Podium

Power to the Youth

"Most Likely To Be Writers"
Power to the Youth.

Journal 13
Curated by Richmond students in 2022.
An Alumni Introduction

A most warm hello and greetings to our Podium family, friends, and students. Welcome to Journal 13! We are in the midst of much change and within a time of great uncertainty. What is certain, though, are the amazing written bodies of work created by Podium youth that grace the pages of this journal!

I’ll be frank, we need each other now more than ever. While some places have started to open their doors, there is still much debate on how much the nation should open back up, and what human right issues should be addressed. Time and time again, we see how often young people need and deserve to have their voices heard. Many of the pieces shared in this publication remind us that we have a duty to listen to each other, and that reading goes a long way. So how does Podium fit into all this? Just what is Podium? Who are we?

Podium RVA is a creative non-profit working with middle and high school aged youth to express themselves through writing and leadership. Workshops are hosted weekly after-school and in the summertime. What makes Podium so special is the impact we have on the students. I, myself, went through the program in high school and am honored to return to run our youth workshops as a current college student. Youth always tend to speak volumes as an integral part of the Podium programming. Last year, 100% of youth viewed Podium as a safe, inclusive space where they felt encouraged to share their work and stories with others; 88% of students wrote more often on their own after participating in Podium’s weekly programs.

The Podium family is cyclical. Like myself, many former youth who age out of the program end up rejoining as mentors, volunteers, and even program leads. There are many opportunities for youth and teens while at Podium, including participating in mentorships, publications, like this journal, showcases, and in the Teen Professional Conference that happens every August. We love preparing youth for their endeavors post high school in whatever they choose! In 2008, we had a mission to give back to inner-city youth by empowering them to take control of their own learning while developing the skillsets they need out in the real world. 14 years later, Podium is still thriving and more committed than ever to its mission and dedication to youth writing, communication, and leadership skill development.

“Power to the Youth” is a call to the young people in this generation and beyond. Their words and ideas are so valuable and so needed. Letting them speak their truths is imperative. It is just as imperative as providing outlets to write these truths down. So again, I welcome you to Journal #13! Enjoy the writings created by our wonderful students. And please remember, the youth are speaking, and it’s our job to listen.

- Destiny Hall-Harper, Summer 2022 Program Lead
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- Summer Program Lead, Destiny Hall-Harper

Journal 13 edited by Podium volunteer and friend, Lai King Lam.
Partners and Special Thanks

We thank the students, teachers, administrators, and parents of Richmond City, Henrico County, and Chesterfield 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:

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- **Community Partnerships:** 21st Century Community Learning Centers, Chester Family YMCA, City of Richmond, Communities in Schools, Metro Richmond Boys & Girls Clubs, Next-Up RVA, Partnership for the Future, and ResponseAbility.

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Black Excellence
A'Landa Macklin
Boys & Girls Club - Southside

“The most common way people give up their power is by thinking they don’t have any.” That is a quote by Alice Walker, the author of “The Color Purple.” That quote alone describes how the Boys and Girls Club has helped and provided me with guidance and a purpose. The club has helped me find myself, my passion, and the ability to use my voice to help other Black youth find their own voices and confidence within themselves. Having a place that I can call home and where I feel secure means a lot to me.

Many young Black girls don’t have any confidence about their hair, and I was one of those girls. I was not taught how to love my hair the way it was, to embrace it, or to be confident in it. I was told it was too hard to handle, and I always wondered if I would ever feel comfortable being me. Having conversations inside of the club with older and other young Black girls helped me open my eyes and understand that I should love my hair and myself — no matter what.

Starting January 27, 2020, I started to love my hair. I did my very first twist out and realized how beautiful I looked. That was the first time I really noticed myself starting to be more open and carefree with others. Ever since then, I love wearing my beautiful brown puff or wearing twist outs that show my curls. That was one of the best decisions I have ever made. The club helped me find myself and understand that I do not have to change my hair or myself to fit society’s standards of having “nice hair” or not having my hair “all over the place.” I want Black youth to understand that their hair is beautiful and that it is their crown. Your hair is unique, and don’t let anyone take that away from you.

If I had the opportunity to change anything about my life, I wouldn’t. Otherwise, I wouldn’t have accomplished the goals of learning my voice and becoming more confident in myself. In the same way I have been taught to love myself by attending the club, I want to provide that same help for others who do not attend the club. The way the club has impacted my life reminds me every day that I am somebody and will continue to be somebody, if I believe in myself and my capability of accomplishing anything I put my mind to. I want to thank the club for molding me into the beautiful young Black woman that I am today. Because of you, I am Black excellence.

The Power of Freedom
Lael Washington
Boys & Girls Club - Southside

Good evening, everyone,

My name is Lael Washington, and I am a senior at the School of Tomorrow. What does the Boys and Girls Club mean to me? Freedom.

Freedom to discover myself. When I first walked into the club at the age of seven, I’m going to be honest: I was scared. It was something new, and new things and little kids usually don’t mix too well. The thing that made the difference was the welcoming atmosphere that allowed me to overcome childhood trauma and come out of my shell. The staff treated me as if I were their own child. The Boys and Girls Club became a safe space where I could express myself. In the words of the song “Endless Possibilities,” the club became my escape, a place where I could safely run through the world and not look back.

Freedom to develop myself. I learned to both find my voice and to communicate the club’s values by looking out for our younger members. Developing communication skills enabled me to be aware of the needs of others. I learned to speak to them or simply provide active listening without being judgmental. I took advantage of opportunities to participate in marathons, Black Lives Matter rallies, and diverse sports events. There were opportunities to participate in robotics, coding, and carpentry. I actually built a gaming PC from scratch. I also became part of initiatives that battle homelessness and distribute food boxes. I even helped with recycling and beautification. I was also selected to attend the National Leadership Conference in Florida.

Freedom to express myself. Now, if all of this wasn’t enough, most impressive for me was watching the club reinvent itself during the pandemic. The club stayed alive. Staff, through Zoom, made the effort to stay in contact with me and check on me in a time of uncertainty and isolation. I was encouraged to share my most intimate thoughts. This caused me to realize one of my passions: creating opportunities for the younger generation. I hope to give them more scholarship opportunities, while also improving their school environment through an advocacy podcast called B.I.N.G (Bullying Is Not a Game). We will advocate against bullying and talk about how to avoid and prevent things from escalating.

