they have never seen in their lives? Second, because of stereotypes alone, people aren't being accepted for jobs or getting into college which ruins lives. Third, the system has been used time and time again to put down certain groups of people."

Speaker looks around the room.

"Fourth, people complain about what we, Gen-Z, keep doing wrong, yet you all have caused the problems that many people are protesting. There is some food for thought as you leave. That concludes my presentation!"

Silence as everyone staggers out of the room in deep thought.





Good Vibes
Nakia A.
Elkhardt Thompson MS

The gates of the garden shiver open when the wind blows,
giving oxygen to the flowers and fruit.

Strawberries and dandelions dance with the wind, and

I am there too.

Giving water to the flowers and fruit. The sun is out, shining.

Underneath, I play music to the flowers and the fruit

While dancing with the wind.

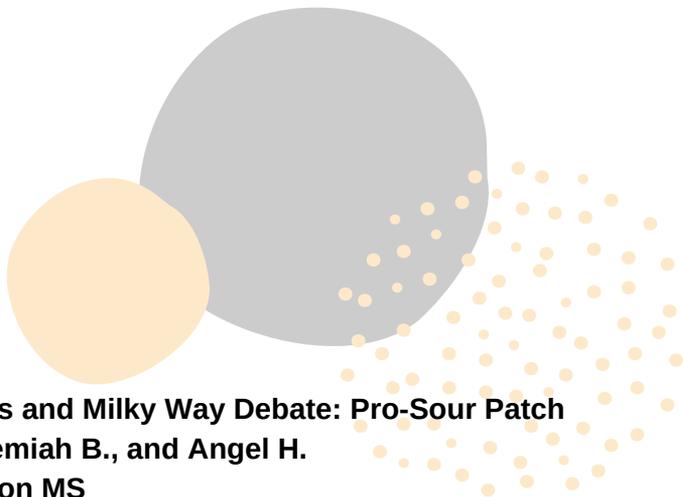
I am there too.



Gun Violence
Abdoulatif F.
Lucille Brown MS

Did you know that hundreds of people die from gun violence every day? This should not be the case. Killing people doesn't help. Somebody who was killed today could have been a doctor tomorrow. When you kill somebody's child, their parents and family become very depressed. It hurts many people. In fact, when people die from gun violence, their deaths affect even people they didn't even know.

People die for all sorts of reasons, but we can prevent gun violence. That said, I would like to encourage people to vote for politicians who stand against gun violence.



A Sour Patch Kids and Milky Way Debate: Pro-Sour Patch

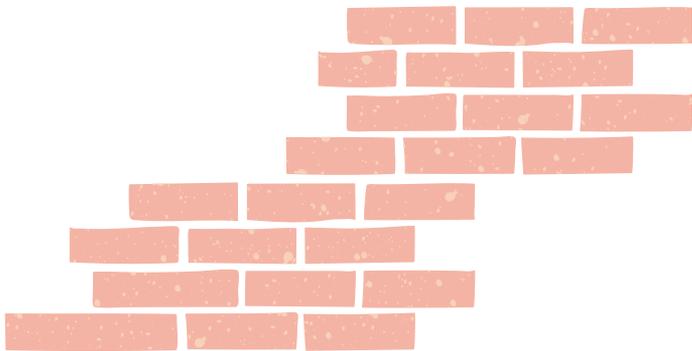
Donnasia B., Jeremiah B., and Angel H.

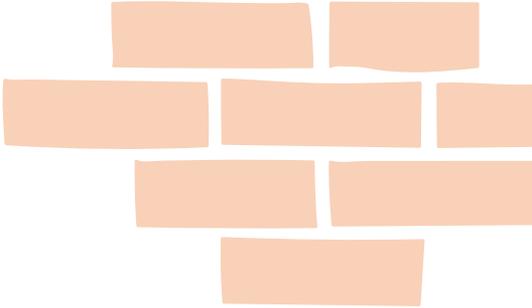
Elkhardt Thompson MS

Welcome, and thank you for attending this debate. Sour Patch Kids are the best candy because they are sour and then sweet. They have so many colors and flavors. Sour Patch Kids are very popular on Instagram. Lots of people love them. They are so delicious that you can eat them during breakfast, lunch, and dinner. They taste so good that they will put you in La La Land. They are soft and chewy, and their commercials are very fun too.

On the other hand, a Milky Way is too small. It's like a one-bite piece of chocolate. When you eat a Milky Way, it makes your mouth dry. A Milky Way can melt in your pocket, unlike Sour Patch Kids, which can stay in your pocket forever, so you can eat them any time you want. Some people are allergic to chocolate, caramel, or milk, which can cause death. Caramel is also messy, sticky, and it makes your teeth look dirty. A Milky Way can kill your family's pet dog, and finally, a Milky Way is just a Twix rip-off.

In conclusion, Sour Patch Kids have many upgrades compared to Milky Way, such as how they are sour and then sweet, and are cheaper. That is why they are the best candy.





Overcoming Obstacles

Nadia H.

Metro Richmond Boys & Girls Clubs - MLK MS

Overcoming life's obstacles is not an easy task. An obstacle I have overcome is making it to my junior year of high school. This was an obstacle for me because I struggled to get where I am in some of my classes. For my first two years in high school, things were more complicated, and I felt like I was not going to make it. I was not comprehending the lessons being taught to me. I was extremely frustrated and gave up on myself. Instead of doubting myself, I should have been pushing even harder, so I did not have to go through the emotions I did.

I overcame this obstacle by pushing myself to do better and by trying instead of giving up. Now, I am putting in the effort, so I can graduate and have a great career. I am so proud of myself because now I know I am going to make it. I have a great support system to help me focus on the things that impact my future. I am thankful to have the support I have because without that support, I would not have made it.

The people in my support group include my mom, my dad, Mrs. Jade, Ms. Ponton, Mr. V, Derrick, Keniyah, Da'marcus, Mr. Craig, and Mr. E. They help me by talking with me to see where my head is and to check in on how I'm feeling. They push me to do better, to try my best, and they give great advice about anything. They help me get through the things I'm going through, and I appreciate them for being there for me.



**Just Because I Am
Khamani M.
Henderson MS**

Just because I am Black,
that doesn't mean I want to be a rapper
or that I am a danger in the eyes of the police.

Just because I am Black.
I do not steal, and I can write and read.

Just because I wear glasses,
that doesn't mean I have four eyes.

Just because I am a boy.
I don't like Fortnite or YoungBoy.

Just because I smile all the time,
that doesn't mean I am happy.

Just because I am a boy.
I don't like sports or action figures.

Just because I am smart
that doesn't mean I am different.
I struggle with math, and that is the truth.

Just because I am calm,
that doesn't mean I don't worry about my older sister all the time
or about what is happening.

Just because it seems like I don't have anything going on in my life.
You'd be wrong.
Because to be totally honest, I really do.



Youth Ages 14 -19

Girl, Get Up

Imani A.

Armstrong HS

I hope I heal from all the pain.
No matter what I did, it was never enough.
I put in my all, and that still wasn't sufficient for you.
But now I realize it wasn't me, it was you.
GIRL GET UP.

