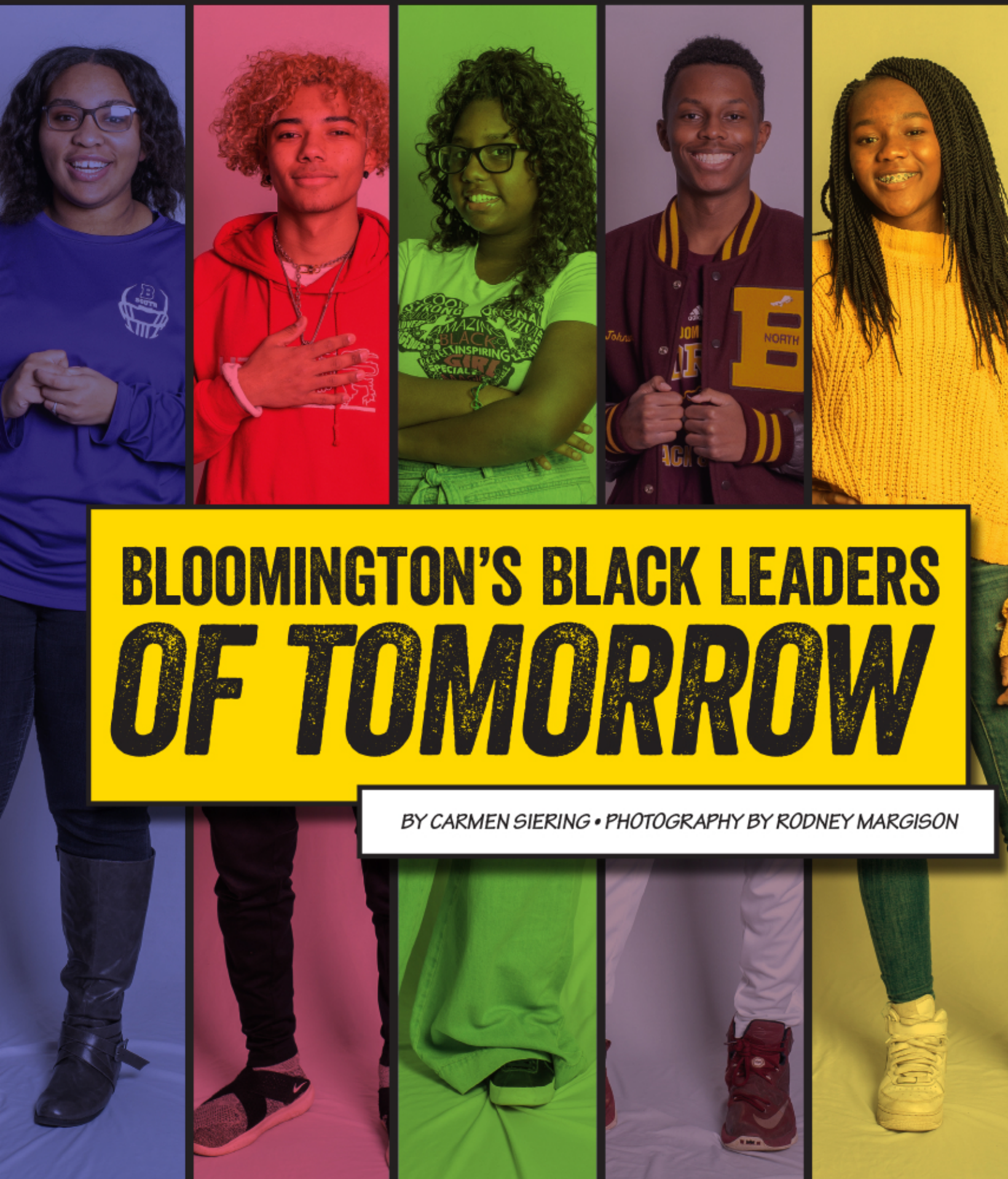




BLOOMINGTON'S BLACK LEADERS OF TOMORROW

BY CARMEN SIERING • PHOTOGRAPHY BY RODNEY MARGISON



To choose Bloomington's black leaders of tomorrow, *Bloom* reached out to black civic organizations, current black community leaders, the Monroe County Community School Corporation, the City of Bloomington, area churches, and other groups for their recommendations. We were looking for students who are outstanding in scholarship, the arts, or other fields; who are involved in the community through volunteerism and activism; who show a generosity of spirit; and who demonstrate a commitment to improving their own lives and the lives of others.