Thank you to the people around me — for supporting me just like the Boys and Girls Club on Bainbridge Street has. It has given me opportunities that I wish to give to others. As I close, I will remind you that the club continues to be an exceptional launching pad to imagine, do, and become. I am Lael Washington, president of the Keystone Club. Please remember to keep your freedom of expression. Thank you.
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“The most common way people give up their power is by thinking they don’t have any.”
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You Can’t Get Rid of Us
James Moon
Armstrong HS

Peace? Love? Happiness? Where is that? I don’t see it, only sadness and anger. Teenagers getting talked down to or cursed for being gay.

They can’t control who they love or what they are. The only one who can judge them is God, not their family and friends. Many misinterpret the Bible when it comes to sexuality, and being gay is not a sin.

You’re not going to Hell for loving the same gender or for identifying as a different one. You still don’t understand why it’s such a big deal. They’re not hurting anyone by being themselves, and I keep hoping that the world will get better soon.

To the homophobic and transphobic people hating on gay people, that want them dead or want them to get help being straight again, stop asking God to forgive us for “going through a phase” and “sinning.” You can’t get rid of us.

Alternatives
Josh Herndon
Boys & Girls Club - Teen Center

Right now, I go to an alternative school. Countless Black and Brown kids and teens are pushed into alternative schools because of common mistakes and racist school policies. I was one of those kids. But I’ve learned positive ways to control myself, how to take help when it’s given to me, how to ask for help, and how to talk about my feelings. As a result, I’ve taken a lot of help from others and learned from their help, especially how I can do better when going back to public school. I will have better relationships with teachers, help more around the house, and be a leader on my football team.

Conditional Love
Anonymous
Partnership for the Future

I attended a Flying Squirrels game with my mother to perform the national anthem with my school’s choir. The whole time I was performing, I was a nervous wreck, though I doubt anyone could hear me. It was a huge relief to walk off the baseball field and enjoy the game like the rest of the people who came.

I sat in the crowd with my mom and brother. Just next to us were my two best friends and their mom. The two girls were fraternal twins, but they looked nothing alike. I recently developed a crush on one of them. She had bright hair and freckles. We were history classmates, and I told her about my crush a week earlier. The feeling wasn’t mutual, but I wasn’t upset and completely forgot. Like a normal best friend, I asked her mom if we could sleep over, and her mom said she would get back to me and never did. On the car ride home, it was oddly quiet.

Suddenly, my mom revealed that my crush’s mother had informed her of my crush. I was then questioned uncomfortably in the car like I was only six, like I didn’t know what it meant to “like” someone in that way. The questioning continued when we arrived home with my father present. My mom revealed to me that she was upset with me for having those feelings for a girl and how selfish I was being.

It was that evening I realized my mother and father’s love was conditional. Throughout that entire interaction my body felt numb, like I was hearing mostly white noise. I was angry that my mother would upset me and call me things I wasn’t. I was frustrated because I know I couldn’t change her mind, and I was sad knowing I had to hide a part of myself from my own mother.
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Anonymous
Partnership for the Future

I attended a Flying Squirrels game with my mother to perform the national anthem with my school’s choir. The whole time I was performing, I was a nervous wreck, though I doubt anyone could hear me. It was a huge relief to walk off the baseball field and enjoy the game like the rest of the people who came.

I sat in the crowd with my mom and brother. Just next to us were my two best friends and their mom. The two girls were fraternal twins, but they looked nothing alike. I recently developed a crush on one of them. She had bright hair and freckles. We were history classmates, and I told her about my crush a week earlier. The feeling wasn’t mutual, but I wasn’t upset and completely forgot. Like a normal best friend, I asked her mom if we could sleep over, and her mom said she would get back to me and never did. On the car ride home, it was oddly quiet.

Suddenly, my mom revealed that my crush’s mother had informed her of my crush. I was then questioned uncomfortably in the car like I was only six, like I didn’t know what it meant to “like” someone in that way. The questioning continued when we arrived home with my father present. My mom revealed to me that she was upset with me for having those feelings for a girl and how selfish I was being.

It was that evening I realized my mother and father’s love was conditional. Throughout that entire interaction my body felt numb, like I was hearing mostly white noise. I was angry that my mother would upset me and call me things I wasn’t. I was frustrated because I know I couldn’t change her mind, and I was sad knowing I had to hide a part of myself from my own mother.
This is Me
Treasure Grizzard
River City MS

Just because I am pansexual
That doesn’t mean I can’t believe in the Lord.
I am not a sinner.
I am not a disappointment.
I am me.

Just because I am Black
That doesn’t mean I steal.
I am not a criminal.
I am not a thief.
I am a person.

Growth
Kimari Smith-Baker
Partnership for the Future

The time I had a negative impact on my life was in the eighth grade. In eighth grade, I always used to be in trouble. I always got suspended and had to leave school early; it got to the point where there was a big chance I was going to get expelled. I was really upset with myself because I had become this person I thought I’d never become. Disappointing my mom made me feel like I lost every opportunity I had. It made me feel like I failed as a person.

Later during the school year, I told myself I had to change the way that I’m acting because I’m not going anywhere in life. People in the main office at my school doubted me. They always thought that I’d stay in trouble. Quarantine gave me a huge break to get my thoughts together, and the truth is: it actually made me become a better person.

When I started high school, it was like a brand-new start. I’ve become a better person and have gotten into many programs. I have also met important people in Richmond which is good, so this had negative and positive impacts on my life.

Polly
Julian Moore
Partnership for the Future

It is a normal day. The sun is shining, the Earth is spinning, and the sky is clear. A calm before the storm. I am sitting in bed, oblivious and using my laptop. My mom is standing at the foot of my bed, and I can already sense that something is amiss. I can see it on her face, hear it in the quiet, “I love you.”

My heart already started dropping with those three words. The kicker: “Polly is dead.”

Now I am really paying attention. I sat my device aside, thinking I must have misheard, or maybe that was some sick sort of joke.

“What?” I ask as the anxiety begins to rise.

“Polly got hit by a car. I’m sorry, and I love you,” my mother repeats, adding condolences to control the damage.

In an instant, I’m on my feet, rushing down the stairs and bursting out of the front door. The world is a blur around me, a sea of colors in which I am fighting not to drown. I’m losing.