I'm gaining back everything you took from me.
The way I see myself now is breathtaking.
I now know I am a true queen.
I'm going to be the Melanin Goddess I'm called to be.
GIRL GET UP.

Don't you know who you are?
You are a queen in the making.
Don't let anybody tell you different.
Your brown skin, bodacious hips,
and your fine curves are what make you.
Never doubt your beauty.
GIRL GET UP.

It's about time you awaken and find your worth.
Stop looking down on yourself
like you're not enough or you're useless.
You are more than enough.
GIRL GET UP.

What makes you think in this state of mind?
It's not you.
You have a whole future ahead of you,
so let's get to it.
GIRL GET UP.

The Salesman

Shacorie J. Armstrong HS

It was a cold, windy evening. James, a middle-aged father, was sitting in his new leather chair reading the newspaper. Finishing the section, he handed it to his six-year-old daughter sitting on the ground near him. She was cutting out paper dolls. The quiet was interrupted by the doorbell.

“Who could that be?” James thought. He opened the door to find a handsome man in a suit, carrying a briefcase and smiling widely.

“Good evening. I’m sorry to disturb you,” the man said, his voice warm and inviting, “but my car doesn’t seem to be working. I was wondering if I could borrow your phone to call for help.”

James stared the stranger up and down. “And what brings you to our neighborhood?” he asked.

“Oh! Pardon my manners.” The stranger handed him a business card. It said “FAMILY FIRST” in big letters. As James inspected the card, the man said, “The name’s Robert. I sell life insurance.”

James’s wife appeared from behind James and said, “Why don’t you come out of the cold? You are more than welcome to use our phone, but you have to stay for dinner, and I won’t take no for an answer.” She motioned for Robert to come inside.

“Where is your phone?”

“It’s broken right now,” she said, smiling.

James glared daggers at his wife. She offered the new leather chair for Robert to sit. While she finished dinner, Robert commented on how nice the chair felt, then explained the types of policies he sold.

“The world is full of the unexpected,” he said. “Don’t you want your family to be protected in case something happens to you?” Robert’s eyes wandered down to the newspaper headline the daughter was cutting: “Missing Salesman Still Not Found.” As Robert started to say something, James’ wife called, “Dinner’s ready!”

Robert declined, but she insisted he stay. She sat him down at the dinner table with the rest of the family. Realizing he didn’t have a choice, Robert dove into the meat placed in front of him. “This is delicious!” he said.

Robert ate until he was full. He washed it down with red wine and gave his compliments to the chef. As he put the drink back, he looked over and saw the daughter giggling and giving him a wide, sinister smile. Robert wondered what it was that was so funny. Suddenly, his vision became blurry, and he grew dizzy. His hearing faded in and out, but he could faintly understand, “Thank you so much, James. You know I love salesmen...they are always the tastiest.”

Robert thought back to the headline he saw earlier. He realized just how sick and sinister this family was. The last thing he saw was each family member holding a knife, and then it went black.

Dhagaxley Kenya

Kin I.

Henrico HS

4:30am,

Alarm calls by evil birds
Going off,
Interrupting
Our peaceful sleep.
Sheep roaming around, begging to be fed,
Mother and father
Taking what seems to be never-ending voyages

For our necessities,
Breakfast,
And maybe lunch,

But definitely
Not dinner.

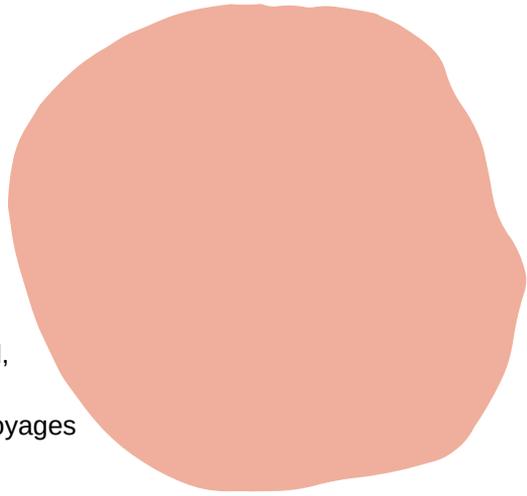
The recitation of the Quran,
Taking over the entire village.
Kids,
Like myself,
Being fussed at to read the Holy Book.

Vulnerable elders
Heeding to "News" coming from the ancient radios.
Discourse on controversial issues
Later ending in violent confrontations,
Separation between loved ones,
Rivalries rendered by stupid,
Itsy bitsy... aka discussions.

Authorities invading our helpless villages,

Innocent and unaware offsprings roaming in hunger,

Feeble guardians compromising in an attempt,
And perhaps hopes of discovering,
The positive and enjoyable substances life has preserved
Or stored for them.



Dear Undergraduate Admissions
Brittany A.
John Marshall HS



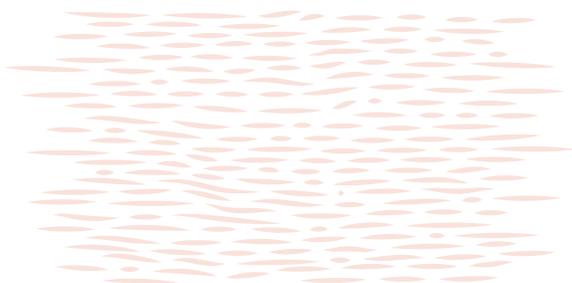
Dear Undergraduate Admissions,

There are a million reasons why I would be the perfect student to attend your school, but I will narrow them down here. First, I am an outgoing, dedicated individual who finishes what I start. Growing up, my family guided me down the path of finding the best version of myself and fully embracing it. Not just mentally, but academically too.

In my generation, that is not so simple to do. There is peer pressure, self-doubt, and people constantly telling you “you’re not good enough” or “you can’t do it.” When you are so familiar with those words, they become a part of you, and you can use them to either build or break yourself. I chose to build myself through words. I perceived them differently when they were said to me, and because of my choice, I became phenomenal, unstoppable, and determined. I am hungry for education, success, and for my doctoral degree.

If I don’t get accepted into your school, then you will have lost a role model. Thank you for taking the time to read your future honor-roll student’s paper. I am in great hope to be accepted into your school.

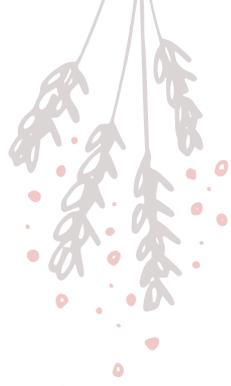
Sincerely,
Brittany



I Awoke To...
Ja-Juan H.
Armstrong HS

I awoke to the sound of the baby monitor crackling with a voice comforting my firstborn child.

As I adjusted to a new position, my arm brushed against my wife, sleeping next to me.



(Quiet) Rebellion
Demi C.
Henrico HS

Grandfather, you said I'd be a celibate priest,
so I grabbed my soft limbs with waist-full sweaty palms,
wrote "namaste" in burnt incense to rid your contempt, and struck
matches to light lavender candles beside mantras of "mine, mine."