On these pages, we are pleased to feature 10 students from middle school through college who more than fit that description. They are advocates and artists, activists and athletes, and each of them shows great promise and potential. With such shining lights in our community, the future looks bright indeed.

SANTINA JESTER TRI-NORTH MIDDLE SCHOOL

It might seem unusual that a 14-year-old hopes she can serve as a role model for other young teens, but Santina Jester says her family situation has put her in that position. “It’s only my mom at home; my older sister is away at college,” she says. “So maybe I tend to act older than my age.”

Santina is in the eighth grade at Tri-North Middle School. She has four younger siblings at home. “She’s the ultimate big sister,” her mother, Aja Jester, says. “She can calm them all down in ways I can’t. I don’t even have to ask. And she’s the same way in life. I think she downplays herself a lot.”

A member of the National Junior Honor Society, Santina participates in a group called Global Citizens Empowerment (GCE) that is connected to a group of students in China. “Every Thursday we talk to them about real world issues like immigration and global warming and the economy,” Santina says.

GCE is fun, but there’s more to it than that. “It’s important to understand that things we experience don’t just happen where we are,” Santina explains. “Things like immigration and poverty happen everywhere.”

Another school organization she’s involved with is YES—Youth Engagement Services. “It’s a group of students who get together and think of ways we can help people in Bloomington,” Santina says. During the fall, the students collected socks for local shelters. The project’s name? “Oh, it was called Socktober,” Santina says with a grin.

Outside of school, Santina participates in Girl Scouts and volunteers with her family. “My mom says giving back is very important,” she explains. “We’ve packed oats for Backpack Buddies [at Community Kitchen of Monroe County] and made dog toys at the animal shelter. We volunteer somewhere a couple of times a month.”

Even at 14, Santina says she has experienced prejudice. “I think people have held stereotypes against me, and stereotypes are wrong,” she says. “I can help by not fitting into them. I don’t want people to assume anything about me because I’m African American.”

She’s not sure what she wants to be when she’s an adult, but she’s sure of the kind of person she wants to be. “My mother is my mentor,” she says. “She’s gone through so much, but she is so strong and she is a good mother. I want to be as strong as her when I’m older. If I’m as strong as her, I can get through anything.”

And right now? “I want to be there for all of the African American students who go to Tri-North. I want to be a role model,” she says. “And I think I am. I can tell when people are having a bad day and they tell me and I try to help them. A lot of people tell me I know when to help.”

“I want to be there for all of the African American students who go to Tri-North. I want to be a role model.”



KYA SEIBERT BATCHELOR MIDDLE SCHOOL

Students in elementary and middle school are frequently told to take a chance and try new things—musical instruments, sports, different activities. It seems Kya Seibert, 13-year-old daughter of John and Kelly Seibert, has taken that advice to heart.

Kya, an eighth grader, started playing the viola in the fifth grade and is now part of Batchelor Middle School’s advanced orchestra. She’s active in her school’s student leadership group, Paw Squad, and WyldLife, a Christian youth program for middle school students. She also volunteers with her church, First United Methodist, where she has participated in the Martin Luther King Jr. Day of Service, helps out at the local winter shelter, and goes on mission trips, most recently to the Red Lake Indian Reservation in Minnesota.

But when Kya talks about sports, she really shines. She ran cross country in seventh and eighth grade. “I did it because I like having teammates, and our coaches really care for the runners,” she says. “And it was good conditioning for basketball.”

Yes, Kya is a two-sport athlete. And while she says she isn’t a great basketball player, it is a sport she loves. “I like being on the team,” she says. “I’m pretty competitive, but mostly I like helping my teammates.” She says sports is one place where she sees the benefits of having, and being, a leader.