There, on the vividly green grass of the front lawn, is my Polly. A tiny creature that somehow meant the world to me, so unique and special, unmoving on the ground. I blink, and I’m on my knees, hunching over her body as tears gush out of my eyes like rivers. I blubber nonsensically, like a man deranged pleading for her to wake up, like you’d see in a movie.

Unfortunately, reality is the most unforgiving movie. She does not move. Doesn’t make a sound. In my arms, she’s horribly, awfully limp. Her beautiful eyes are now clouded with death. Blood trickles from her broken jaws, and I cry harder still. Her gorgeous, mismatched fur, like the coats of many cats stitched together in an amazing combination of patterns and colors.

I couldn’t weep forever though. Polly is placed in a shallow grave, coupled with a mouse caught by my other cat — a parting gift, even though they never got along. Polly is covered with earth, taking the gift with her. My last words to her, one of my closest companions, had been to “go away.” I got what I wanted at that moment. Now she is really, truly gone. I wish I’d never said those words.
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Treasure Grizzard
River City MS

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I Got Your Back
Quentin Crump
Highland Springs HS

I got your back
through thick and thin,
you can’t give up
so pinch up your chin
cause after the storm
is when flowers bloom.
All things are beautiful
even a mushroom.

Be like a rose
that grew from concrete.
Be the boss in a game
that can’t feel defeat.
Many great things
are coming for you,
So do it your way.
You know it’s true.

My Earliest Memory
Sueza Khan
Partnership for the Future

I don’t know how I didn’t get tired of it.
I sat on the old forest green couch
in the living room,
waiting for the Elmo DVD to replay.
I stared blankly at the old, boxy TV
as the characters repeated the words
that I had heard many times before.
The fuzzy screen flickered in the dim room
as I lay next to my brother,
who was getting sick of Elmo.
I was only two,
but I probably should’ve shut off the TV
because I didn’t need to watch Elmo explain numbers
for the tenth time.
I was past that.

Family Matters
Cherish Bland
Partnership for the Future

My earliest memory is my first day of school. I don’t quite remember if it was pre-K or
kindergarten, but I do remember that it was a sunny morning, and I was riding with my mom
in her black truck that smelled old – but in a good way. We pulled into my grandmother’s
house, and I remember walking to the door with a smile on my face. I could feel the stone
sidewalk under my shoes as I slightly dragged my feet. I also remember how big my
backpack was and the way it felt as it covered the expanse of my back. Also, my purple outfit
was bright and made me feel happy.
I remember opening the door and everybody from the house yelling, “Surprise!”
Everyone at my grandmother’s daycare had gotten together to throw me a surprise party
before my first day of school. It made me happy to see all my friends and the people I cared
about at the time come together and (now that I’m fully aware) support me.
My whole family even went as far as to take me to school together on my first day. I
remember walking through the hall and seeing my name on a shirt-shaped name tag and how
white and less happy the building felt in comparison to the outside. All my family surrounding
me helped calm my nerves. This moment was important to me because it showed that they
all cared. I would tell my family if I could that this is one of the moments that helped me love
school as a kid. It was an opportunity for me to interact and socialize with other kids which
was great, since I was an only child. I think it is a great first memory to have since it has been
a foundation for the rest of my life.

Goodbye
Emerald Rutherford
Partnership for the Future

It was very dark and rainy, and all you could hear was the constant tapping of raindrops
on the glass. My brother and sister sat next to me, and my mom was in front of me. This day
was very unexpected considering she was perfectly fine two days before. Obviously, when
you’re truly sad, your eyes get blurry and cloudy from tears; although, in that moment I felt
nothing. Just blank.
“Emerald, do you want to say bye?” my mom said. I didn’t.
I sat in silence in front of a TV with no signal. In all honesty, I did want to say something, but I
couldn’t. The person who had raised me was dying, and I was watching it through a screen.
I knew she was ready to go, and she knew how I felt. The impact of my grandma’s death
still hits me hard because it happened in May.

I love you.
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Highland Springs HS

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The fuzzy screen flickered in the dim room
as I lay next to my brother,
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He was only one.
My mom sensed this and took him to his crib.
I was only two,
but I probably should’ve shut off the TV
because I didn’t need to watch Elmo explain numbers
for the tenth time.
I was past that.
Story's End
E’Nyah Nash
Highland Spring HS
Like the feeling of sand
Slipping through your fingers
On a warm day,
The touch of a brittle
Bloom just at summer's end
Of a breath.
The smell of paper comes
To us, blossoming under
The nose when the pages open,
Coming to a close too soon,
Too quick, too much to
Bear the end.

I See Your Monsters
Andrea Jackson
John Marshall HS
I see your monsters
I see your pain
Tell me your problems
I'll chase them away.
I'll be your lighthouse
I'll make it okay.
When I see your monsters
I'll stand and be brave.

Hope
Amelie Lavallee
Armstrong HS
“What does hope mean to me?” The question is a complicated one to answer. There are many different versions of hope. There’s the hope that reminds you of spring flowers and the wind you feel lying in a field of grass. There’s hope that you feel when you’re alone, and the only warmth you can touch is from a white-lit candle flame — and that flame is slowly going out. There’s hope that burns like forest fire, burning into red and blue flames that never die until they feel at peace.

The Perfect Day
Sierra King
Albert Hill MS
Never distress just overcome oppression and stay alive because soon you will thrive and people will flourish you with applause. They ask how you did it, and you say just keep moving forward. They aren’t satisfied with your answer. People think you lie. Now you face the adversity, all over again, but it’s ok. You just let it flow off like rain. People are the storm, and lies are the lightning. You never stay, so you remain alive. Maybe someday you can thrive again but, for now, you’re just alive and that’s fine. You go to sleep dreaming of that day, the perfect day, but it was never really perfect. People blinded by hatred only wanting to hear something that will help them. These selfish people, They haunt you, but that’s ok. It doesn’t bother you. They didn’t go through this with you. They haven’t suffered like you, with you, for you. They are just the cause of it. You hope they one day see the light, but you will not force it upon them. So, you hum to yourself and watch the sunset, the swirl of colors. Just like the inside of you.
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Story’s End
E’Nyah Nash
Highland Spring HS

Like the feeling of sand Slipping through your fingers
On a warm day,
The touch of a brittle Bloom just at summer’s end
Of a breath.
The smell of paper comes To us, blossoming under
The nose when the pages open, Coming to a close too soon,
Too quick, too much to Bear the end.
The Perfect Shatter
Abi F.
Chester Family YMCA

Dear Abby,

You will never be the book definition of “perfect.” There will always be stereotypes and the desire to fit in. There will always be daily reminders that you can do better and be better — be a different person, a false image. You look in the mirror every day and see an unknown person, that false image.
Is this who you want to be? No? Then shatter it. Break it.
Now, put it back together. No instructions. No reference. No starting point. You can’t put it back together the exact same way. Rough edges, missing pieces. Exactly how is it supposed to be? You have made art, my friend. You have made beauty of the broken: the beauty of yourself.
Kintsugi. Break what is bland and old to create what is unique and new. You will never be the book definition of “perfect,” but rather, the definition of your perfect.