Grandfather, you said my friend couldn't get married,
so crayons and imagination made rainbow flags on Sunday morning.
While Bluetooth sang Beyoncé, we made jokes about a gay Jesus
who commanded love, just to realize our fellowship was church.

Grandfather, the newspaper's headline read "sex scandal,"
so my thoughts strung tears as paper doll chains tear to bits in wind,
my wordless steel blue paint stroking in wonder of how to draw a love letter
to children, a love letter to God-- forgive us, for we know not what we do.

Grandfather, I read women were to be submissive,
so palm to chest, I submit to its beating. View my creases and freckles
as stained-glass on a temple, listening to the unheard, beneath man and
church:

{ b r e a t h e }



Classroom Jungle

Leila M.

Thomas Jefferson HS

Climate change is a real thing.
Tears of the leaves don't drip.
Creatures lack growth as it's too warm for a mane.
Centuries have passed,
there's an infinite moisture in the ground, and
no nutrient is the same.

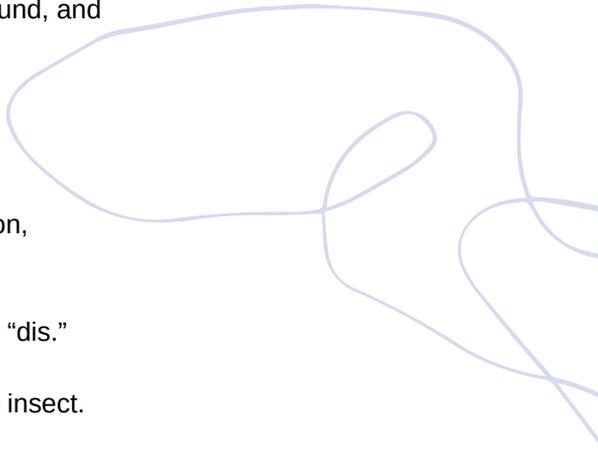
Damp and brown,
the mud is fed to poor creatures as
food. Nonetheless,
rain slaps, unlike this rare combination,
blandier than a broken moon.

The taste of your mannerisms exude "dis."
My soggy mind cannot dissect.
Intriguing, one shares the mind of an insect.
A soak in this creek may help
fix your distasteful perspective.

In this damp Eden,
we critters rebuke classism,
a true dissociation,
for a snake will always slide with a worm.

All are unwell in this meek, wet wood,
Destroyed by creation,
ignored for industrialization.
Health depletes without further ado.
International healthcare removes a lawsuit
not just for the Jungle,
but for the concrete forest next-door.
Hypothetically, unreachable,
but disease loves all.

The invisible virus lives without
lack of inspiration.
Not hard to cater to you,
the Amazon is leaky.
Art dries it up.
The Jungle without a cage, a beautiful club.





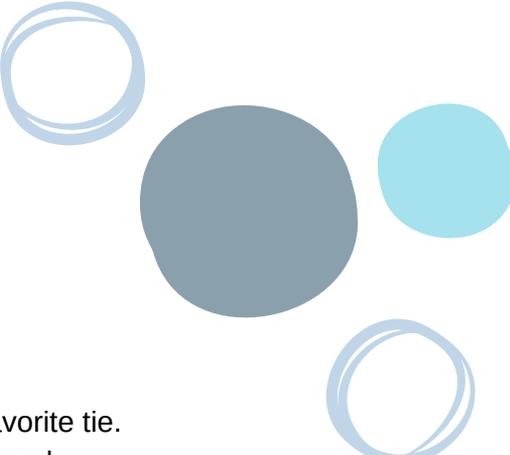
**Long Live
Aalisha A.
Armstrong HS**

Today, I lost my friend. His name was Tyrone, and I just feel like bursting and crying. Right now, this does not seem real.

I want him to watch over us. I love him so much and wish he was here now. Every time I saw him, I used to bump him on purpose, and he used to always stop and talk with me and our other friends. We used to say we were the smartest ones in math and compete with others in class. It is not the same anymore, not seeing you walk into class and our school.

I call for Richmond to put down guns and use their brains instead because this is like losing a family member. I miss him so much, and I am trying not to cry, but it is just so hard. It doesn't seem real, and it is truly shocking because you are not here with us anymore. I just can't get this or you out of my mind. Just know that I love you, and that I will see you one day.

Long live Tyrone. I guess it was your time. You are gone but never forgotten. Why did you leave, and if you were here now, how would it be?



Blue
Niles W.
Hanover High School

Blue. The color of both his eyes and favorite tie.
One was a gift, the other must've been a dream.

And what a wonderful dream it was.
But like all dreams, it came to an end.

I still have the tie, but I miss the person it was attached to.
The man I once knew. The man I loved so dearly.

He's still alive, he's just dead to me.

Blue. The color of nearly everything he wore.
It was the color I, too, learned to love and hate over time.

I hate to admit that I love him still, even if he is with someone new.

He may have been a walking nightmare, but he was one I couldn't escape.

Blue. The one color I now know to hate. To despise, but yet I recognize it.
I recognize it now more than ever.

Blue. The color I was when he left for good.
Blue is how I shall remain until someone new comes along.

What Matters to Me?

Josette H.

Metro Richmond Boys & Girls Club - Petersburg

I've always been interested in making the world a better place and being fair to everyone. I stand for equality, love, and education. Some people would like to consider me a triple-minority, an LGBTQ+ African-American female, and one day, I hope that people who are similar will not be singled out for being themselves. Many people are treated unfairly and are not given equal opportunity to showcase their strengths. Some people are automatically turned away because of race, living predicament, sexuality, or how they may look. Laws may have been passed to "prevent" these actions, but sometimes they don't prevent discrimination.

One of the most challenging obstacles someone can go through is homelessness. Many people are struggling, and they need proper materials to survive. I am proud to say that I am part of a youth action board that focuses on helping people with housing instability. We collect necessities such as toiletries and canned food to donate to our local homeless shelters. Many people who are homeless are part of the LGBTQ+ community and struggle to be accepted and live in peace. The largest group of youth experiencing homelessness are LGBTQ+, at roughly 40%. We, as a people, need to put our differences aside, treat each other with respect, and help each other out. The way we treat people can really take a toll on their mental state, which can affect the open opportunities they may have.

In addition to my last statement, bullying is a huge issue in America. I have suffered from bullying for over ten years, and it is very painful and stressful. One day, I hope for everyone to be treated with kindness and for bullying to just be an obstacle of the past. So many suicides could have been avoided if everyone was just kinder to each other. Over 14% of high school students have considered suicide, and almost seven percent have attempted it. Bullying victims are more likely to commit suicide than non-victims.

The youth LGBTQ+ population has the highest rates of depression, suicide, and bullying in school. This has been an ongoing problem for years, and no one has really tried to help, other than trying to push expensive counseling on them. This makes teens feel like they have no control or that they may be “sick” or “crazy.”