Love,
Moi

Erasure
Sheyna Esson
Highland Springs HS

A young girl, she was a Hispanic girl
Made fun of because
Of her long hair and accent.

They would
Tell her “Speak clearly.”
They cut her
Hair off. She
Came to school every day,
Wearing her shame.

Sits in fear
Unprotected, unaccepted
Yet very educated.

She woke up for school.
Afraid to ride the bus,
She walked.

Came across this box,
Colors and sparkles
Caught her eye.

Picked up the box, she
Had a vision:
See a strong, beautiful, assertive woman,
Greatly respected in the world.
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Self-Love
Kaira Bradby
Highland Springs HS

Your smile isn’t like the sun,
So it does not shine like it.
Your eyes aren’t blue, so they
Aren’t like vast and deep seas.
Your hair’s not blonde or red,
So the hay and sunflowers don’t bow
When they see you.
Not red like flaming stars in
The sky or the blood in one’s body.

Your smile is like pearls and jewels.
Your eyes are a dark brown.
And don’t look down
When someone says your eyes are
Like dirt or poop because their
Eyes don’t hold the search of a time long gone,
The strength of a bear,
The sweetness of chocolate and coconuts, and so much more.
Show the soul they hide within your hair like an auburn rain
Or black thunderstorms.

Self-Acceptance
Jonathan Burks
MLK MS

Once, a leopard was born with spots he loved a lot,
but his friends did not.
He was shunned and kicked out of his pack.
Left cold and searching for a snack.
When he found a spotted frog, it gave him some advice,
“Learn to love your spots. They make you look nice.”

So the leopard listened and flaunted his spots.

His friends begged him to come rejoin the pack,
but the leopard did not and showed them his back.

Self-Confidence
Shyla Scott
George Wythe HS

The mind might tell you one thing, and the heart might tell you another.

Your mother told you to let it go.
Because if you don’t let it go,
they won’t be the ones hurting you,
you will be the one hurting yourself.

Don’t let people get to you who don’t even know you.
Self-confidence is not something you can just grab.
You must work for it.
You must learn to love yourself, and there is not a class for that.
Because, if you can’t love yourself,
how are you going to love anybody else?
Self-Love
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I Am
Gabrielle Spencer
River City MS

Just because I am a girl
That doesn't mean I have to like just boys.

Just because I like girls
That doesn't mean I am weird.

Just because you don't like the way I dress
That doesn't mean I don't have to like it either.

I am not DUMB.
I am not CRAZY.
I am not WEIRD.
I am me.

---

Just Because I Am
La'Mya Miller
MLK MS

I am not... ugly.
I am not... stupid.
I am not... slow.
I am Black, brave, and pretty.

Most people call me short.
They see me as Black, and therefore stupid.
But I see myself as Black, pretty, and brave.

---

The Real Me
Roselee Bubanji
George Wythe HS

It's hard living life when I don't know myself.
I'm trying to create a persona in their image of wealth.
A lost soul and an empty shadow.
But what do I do it for?

I do it for my peace and my well-being.
to be motivated and in control of me.
I do it as a reason to get up and as a reason for tomorrow.
I do it for my confidence, my love, and my passion.

It's a challenge to be and experience the real me.

---

Mixed Emotions
Alison Arevaw
Partnership for the Future

I told my parents I wanted to go watch "Avengers: Endgame" with my friend Mariana. It was streaming two days after my birthday; I wanted it as my birthday present, and my parents agreed.

It was Friday, and everyone in school was crazy about it. We were going to go after school with Mariana’s parents and little sister. We went to CineMark, La Gran Via (El Salvador). There we found some classmates; sadly, they were going to a different room but to see the same movie.

I bought some popcorn and a drink called Captain America, a blue drink with blueberry flavor. Mariana and I shared them both. My favorite part of the story came at the end with the death of Iron Man. I started crying so much that Mariana’s mom was worried, and the lady beside me was laughing. My eyes were so wet that I couldn’t even watch the movie anymore. The drink was finished, and I was destroyed.

Mariana was really worried for me, but I was okay. It was just the feeling of the movie. Then we came out of the theater, and I had a mix of emotions, but I was happy I saw it with her. Media can do that to a person sometimes.
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River City MS

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Just because I like girls
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Just because you don’t like the way I dress
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Mixed Emotions
Alison Arevaw
Partnership for the Future

I told my parents I wanted to go watch “Avengers: Endgame” with my friend
Mariana. It was streaming two days after my birthday; I wanted it as my birthday present,
and my parents agreed.

It was Friday, and everyone in school was crazy about it. We were going to go
after school with Mariana’s parents and little sister. We went to CineMark, La Gran Via
(El Salvador). There we found some classmates; sadly, they were going to a different
room but to see the same movie.

I bought some popcorn and a drink called Captain America, a blue drink with
blueberry flavor. Mariana and I shared them both. My favorite part of the story came at
the end with the death of Iron Man. I started crying so much that Mariana’s mom was
worried, and the lady beside me was laughing. My eyes were so wet that I couldn’t even
watch the movie anymore. The drink was finished, and I was destroyed.

Mariana was really worried for me, but I was okay. It was just the feeling of
the movie. Then we came out of the theater, and I had a mix of emotions, but I was
happy I saw it with her. Media can do that to a person sometimes.
East End Lightning
Jamari Anderson
Partnership for the Future

When I was 11, I started a new chapter in my life: track and field. Sport talent runs in my family, so it was no surprise when I joined the team. I started my track career with an Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) team, East End Lighting. This helped prepare me and ultimately led me to joining my middle school track team. I went to my middle school's track team at the top and continued to run with both teams until the end of middle school. Then, it was time to move up. I was excited to start my freshman year of track.

As the season arrived, COVID began to rise and eventually led to the season being cancelled. I didn’t even get to run one high school meet. AAU season was also cancelled. I was supposed to attend the 2020 Indoor Nationals, and the AAU council cancelled it. This was a devastating, major setback.

Throughout the pandemic, I continued to train, and as it started to fade away, our indoor season began. My school does not have an indoor team, but my AAU team does. I ran with them but did not attend nationals again because there was still a pandemic going on. After indoor season ended, outdoor season began. I only ran with my school team at the beginning of the season, and I was the fastest girl on the team. I made it to regionals and got the top 10 designation, but I did not qualify for states.

After that season concluded, I ran AAU and qualified for the Junior Olympics, but I did not go because it was all the way in Texas. I still run track and I am in the training season now. Track has come with many ups and downs. I have competed nationally and won a national medal. I hold track and that medal close to my heart.

New Experiences
Madisyn Williams
Partnership for the Future

When I got the news that my first year of high school (ninth grade) was virtual, I felt as if I wasn’t ready. Coming from middle school, you would always imagine and dream of that first year: stepping into a new beginning with better outcomes when going to high school. So when reality came, I started stressing about what I was going to wear, how people and myself were going to act, and more.

The first day came, and I didn’t know if I wanted my camera on with my “first day outfit on.” I decided I was going to, and the first day went well. Everyone was cool and helpful, and things started to succeed on a day-to-day basis to a point where virtual school became so natural.

Months went by, and I got so comfortable that I didn’t even try to get ready or get on the camera. I felt more comfortable that way, so that’s what I did. I would say ninth grade was wonderful. I was able to meet new people and discover new things and ideas, which is something I love doing.

Our Weird World – A Narrative
Group Piece
Partnership for the Future

We awoke to find ourselves on a planet with no phones. We looked around and saw nothing but trees and streets. To find help, we traveled, but there was no one around for miles, so we started losing hope. It was very cold and windy. This world felt peaceful but a little scary.

The lights in the environment were a cool color of white, illuminating the whole area until there was no more darkness. The trees had an unusual color to them, purple leaves with blue bark. As soon as I started to observe the trees further, the wind started to pick up violently.

We followed the streets until we reached an abandoned hotel outside of the oddly lit area. As soon as we walked up and opened the door, birds funneled out, flying around us then up and away. With overgrown weeds and gross coverings of dust and decay over the windows and doors, the place seemed abandoned. We tried to open back up the door, but it was solidly shut. Suddenly, after what appeared to be decades with no light, there was a flash.

We looked up with joy and fear.
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Our Weird World – A Theatrical Skit
Group Piece
Partnership for the Future

Characters: Shafi, Burney, Ameer, Isaiah, and Darius

Enter: Everyone is on the floor waking up and looking around, lost.

Shafi: Smacks hand on the ground. “Where are we?” Grabs head and looks around scared.

Burney (low voice): “What happened?”

Ameer: “Bro, my leg! I can’t move it!” Moves leg. “Oh… nevermind.”

Isaiah: “We’ve got to go and find help.”

Everyone gets up except for Darius. They all turn and yell at Darius.

Darius: “Huh?”

Shafi: “Come on!”

Everyone gathers together and walks across the stage. Ameer begins to dance.

Ameer: “I can feel my leg!”

Isaiah (looking annoyed): “Dude…”

Ameer mocks Isaiah. As Shafi reacts, Darius pretends to mouth his words with his hand.

Shafi: “Stop messing around. This is serious, and we need to seek help soon.”

Burney rubs his arms, showing he is cold.

Ameer: “See, look at you. I told you to get a jacket, but you didn’t listen!”

Burney: “I did, but someone shook a soda can and opened it right near me.”

Burney looks at Darius. The wind starts to pick up violently, and the group notices they are now standing in front of an abandoned hotel.

Wings
Anonymous
Partnership for the Future

Ping. “Ow!”

I looked over to see my friend Jaden holding the back of his head and a confused look on his face. He whirled around, and to my surprise, my little brother was standing on the porch, looking at him with a smug grin plastered on his face. In one hand, he held a little rubber ball, and in the other, a toy slingshot he got for Christmas about two years ago. In a matter of seconds, my brother was running around, screaming and laughing as Jaden chased after him around the front yard.

Sigh.

As I looked up toward the clear, blue sky I thought, What should we do today? Every day was just about the same as the day before and the day before that. I was tired of just sitting around and doing nothing. I heard someone say it’s hot, so I mumbled back, “Maybe we should get a soda?”

I sat up, now wondering why it had become so quiet. My brother was occupied playing with dirt, and Jaden was fanning himself with his hands. That same person said, “Hey guys, should we get something for lunch?”

“Ohhh, lunch!”

“So, what do you want to get? Ice cream?”

I jumped in, “No, real food. How about hamburgers or wings?”

The group looked at each other in satisfaction and went off, together, to get our wings. That day, we all had the best time and the tastiest wings, but we never figured out who suggested we go get lunch in the first place.

Fear the Flying Devil
Iceon Hogan
Partnership for the Future

I’m filled with fear as I run through the dark. All I can pick out is the sound of hissing and howling. I try to find a place to hide, but there’s nowhere in sight. I turn around and see it, the Flying Abomination. Unpleasant to look at but graceful to see flying, it drops down and scratches my face. I fall down, and as I look up, it towers over me. In my final moments, I close my eyes and clasp my hands, asking the Lord for mercy as I enter his kingdom. I open my eyes after waiting for my end and see nothing but giant footprints in the sand.

The rest of my exploration team finds me by shining their flashlights. I respond to them, saying, “I’ve seen a devil.”
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Partnership for the Future

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Fifty years ago, Dr. Jenkins worked with two teams: the humans and the aliens. He started producing alien babies, but during that time, a malfunction happened. The aliens thought that the humans caused this malfunction because they hated the fact that the aliens were taking over the population. This distrust began a war.