From my personal experiences, I have been creating a plan of action for over a year. I would like to create a group for youth, and for all genders, to come together weekly or as often as needed. We can have group therapy sessions, and if there are times we may not have a meeting, we can have a group chat where everyone is welcome. If someone feels like they have hit rock-bottom, they will be able to contact the group at any time, and we can help them through tough times. Also, since everything is confidential, and there are no parents allowed, they can have their freedom and talk about anything on their mind. I would have definitely loved this type of group when I had thoughts of suicide, so it is be a no-brainer to share this with youth of this day and age.

Working on bullying and establishing this group can benefit others by helping them gain the confidence they need to succeed. Challenging depression from bullying and not being accepted has taught me that it does not matter what anyone else thinks. At the end of the day, you have to be there for yourself. Being a “triple-minority” has taught me to embrace who I am and that nobody can change me. Self-love is the best love, and you have to love yourself before anyone else.



Becoming Me

Tamiyah C.

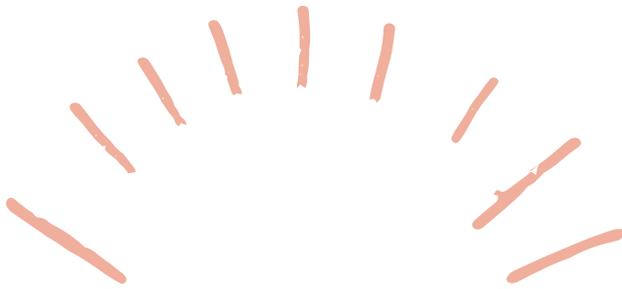
Metro Richmond Boys & Girls Club - Southside

If you were wondering what it looks like to be involved in the Boys and Girls Club for five years, you can take a look at my hair. You might be wondering, where does she get her hair done, it looks so good! It's all me. You might also be wondering, what on earth does the Boys and Girls Club have to do with her hair? Now, I know you can't possibly imagine what my hair looked like over the past decade, so allow me to paint you a picture of the way that the Boys and Girls Club transformed my hair, and me.

At eight years old when I joined the club, I relied on my mom or whoever else to do my hair. I always took pride in having my hair done and hoped that one day I was going to learn how to style it myself. Even from a young age, I understood that my hair was an extension of myself and a tangible way to express my developing identity.

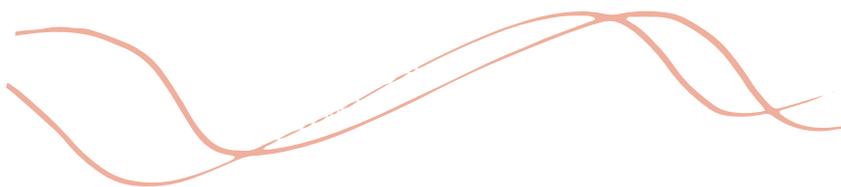
In middle school, I had already been involved in the club for 5 years. I began to realize that this community and space provided me with much more than just a place to participate in extracurricular activities. Since the beginning of my relationship with the Boys and Girls Club, it along with my peers have instilled in me a sense of confidence. All of the times that I received compliments and encouragement on my hair made me feel like I had a hand in using hair to express myself. This emboldened me to continue my hair journey, and along the way, that turned into a journey of loving myself.





By the time I entered high school, I was well on my way towards a more sophisticated set of styling skills and a more assured and prouder sense of self. Looking back on the journey I have taken to styling my own hair, I found many parallels to my personal development. The safe, supportive, and welcoming environment that the Boys and Girls Club provided allowed me to feel secure in trying new things, learn from my mistakes, and find the confidence to try again. When I think about the story of my life, I see memories and photos of me with different hairstyles as markers in time. Though I have grown and changed infinitely since I was eight years old, one thing remains the same: my love and appreciation for the Boys and Girls Club.

Even though my time at the club as a student is coming to a close, my relationship with this organization is far from over. I plan to volunteer my time during college to work at local Boys and Girls Clubs in order to offer the same support that helped me become who I am today. I envision myself imparting wisdom about life and of loving myself, and my hair, that I have learned throughout the past decade. I will take these lessons and memories with me, and every time I embark on a journey that requires courage and bravery, I will think about how much I like the hair on my head and how I will always have the lessons learned from the Boys and Girls Club on my side.



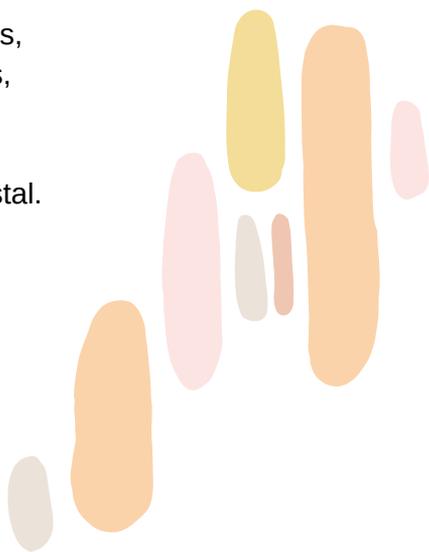
Prism
Rey F.
Open HS

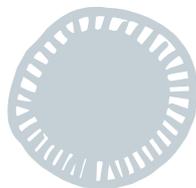
You stabbed me in the heart with a glass sword.
I tried to pull it out, but the quick-silver blade broke in my blue hands.
The sharp synth of it braking, blood pooling,
I fell into myself, crumbling like paper.

Ectoplasmic phantom of hazy yellow tones,
you ruled my world with your pretty hands,
cold to the touch but still beautiful.
You were made of every kind of light,
burning my skin, turning my bones to crystal.
Purifying me.
I hold the afterthought of you,
cradling it like a responsibility.

In a sense, the sword was a stain,
a memory for me to try to drown at 3 a.m.
When all I can think about is you,
only to come up gagging,
gasping for you over and over.
I lost things in that.

I hold the handle in my hand now,
while you stand there staring, waiting.
How could a creature so beautiful be so dangerous?
I wrap my hands around the glass still embedded in my chest, and begin to
turn.
A click,
and water comes pouring out.





Bright's Delights

Bright K.

Metro Richmond Boys & Girls Club - Southside

Good evening. I am the future founder of Bright's Delights, a restaurant founded upon love, family, and determination. I'm here to tell you about how life is like making a cake.

The first step of baking a cake is gathering your ingredients together. For me, I lacked an important ingredient in my life which was my father. Since he wasn't around, I grew up in a single parent home with my mother and little sister. At a very young age, I learned how to be responsible and manage myself and my sister. I had an encouraging mom who never gave up on us and teachers that actually cared about my future. At the Southside Club, the staff saw that I had potential. They saw how I led others in the club, and most importantly, that I had friends who supported me and cared about me. These were the perfect ingredients I had to add to my life.

After mixing the ingredients, you have the baking process before the cake is complete. During my life process, I went through many struggles. One of them was my weight. Due to my father's absence, I felt like I wasn't loved enough and I didn't gain enough attention, so I turned to food to fill that void. This led me to have low self esteem and later on, I would please people just to get their attention. Eventually, I overcame these obstacles and instead used them to my advantage .