The aliens had a very efficient process: They would scan babies through an identification machine. It looked for a birthmark on the hand which determined if that baby had powers. Being a very smart scientist, Dr. Jenkins was also put in charge of these children. Called the Alphas, there were an elite group of kids who had hidden powers that can only be detected using the scanner.

After 10 years of planning, Dr. Jenkins decided it was finally time to take down the aliens. First, he had to obtain the resources needed to awaken the powers of the 10 Alpha kids he had raised. Then, he had to find time to sneak away, meet with the Alphas, and tell them about the war and the situation with the humans. After hearing his story, the Alpha kids were at first hesitant but finally believed him, so he invoked their powers.

After weeks of training their mental and physical strength for a war that was starting to seem more like a battle between life and death, the Alphas were finally ready. But before they went to fight, Dr. Jenkins had a quick word with them.

“I know that training for a war against the people who you thought were on your side and who you trusted blindly has been hard for you all. I’m proud of you for pushing through and not giving up on yourselves or each other.” As he looked each of them in the eyes, they could feel how proud he was of them.

“I still can’t believe they took us from our parents, from what could have been a normal life,” Zaria said crying to her boyfriend Zade and his twin brother Blade.

“Yes sir,” they all said in unity, as they grabbed their equipment and went out of the room to prepare for battle, knowing it could mean losing their lives.

As the 10 Alphas left, Dr. Jenkins stayed to write a letter to his wife and kids. Once finished, he left it on the desk for his family to see and left the room. He opened the door to where the Alphas were preparing for the attack, leaving it half-cracked. Little did Dr. Jenkins know, the alien Lucion was around the corner. He was waiting for Dr. Jenkins to leave the room so he could see what everyone was doing.

After catching Dr. Jenkins leaving the weapons room when he wasn’t authorized to be there, Lucion became suspicious. His feelings grew after his frequent talks with the Alphas in private. Opening the half-cracked door wider, he went inside, hoping to see something he could report back to the leader. The first thing he saw was a letter that said:

“My dear family,

If you are reading this, that means I didn’t make it through the war as I had planned. I want you to know that I love you all so much. You each have made me a better person in your own way. I hope that I gave to you, my children, everything you need because sadly I can no longer provide for you. And to my wife, thank you. Thank you for being who you are, for being with me, for giving me three amazing kids. You made my life better. I love you all.

Sincerely,

Your dad and husband.

P.S.- Take care of the Alphas. They are my second family.

After reading the letter, Lucion immediately yelled in anger and then went to warn the others to get ready for war. While preparing, a bomb exploded. It was the Alphas; they had attacked the aliens. Some aliens were injured, but most were not. Those who were not injured grabbed their weapons and went to fight.

On one side of the battlefield were the 10 Alphas, who had only a few weeks of training. On the other side was an entire army of aliens with a lifetime of training. Both sides were confident that they would win, but as we all know, only one side could.

With only a few hours until the sun went down, they fought. This went on for a long while, until every remaining Alpha paused to look at Zade running to Zaria, now struggling to breathe. On her last breath, Zade got up and with a crazy look in his eye, he started killing any alien that crossed his path.

While the Alphas fought the other aliens, Dr. Jenkins was busy in his own battle. As Dr. Jenkins was getting ready to set off a bomb, Lucion came from out of nowhere with a sword, ready to stab Dr. Jenkins for betraying him and the rest of the aliens.

Without thinking twice, Dr. Jenkins turned with his back towards Lucion to grab his gun, hidden in between his books on the bookshelf. Before he could grab it, Lucion threw the sword into his back. Dr. Jenkins fell to his knees gasping for air, but after just a few seconds of trying to breathe, Dr. Jenkins died. Lucion grabbed the note, ripped it up, and threw it in the trash can.
Alphas vs. Aliens
Ca’lynn Black, Josalyn Horton, Kyle James, Glory Kadeghe, Jasmine Lewis, Ra’mel Holloway, Kaiya Oliver-Jenkins, Marquise Anderson, Rachel Bryan, Gabrielle Howell, and Khai James
Boys & Girls Club - Southside

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“I still can’t believe they took us from our parents, from what could have been a normal life,” Zaria said crying to her boyfriend Zade and his twin brother Blade. “I know, but you need to take the anger, sadness, and frustration that you are all feeling and take it all out on them. You are going to survive on the battlefield, not them, OK?” Dr. Jenkins said, pulling Zaria close to hug her.

“Your dad and husband.

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My dear family,

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Back on the battlefield, the Alphas had nearly killed off all the aliens. Lucion returned with the bomb that Dr. Jenkins had prepared. Lucion fired it at the Alphas, and all of them went flying in different directions, hitting the ground hard. The only Alphas that got up were Zade and Blade; every other Alpha was dead. They took a second to mourn over the loss of their friends, who over the last few weeks had become their family. After mourning came anger.

Together, the twins quickly thought of a plan to use their powers to defeat the aliens. Just before they could execute the plan, Zorax, the leader of the aliens, stood up and said something that not only caught the attention of the Alphas but also every remaining alien.

"We surrender! Look, take whatever it is that you want. You all are in charge now, OK? Just stop killing my people. This was all my father’s idea. I was just going along with it to please him. This isn’t anywhere near their fault. Please!" Zorax tried hard to convince the Alphas to stop.

"Fine, but we’re doing things differently. From now on we’re equal. Not one person is better than anyone else. Deal?" Blade said with no emotion, as he held out his hand to shake with Zorax.

"Deal," Zorax said, shaking hands with Blade.

"Boss, are you sure about this?" Lucion said.

"Of course," Lucion said, not fully trusting her but going along with it anyway.

"Good! I’m glad we can all agree on that," Blade said, still with no emotion.

With the aliens surrendered, the Alphas returned to their base to collect themselves. The new agreement ended the war, so they all went to tell the rest of their populations how everything was now going to be managed. The feeling of loss filled everyone. As the Alphas attended their funerals, so did the aliens. With heavy losses on both sides, it’s likely they won’t fight anymore.

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The Abomination
Oliviyah Moore
Partnership for the Future

It was a Saturday afternoon around 5pm. That’s when I usually take my daily walk. This walk was different though. Something was off; I felt it in my gut. The sky was gloomy, no birds were chirping, and my neighbors weren’t watering their gardens or sitting on their front porches as usual. There wasn’t a sound or a peep.

Five minutes into my walk, heading downtown, I heard dreadful screaming and running coming closer and closer to me. That’s when I saw it: the most unusual, biggest, and strangest creature that I have ever seen. My first instinct was to turn around and run back home, but oddly enough, I didn’t.

I didn’t know what it was, but something drew me to this creature. Maybe it was my curious mind; maybe it was my spirit. With no fear, I approached the mysterious creature.

Once I was at an arm’s length distance from the creature, we locked eyes, and suddenly, I felt my whole-body shift. I couldn’t move, breathe, or feel anything until . . . I woke up and realized that it was all just a dream . . .

Or was it?
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“Boss, are you sure about this?” Lucion said.

“We can’t keep letting our people die like this. You trust me, don’t you?”

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Or was it?
The Key to Forgiveness
Elijah D.
Chester Family YMCA

I am frozen.
Stuck here
In this prison I locked myself in
With many regrets,
Many mistakes,
And many fake personalities
In the shackles of self-worth
And bars that are made of comparisons and expectations.

But there is a key,
A way out.
An escape from this personal prison.
What is this way out called?
The key to forgiveness.

Like the Sun
A Shaney Smith
George Wythe HS

Take me to the stars and
Let the dust fill my lungs.
The asteroids and black holes
Are only obstacles we can fly through.
Me and the sun are beauty,
We will forever orbit.
The Key to Forgiveness
Elijah D.
Chester Family YMCA

I am frozen.
Stuck here
In this prison I locked myself in
With many regrets,
Many mistakes,
And many fake personalities
In the shackles of self-worth
And bars that are made of comparisons and expectations.

But there is a key,
A way out.
An escape from this personal prison.
What is this way out called?
The key to forgiveness.

Like the Sun
Ashaney Smith
George Wythe HS

Take me to the stars and
Let the dust fill my lungs.
The asteroids and black holes
Are only obstacles we can fly through.
Me and the sun are beauty,
We will forever orbit.

Subset Null
Kelsean Kersey-Lee
John Marshall HS

Enter poetry [here],
in this blank anything goes,
as far as the outermost bounds of your mind
and powered by the fuel tank
that is your inspiration for writing.
This blank [ ] can fit
anything from a couple of letters
to an entire book’s worth of words.
This poem [subset null]
is a poem of your own imagination.
Wondering about the story?
Just imagine one.
Theme? Imagine one.
Author? You!
All you need to start is this:
[enter poetry here] to begin your journey
to my poem [subset null]
and the concept of [enter poetry here].
Until We Meet Again
Ariyana Thompson
George Wythe HS

Those special memories of you will always bring a smile, if only I could have you back for just a little while.

Then we can sit and talk again just like we used to do. You always meant so very much and you always will too.

That you are no longer here will always cause me pain. You will be forever in my heart until we meet again.

Dear the Beloved Stars
Chester Family YMCA

I know the figure said it would taste sweet, and it took some convincing to get you to eat. And at first, the figure was right, it tasted sweet. Oh, the nice things it said, but nevertheless, it sometime started to turn sour. Like a spoon of watered down lemon juice becoming more potent with each word dripping out of its mouth. Then suddenly, it became dry, a potent cinnamon that you swallowed. It caked your throat, making it almost impossible to breathe, no less talk. And with no defense from letting the figure’s previously sweet words you had trusted so much slip by… Soon almost no good thoughts could get out. They had all turned to stone.

Don’t let the honey-sweet words affect you, darling. Trust what you think, and not the words of the figure. Be brave. Be strong. Don’t doubt your words or trust in those who seem sweet just because they are nice. Let yourself be happy. The Universe has a good plan for you. Just trust it, love.
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Will Gen Z Change the World?
G. Lucy
Armstrong HS

Yes, I think my generation will be the one to change the world. Why? Because we’re already changing social and societal norms as we speak. My generation is the literal hand that’s giving racism its own fatal beat down, the same head and mouthpiece that’s giving the most disrespectful people, and generations from way before us, the same disrespect right back with a pretty little bow on top. My generation is going to change the world because we have the ability to accept everyone and anything for whom and what they are. We are open-minded and steel-hearted. Not only are we going to change the world, we are going to better the world.
Will Gen Z Change the World?
G. Lucy
Armstrong HS

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Partnership for the Future
Metro Richmond Boys & Girls Clubs (Southside & Teen Center)
Chester Family YMCA (last names omitted)
Royal Simpson-Nettles, Shyla Scott, Bryana Taylor, and Lael Washington
Jasmine Lewis, A’Landa Macklin, Jada Mickens, Kaya Oliver-Jenkins, Jaisean Oulahi, Royal Simpson-Nells, Stylia Scott, Bryana Taylor, and Lael Washington

Partnership for the Future

Metro Richmond Boys & Girls Clubs (Southside & Teen Center)
Jatara Anderson, Malliyah Anderson, Marquise Anderson, Amia Battle, Ca’Lynn Black, Carlo Black, Rachel Bryan, Phoenix Coakley, Keanna Daniel, Anna Harris, Devyn Harris, Joshua Herndon, Ra’mel Hollowell, Josalyn Horton, McKenzie Howard, Gabrielle Howell, Khal James, Kyle James, Acheley Jones, Aiana Jones, Tianna Jones, Glory Kadeghe, Jasmine Lewis, A’Landa Macklin, Jada Mickens, Kaya Oliver-Jenkins, Jaisean Oulahi, Royal Simpson-Nells, Stylia Scott, Bryana Taylor, and Lael Washington

MLK Middle School
Atiya Allen-Dean, Richard Armstead, Quentin Atkins, Lauryn Briggs, Johnathan Burks, Joydasia Burton, Jalyn Clark, Darelle Graham Jr, Daziya Harris, Terieq Henderson, Kahrton Hieskil, Aaminah Jackson, Francois Kadiga, Marie Kadiga, Daymya Lightner, Zia’nondi Mitchell, Innocence Robinson, Jazlyne Robinson, Johnathan Smith, Lynayah Steward, Jamal Walker, Malakai White, and Brandon Williams