One of my favorite lyrics from J. Cole's song "Love Yours" is "there's beauty in the struggle, ugliness in the success." Even though we go through our own personal issues, there is always something beautiful that will emerge from it. There's a failure to any success. Hearing these words motivate me to keep going no matter the situation.

Now that the cake is finished, it is ready to be decorated. Although I went through many challenges, it strengthened me as a person. There are 6 ways to describe me that each start with the first letter of my name.

B - Brilliant - I am brilliant in my communication with others and in my academics.

R - Ready - I am ready for any challenges that might come my way.

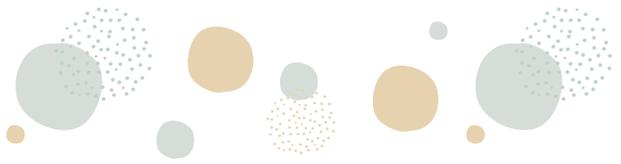
I - Independent - I am independent and my intuition allows me to be capable of working on my own and leading others.

G - Genuine - I am genuine; a person of action and emotion.

H - Humble - I humble myself, taking in and adapting to constructive criticism.

T - True - I am true to myself as well as others.

These attributes that I possess will help me succeed through life as I reach my goal of having my own restaurant. I am thankful for the people who have molded and shaped me into the person that I am today. I want others to realize that challenges are not weaknesses; instead, they make you stronger. My name is Bright, and this is my story.



Who Decided That?

Chris O.

Thomas Jefferson HS

Erasmus said "vestis virum facit." Shakespeare said "the apparel oft proclaims man."

We now say, how you came is too dull, so go sharpen up. Your foreign ways are now past ancient days, and it will not get you a cut.

Who decided the value in what you wear?

Who determined parents should tell their kids, "Don't put on your skin out there?"

'Cuz no matter your past or future, they don't care

about the book, or the cover, as long as the bullets they tear

poke holes in the story to the end of the hood's tale.

Who decided that you're the sum of your parts? It doesn't add up:

how's it fair?

They don't want a sister melanin touching the air

Oppressing the dressing all the way up to the hair.

You have a crown of thorns, is too distracting I hear.

Understand to take pride in your mane, it's power in here, it's power they fear. The

acceptance of how we are, the time is coming near.

Who decided our naps shouldn't tangle and there's unity in how we appear?

They hate to see the reminder that we don't originate from here.

Who decided that the dress code must undress those who clothes express, show they won't re-dress their soul?

Who decided society should expect 'a go with their flow?'

Now that three piece straight jacket is the picture perfect pose

And let me tell you the truth.

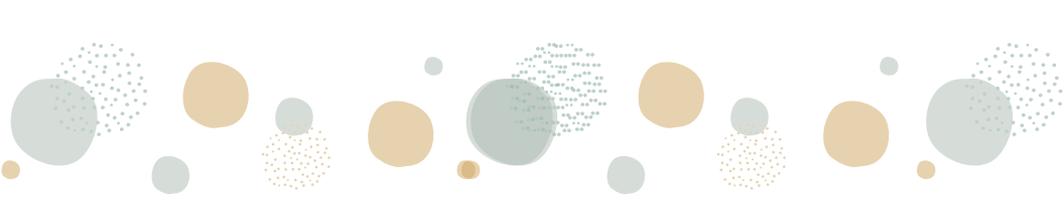
Suits are the modern day noose

tightening to bruise,

and it shows how loose our bond is to our truth

when it comes to the enjoyment of a white man's boots.

Still growing and eating the white man's strange fruits.

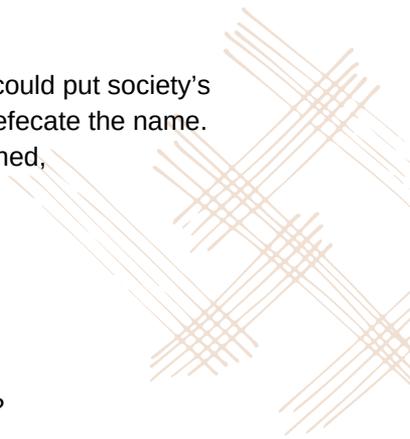


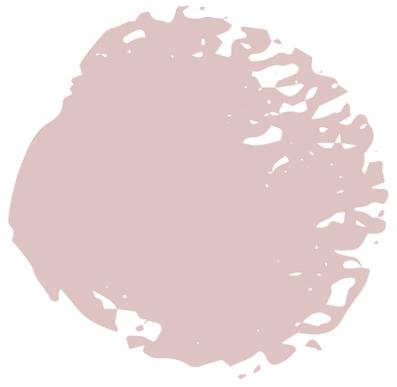
Who decided that they should destroy so many trees by pulling from the roots?
Who decided that our native tongue was too savage,
that they couldn't have us passing down heritage or
trying to deliver the package
of culture to our kids and grandkids, and they still must do the carriage,
so they cut out the tongues, and speech becomes stagnant.

This ain't your native addressing,
So don't come in here talking about no Kunta Kinte.
Who decided that the rawness of an Ebonic tongue could put society's
stomach on the run, so they have no choice but to defecate the name.
Remove it like waste after it burned the energy it gained,
Or the bitter taste makes them regurgitate and
makes it out as a messy mistake all the same.

Who decided that it's bad to be Black?
Who decides what it means to be Black?
Who decided the way we act,
that we should be evolving back and fitting the stats?
Who decided the sister shape was too fat?
She must conceal her make, because society is not ready for all that.
Who decided that the cinematic shape for a beautiful woman is a baseball bat
who has the mind of a Tic Tac?

Who signed these contracts?
Who decided this and that?
The predecessors fought hard, pulling off risky attacks,
and we don't fully understand where we came from to where we're at.
Remember,
*"We may not decide how we look, but what's put on, we have to be the one who's
deciding that."*





My Passion

Kenneth B.

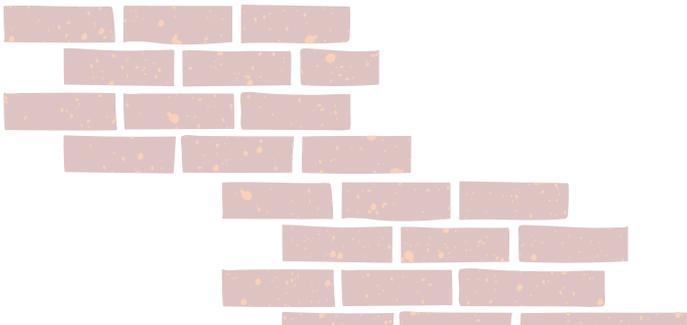
Metro Richmond Boys & Girls Club - Fairfield

Technology has become an important factor in everyday life, but the reason it matters to me is because it is my future. We use it to research cures, improve transportation, and to make life easier. Overall, technology makes living in the modern world more convenient.

Almost everyone in the world has reaped the benefits of technology since the early 1900's. With the invention of modern day computers and other devices, we are able to interpret the past, fly through the skies, and dive into the deepest parts of the ocean. Technology has even played an effort to keep us entertained with game systems, such as the Xbox and PlayStation.

With the advancements of technology, advances in the medical field have also happened. We developed probiotics, modified procedures, and are able to practice artificial organ transplants. Thanks to modern medical devices, we can treat diseases like cancer and HIV rigorously. We have also been able to decrease our mortality rate significantly compared to before these advances were made.

When I graduate college, I want to become an engineer. I'm not exactly sure what I want to do, but I want to make the next best thing. I could make a hover car, a new phone company, or a hi-tech space shuttle. The possibilities are endless.



but it is as it is as it is
Rosalie T.
Henrico HS

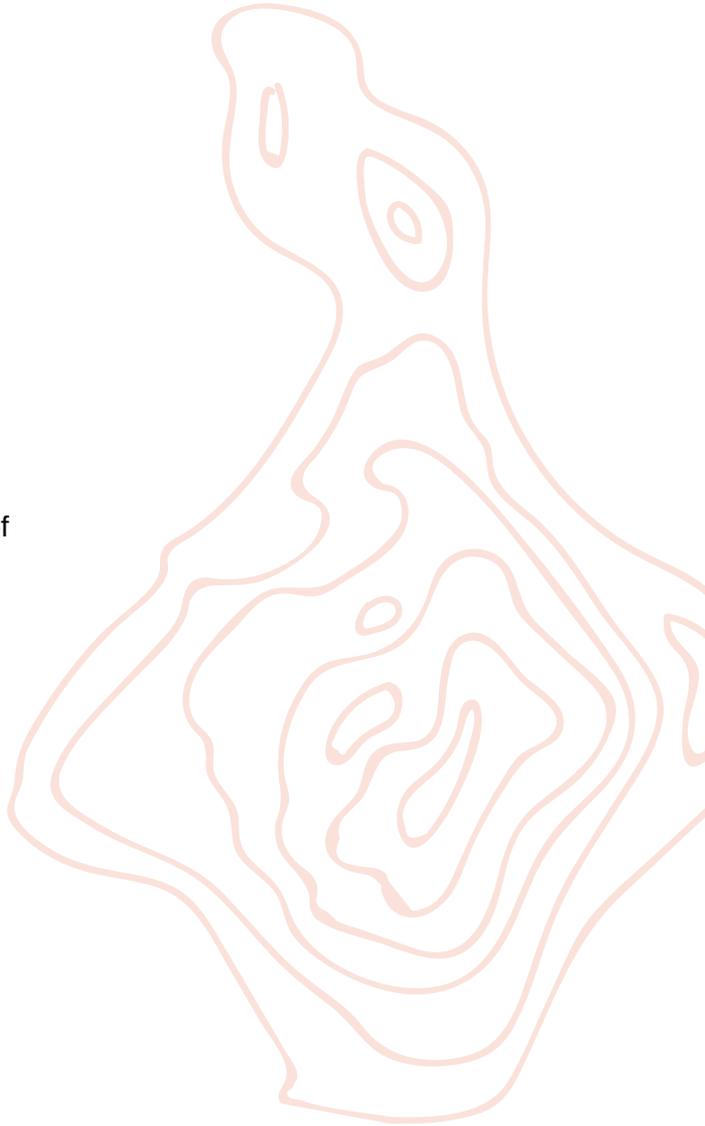
I began to writhe against
the touch of these
hands I did not know
as Brand turned to Knife.

(is this on purpose?)

A disembodied whisper of
it is as it is as it is.
Why am I in line, and
who is in front,
and why is my forehead
bleeding?

(is there an echo?)

I grabbed the hand that
reached for me,
traveled up its arm
to a blood-stained face
and found that
the World is made of
scar tissue,
but it is as it is as it is.

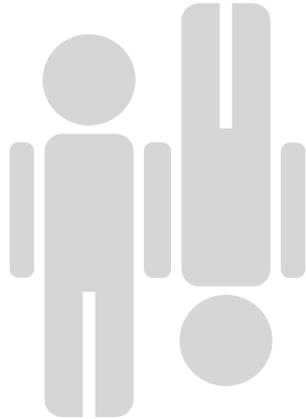


Young Black Man

Charles B.

Henrico HS

Young black man like dirt beneath the soil.
Young black man you can't do this.
Young black man you can't do that.
Young black man you can be below, down in the cracks.
Young black man no matter what you do,
Young black man they will only see the bad in you.
Young black man work hard.
Young black man keep trying.
Young black man keep striving.

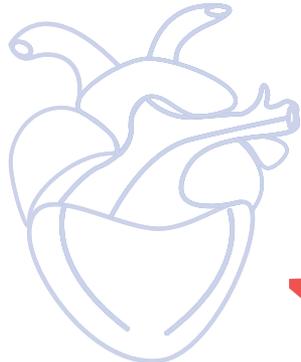


Love

Drusilla P.

Thomas Jefferson HS

I want to open my heart with a scalpel
to let you see my ventricles,
my valves.
To feel my heart beat with hands that smell like bergamot,
dripping with my love, an image of spider lilies.
I wish to feel your fingers under my rib cage,
to know my lungs and to plant roses in them.
Daisies and callas and monkshood.
I crave the wisteria on your breath.
Sigh into me,
would you?





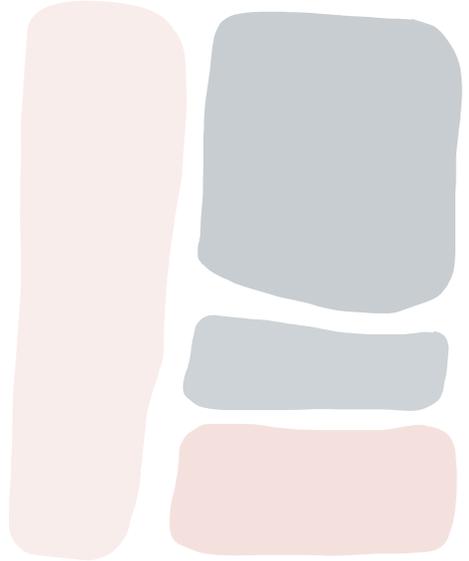
Kids of the Ward
Jalyiah D.
John Marshall HS

Children in the street,
Children in the store,
They don't know what they're doing,
They just get ignored.

You see no shoes,
You see no clothes,
But no need to worry,
At least they're just h**s.

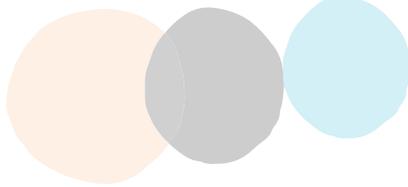
Their moms don't care,
All they buy is hair.
Their Dad is in jail,
Not there to hear the baby wail.

Walking down the street,
Going to the store,
But little do they know,
Momma just locked the door.



My Digital World

Ashantay C.
Thomas Jefferson HS



I've always had a love-hate relationship with social media. I've been on social media since I was 11-years-old. I started on Google Plus and Hangouts, which were my version of Facebook and Skype at the time. I would repost chain mail, join One Direction fan groups, and post occasional heavily filtered selfies. Towards the middle of 6th grade, my friend and I decided to finally get Instagram.