River City Middle School

Wilder Middle School
Wendy Addo, La’Derra Childress, LaMoni Childress, Milani Edwards, Laissa Gakunzi, Kadyn Garcia, Willie Gear, Neveah Gresham, Cion Harris, Cristian Hinojosa, Rian Hudson, Huguetta Kamaliza, Harmony Mason, Linda Meade, Giovanni Moore, Sajade Nicholson, Jane Nyira Kanyana, William Ogburn, Manning Ojibway, Jayden Osborne, Jordynn Palmer, Jayleiyah Pleasant, Ariana Pratt, Arilon Preston, Ayden Preston, Byon Pulliam, Jacl Reed, Jazzmin Reed, Isaiah Rose-Harris, Sydney Smith, Sincere Smith, Mandelini Washishi, Emma Wilson, and Nahzir Winston

Virtual Middle School Programs with NextUp RVA
Jayden Crosby-Brewer, Ka’Lyssa Hickman, Sierra King, and Synhai Parker
Chester Family YMCA (last names omitted)
  • Abi, Elijah, Hugh, M., Stars, and Violet

Metro Richmond Boys & Girls Clubs (Southside & Teen Center)
  • Jatara Anderson, Maliyah Anderson, Marquise Anderson, Amia Battle, Ca’Lynn Black, Carlo Black, Rachel Bryan, Phoenix Coakley, Keanna Daniel, Anna Harris, Devyn Harris, Joshua Herndon, Ra’mel Hollowell, Josalyn Horton, McKenzie Howard, Gabrielle Howell, Khai James, Kyle James, Achelaya Jones, Alaina Jones, Tianna Jones, Glory Kadeghe, Jasmine Lewis, A’Landa Macklin, Jada Mickens, Kaila Oliver-Jenkins, Jaisean Oulahi, Royal Simpson-Nettles, Shyla Scott, Bryana Taylor, and Lael Washington

Partnership for the Future
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  • Jasmine Lewis, A’Landa Macklin, Jada Mickens, Kaila Oliver-Jenkins, Jaisean Oulahi, Royal Simpson-Nettles, Shyla Scott, Bryana Taylor, and Lael Washington

MLK Middle School
  • Gionie Allen, Adonis Alphonse, Aniyah Anderson, Kierstin Bell, Darrell Bigelow Jr., Mackenzie Bowser, Derrick Carter, Madison Easley, Alana Francis, Jordan Giles, Milan Griffin, Lamont Hallums, Cion Harris, Kaylee Hester, Khalib Johnson, KV Von Johnson, Keira Jones, Romel Mills, Kin Jari Mulai, Jasmine Patillo, Mi’Asia Pleasants, Tiara Saunders, Gabriel Cosby-Spivey, Madison Toller, Alnah Tuppince, Leniyah Tuppince, Charly Williams, Tocari Wilson, and Ariyannah Winston

Henderson Middle School
  • Kavon Anderson, Jalyn Clark, Devonte Dejesus, Kah’Mari Gayles, and Iris Reed

River City Middle School

Wildier Middle School
  • Wendy Addo, LaDerra Childress, LaMoni Childress, Milani Edwards, Laissa Gakunzi, Kadyovia Garcia, Willie Gee, Neveah Gresham, Cion Harris, Cristian Hinojosa, Rian Hudson, Huguerette Kamaliza, Harmony Mason, Linda Meade, Giovanni Moore, Sajade Nicholson, Jane Nyira Kanyana, William Ogbum, Manning Ojibway, Jayden Osborne, Jordyn Palmer, Jaiyeiyah Pleasant, Ariana Pratt, Arilon Preston, Ayden Preston, Byon Pulliam, Jael Reed, Jazzmin Reed, Isaiah Rose-Harris, Sydney Smith, Syncree Smith, Mandelini Washishi, Emma Wilson, and Nahzir Winston

Virtual Middle School Programs with NextUp RVA
  • Jayden Crosby-Brewer, Ka’Lyssa Hickman, Sierra King, and Synhai Parker
Podium's Teen Professional Conference

• 2021: Lalane Atkins, Antwon Baker, Heaven Cary, Ian Sparkman Daniels, Mya Sparkman Daniels, Taron Durnham, Norman Farrington, Day’shiyla Gardner, Jamian Harper, Myasia James, Zion Lundy, Cassidy Rozario-Roete, Damesha Shackleford, and Malachi Woods

• 2022: Chania Belfield, Al’Janae Carter, ShaNiya Carter, Xzavian Clark, Jaylyn Crawford, Jamia Criss, JoMauri Davis-Hicks, Anastasia Franklin, Sparkle Franklin, N’Shai Gale, Kah’Mari Gayles, Ty Asia Greene, Jamian Harper, Christian Harris, Jamisha Hicks, Tyler Horn, Edward Jarrett, Richard Johnson, She vontae Johnson, Brandon Jones, Jaydelier Moreira, My’Angel Pittman, Aniyah Rawl, Xaviar Rawl, Iris Reed, Ceiera Sherrod, Ashaney Smith, Caleb Smith, Dominique Smith, KeNyah Smith, Ra’Stiyah Smith, Jeniaya Stewart, Antwain Tindal, Jaquan Washington, Adrian White, Jahquai Wilson, Qua-yonna Wilson and Kalvin Young

Armstrong High School


George Wythe High School


Highland Springs High School


Huguenot High School

• Shiyah Brown, Ric’kara Cooper, Jada Duncan, Milo Dunkley, Jayonna Henley, Heaven Johnson, Grae Price, and Arturo Simpson

John Marshall High School

• Liam Aisahi, Kelsean Kersey-Lee, Lavon Cain, Al’Janae Carter, ShaNiya Carter, Jaylin Clark, Liam Davis, David Finley, Jermaine Fleming, Anastasia Franklin, Sparkle Franklin, Azya Gainyard, Maya Gregory, Christian Harris, Tyler Horn, Andrea Jackson, Edward Jarrett, Amelia John, J’myra Kendrick, Aisha Lewis, Asada Martin, Soliel Mitchell, Tyvell Murchison, Natalia Payne, Nijel Powell, Jaunita Redd, Iris Reed, Rico Rios, Cameron Roberts, Elycisa Satterfield, Ceiera Sherrod, Kalia Smith, Derek Smith, Dallas Snipes, Jaylen Thomas, JaKayla Vincent, Karleyah Williams, Jahquai Wilson, Bre Wright-Anthony, Destiny Young and Kalvin Young
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Empower OUR YOUTH

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