We were both pretty scared of the idea of being on a popular, thriving app surrounded by much cooler peers. After installing that app, I would experience my first cyberbully and unsolicited nude photo within a year. Throughout my middle school days, I downloaded Tumblr, Snapchat, Twitter, and other social media apps that were catalysts to my angsty emo phase. I've always used these apps to express who I am and what I like during different phases of my adolescence. I've had accounts where I made fan edits of my favorite band members, and I've had anime blogs on Tumblr.

All of those accounts and blogs, that have now been demolished, led to my peak on social media, a kpop spam account on Instagram. The first spam account I made "bonelessnamjoon" was created in summer 2017, a time when spam accounts on Instagram and Twitter were in their own era of memes and drama. Not to mention, this was during my post-edgelord, deep-fried-memes, leafyishere-subscriber phase, but I was still swept away by Korean boy bands and 2-D characters. That account ended up deleted due to circumstances I cannot say, but I reached two thousand followers before it was terminated.

I was in a state of shock. I couldn't believe the only thing that made me happy, a place where I could be my true self, was gone. I had made more friends than imaginable, and it was one of the first times in my life when I felt proud of something. I'd like to think I had influence within that community. I made people laugh, and I made friends from all over the world.

Looking back at it now, I feel pretty bittersweet. Social media is probably my most used source of communication. I get to see myself and others create and grow within each post. Most will say that none of this really matters, and maybe it doesn't, but it did to me and to so many others. At the same time, social media isn't real life, and even I'm still getting used to that fact.

I'm So Prada You

Brianna D.
Henrico HS

Funny, like all the things you shouldn't laugh at.

Loud like a car with no brakes.

Giving, like a grandma who just heard you eat all day. Impulsive, like the way you wanna punch someone, so you just do it;

kind like the softest butterfly, and sweet like the freshest honey.

This is who I AM. This is who I will continue to be. I am the one you go to for comfort, for laughter, for upbringing.

You will either LOVE ME OR HATE me, there's no in between. For I am the splinter in your finger and the love in our heart. Funny, like all the things you shouldn't laugh at.

LOUD like a car with no brakes.

BOLD.

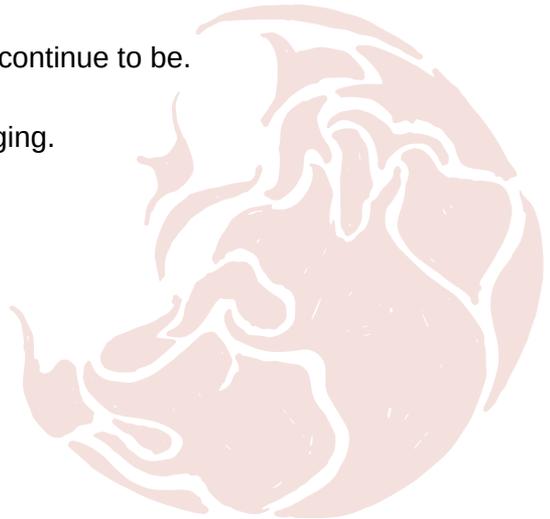
VIBEFUL.

This is who I AM. This is who I will continue to be.

I am the one you go to

for comfort, for laughter, for upbringing.

For I am the splinter in your finger
and the love in our heart.

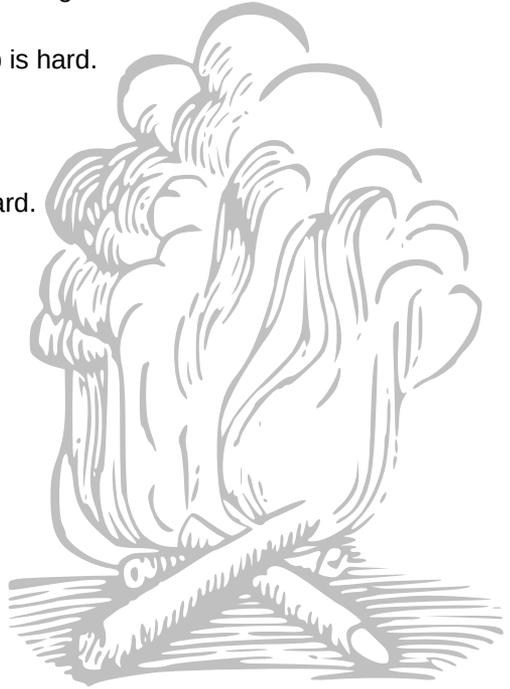


Burning

RaJahne' H.

Alum Spotlight - Summer 2020

From my view the world is burning.
The street I once walked down, lit by police lights and fire.
My city, being broken, burned.
I'm proud of my community, standing up is hard.
I'm too afraid to fight.
I'm too tired to fight.
A part of me thinks it's useless.
I'm tired of screaming and not being heard.
My voice isn't loud enough,
Isn't strong enough.
I feel small, unimportant.
Surrounded by hate.
Social media fuels my anxiety.
It makes the scary things bigger.
I can't hide from it.
Everywhere I turn, a body falls.
They all look like me or like my brother.
I'm scared.
My body can't articulate the fear.
It shakes, becomes numb.
Rinse, repeat.
I should be used to this feeling.
How terrible to think that I should be used to this,
To the disappointment,
To the fear, to the hate.
It's insane that the color of my skin will be the reason for my downfall.
I never noticed how ugly I must be,
Maybe how terrifying I must look.
The fact that I could never hurt a fly, but a lot of people fear me.
It must be scary to hear my brothers crying for their mothers,
Struggling for air.
Seeing them struggle,
Trying to cling onto life,
Trying to make it home to their kids, to their mothers.
It turns them on to see us hurting.
They get off at my worst fear.
I just want you to know,
When they've killed me,
I'll finally stop fearing myself.



Podium Program Members October 2019 – June 2021

Chester YMCA Y-Achievers (*last names omitted*)

- Adilei, Antony, Asusena, Briana, Brinley, Malachi, Yari, and Ziaire

Metro Richmond Boys & Girls Club Teen Center

- Bright Kadeghe, Chriselle Traynum, Josette Harper, Kaquei Brown, Kenneth Boyd, Laradaja Mccants, Llordaisa Newman, Naasir Neverton, and Tamiyah Crawley

Salvation Army Boys and Girls Club

- Aaliyah Moore, Anthony Williams, Ashley Roulett, Cherish Daily, Daniel Green, D'Asia Whitaker, Destiny Wilson, Elijah Edwards, Izrell Williams, Jamarion Williams, Jayda Lee, Kajirah Mclean, Lamya Coleman, Malaysia Smith, Michael Jones, Myles Anderson, Robert Jones, Tai'Li Smith, Taylar Mitchel, Tiesha Santos, T'mya Harrison, Tyshan Darden, Tyshawn Morton, Warren Ruffin, and Yazmine Jackson

Binford Middle School

- Aiden Thomas, Calvin Elan, Coles Williams, Jaman Threats, Kevin Gerrick, Kristjan Davis, Malachi Cosby, Marec Marunde, Phoenix Davis, Richardson Armstead, Zander Davis, and Zykuan Williams

Elkhardt Thompson Middle School

- Abby Bryan, Angel Hernandez, Ashley Chavez, Azayvion Drew, Desean Parham, Diamond Walker, Dominique Smith, Donnasia Brannock, Earl Venable, Jeremiah Bond, Kaniya Drew, Kelli-Ann Hull, Kendalayah Coleman, Lanayisa Boone, Luther Donnell-Williams, Morales Taylor, Nakia Abel, Nasyr Holland, Ric'Kara Cooper, Rodrecus Holloway, Tashona Robertson, and Tiana Wynn

Lucille Brown Middle School

- Abdoulatif Fall, Amon Taylor, Ariana Vitervo, Arielle Fitzgerald, Cedric Moore, Cynthia Hernandez, Daisy Rasor, Danica Furman, Herbert Bullock, Jada Futrell, Jadon Morris, Ja'Nyla Johnson, Jayden Armstrong, Larry Williams, Leilani Johnson, Malia Harris, Mc'kayla Sumner, Sophie Burgh, Ti'elle Young, Xavier Miller, and Zafir Stewart

Quioccasin Middle School

- Abdiel Gonzaliz, Ahmed Haroun, Alejandra Garcia, Daniel Santillana, Deu Sarki, Emeli Gutierrez, Ender Barrios, Esmeralda Colmenarez, Gregory Parada, Gregory Siwakuan, Hana Mansour, Huda Elsadig, Javier Ruiz, Jeena Katwal, Justina Katwal, Krishika Kafley, Lavinia de Olivera Silva, Leene Katwal, Livia Corvolho, Marisabel Terrazas, Marisol Arqueta, Marowa Ahmed, Moustafa Abdalla, Nabaa Sabah, Ndeye Seck, Nicolle Fernandes, Nicolle Katwal, Orlaith Giron, Santiago Goldstein, Sarah Escalante, Scarlet Flores, Sophia Sandoval, Tabarek Sabah, Tanzil Ali, and Yussef Moftah

Armstrong High School

- Aalisha Armstead, Aaliyah Brooks, Adrian White, Akeeymah Havgrove, Altonique Neal, Anaya Pierre, Aniya Wiley, Aniyah Rawl, Arzjon Clarke, Asher Lingo, Bianca Gaines, Blaise Wingold, Brittany Hayes, Canaan Robinson, Chakira Kamara Chandrea Harris, Chenyrai Briggs, Constance Forney, Corey Spruill, Da'mon Hamb, Dariona Johnson, Daviona Teasley, Day'Shaliyha Gardener, De'Vonte Walker, Deandre Davis, Demarco Davis, Deshawn Rodd, Donesha Walker, Dy'lan Lee, Eniyah Moore, G. Johnson, Gelena Brown, Gracie Greenwood, Harmony Simon, Hassan Harris, Imani Adewale, India Williams, Isaiah Gray, Iyana Bing, Jahkirah Adams, Ja-Juan Heyward, Jaliyah Samuels, Jamari Tolliver, Jamyia Walker, Janaiya Rowee, Janaiyah Thompson, Janiyah Epps, Jaquan Washington, Javontae Poag, Jenee Long, Jennifer Goepel, Justin Mattis, Justin Morris, Ka'marya Tolliver, Kameron Belfield, Kapri Robinson, Kate Hodges, Kayla Jackson, Kevion Carter, Kharizma Owens, Khylige Stewart, Kiara Taylor-Stewart, Kyelle Hicks, Lamika Harris, Lashani Carlton, Lenexus Prescod, LeShanea Stevens, Liyah Johnson, Lizzy Neylan, Makyiah Jenkins, Malachi Woods, Malonte Allen, Manuel Randolph, Mareesha Randolph, Mariah Grove, Mario Fuller-Collins, Mario Tolliver, Naquan Hubbard, Nathaniel Christian, Nicholas Pollard, Nigel Huey, Nshai Gale, Quanaisa Hubbard, Quinseon Harris, Quinshawn Ubard, Qwenesha Walker, Rashawa King, Rashawn Harris, Scottasia Smalls, Shacorie Jones, ShaeNikwa Terry, Shaun Hendricks, Shavon Bowens, Shermiah Turpin, Special Scott, Sydni Curtis, Takia Austin, Taleah Frazier, Taliya Scott-Brown, Tavion Winfield, Ti'Ayna Terry, U'Gene Richardson, and Zykeria Williams

Henrico High School

- Brianna Davis, Caleb Bullock, Charles Barber, Charles Bracey, DeJaune Thompson, Demi Chowen, India Simms, Janae Winston, Ja'Niya Sumler, Jared Johnson, Jaylen Smalls, Jermaine Fleming, Kadija Harris, Karla Ramos, Kin Issack, Meyer Beally, Mya Turner, Pfeniox Brown, Ryan Sellars, Sasho Radoulov, Suhayla Amed, and Tyshawn Wyatt

Highland Springs High School

- Ai-Zane' Mason, Azariah Jackson, Devon Alexander, Georgio Haskins, Heavyn Champion, JeNae Hill, Lashauna Wilson, Leira McLaughlin, Matthew Burton, Mekayla Clarke, Michael Israel, Taivyon Palmer, Taniya Ruffin, and Theodore Moss

John Marshall High School

- Amaya Jackson, Brittany Alston, Denaisja Jones, Hakeem Rasser, Jaquan Jones, Kamren Lucas Kent, and Nikisha Fleming

Open High School

- Ashanti Lathern, Aviah Kershaw, Cobi Harrison, Elijah Grant, Henry Roman, Imani Meade, Leonna Harris, Merika Rhodes, Minx Wilson, Reagan Wynn, Stella Bryant, and Zora Dunlap

Thomas Jefferson High School

- Anthony Adkins, Ashontay Coleman, Bre'shon Dunson, Chris Oliver, Drusilla Perkins, Kachief Andrews, Kamari Branch, Leila Moore, Xavier Adkins, and Zolet Martinez

NextUp RVA Virtual Programs (Spring 2020 – Spring 2021)

- Allanah Hicks-Thompson, Amauri Dixon, Amber Bond, Antwon Lathern, Ashley Booker, Ashley Chavez, Brianna Gaines, Brianna Taylor, Cameron Saunders, Davida Stokes, Davon Booker, Destiny Dillard, Destiny Young, Elmer Quijano, Ethan Holt, Jane Lewis, Jeffery Hector, Jenniz Balcarcel, Khamani Mason, Lanayah Fields, Mya Hyman, Nataley Alavez, Reaghan Dock, Samaria Padgett, Shadidah Jones, Shiane Taylor, Sidney King, Xzavier Watkins, and Zaniah Burwell

Podium Hosted Virtual Programs (Spring & Summer 2020)

- Abigail Camp, Amaya Branch, Bright Kadeghe, Drusilla Perkins, Elijah Woodward, Journey Woodward, Kavin Jackson, Rajahne' Harris, Raphael Sharp, Sahara Williamson, Savon Thompson, Sydnei Jefferson, and Tristan Wynn