“You have to have leaders on the team,” she says. “And you have to help the leaders. If you don’t have those people, the team will just fall apart.”

When she looks for inspiration, she turns to sports. “There are some African American athletes who inspire me, who break records, and do things that others haven’t done before, like George Taliaferro, from IU,” she says. And Amber Deane [IU women’s basketball 2016–17]. I look up to her a lot. She was always putting in her best effort even though she didn’t necessarily get to play all the time.”

Looking ahead, Kya says she is ready for high school. “I’m excited to experience a new school and to meet new people,” she says. “Hopefully I’ll play sports, and I hope I can be a leader on any teams I make and help out my teammates. I want to make sure they know we’re in it together and that if they need any help with school or anything else, they aren’t alone and we’re always a team.”



“There are some African American athletes who inspire me, who break records, and do things that others haven’t done before, like George Taliaferro, from IU.”

SABRAH WAGNER JACKSON CREEK MIDDLE SCHOOL

Sabrah Wagner knows she's black. That might not seem like much of a statement, but for the 13-year-old Jackson Creek Middle School eighth grader, it kind of is. She was adopted by white parents, Kari and Cody Wagner, and has a younger sister, Delainey, who is also white. So, for her, identity is a big deal.

"I know I'm black but other people don't because I don't have black parents," Sabrah says. "When I tell people [I have white parents], sometimes they say, 'Well, then you're not really black.'"

Part of her strong black identity comes from the connection she has with her birth family. She has four birth siblings, and feels a special connection to her sister Daquisha, who lives in Philadelphia. "I've known her since I was little," Sabrah says. "We have a lot of similar thoughts, which is crazy because we have a 10-year age difference. But I feel like there is something about us. I don't know if it's genetic, but even though we didn't grow up together, when we met it was like we were best friends."

A member of the National Junior Honor Society, Sabrah takes ALP (advanced learning program) classes—"I wanted more of a challenge"—and says her favorite subject is social studies.

She credits her social studies teacher, Kathy Fox, with changing how she feels about discussing social issues. "I really appreciate Miss Fox," Sabrah says. "Before, I would bark my opinions at people. But she's taught us to see all sides of things and present our opinions in a healthy way. I was a little frustrated at the beginning of class—I didn't want to hear people advocating for Trump or being racist or whatever—but the way she has people present their opinions is not what I expected." Sabrah says she thinks she'll take that interest and study political science when she goes to college.

Those classroom discussions have been eye-opening. Lately, Sabrah says, she's come to see racism more clearly. "Recently, someone didn't want to touch my hand, and they said it was because I was black. I didn't think that kind of thing happened anymore," she says. "I feel like when I was in elementary school, I didn't notice [racism]. But now I do. I guess people can do what they want, but when people treat me differently because of my race, that's really hurtful and degrading."

Although she is a busy middle school student, Sabrah is already looking ahead. "I am so ready for high school and college where you can be involved in activism," she says. "I did the walkout

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[against gun violence] last year and I was so excited about that. I did the one at our school and the one downtown and I wanted to go to the one in D.C."

She says she hopes the activities she's involved with in middle school will lead to greater community involvement in the future. "I think what I do now is a great base," Sabrah says. "A lot of people don't get the exposure I've gotten to leadership and teamwork. And then I can use that to work on other things." She says she knows she wants to be a community advocate when she's older. "I went to a Black Lives Matter event in Indy and that is something I want to do," she says. "I think it's important that black people are recognized as a community, not just a minority."

HIGH SCHOOL—MORE ACTIVITIES, PREPARING FOR COLLEGE

DAVID JOHNSON BLOOMINGTON HIGH SCHOOL NORTH

As a junior from Bloomington High School North, David Johnson, now 17, was awarded the 2018 Outstanding Black Male Leader of Tomorrow High School Award from the Bloomington Commission on the Status of Black Males. The son of Susan and Steven Johnson, David is now a senior at North where he continues to offer service and leadership to his school and his community.

"I've done a lot of things," he says. "I've volunteered with the March of Dimes, helped out at Community Kitchen, worked with Kid City [a Bloomington Parks and Recreation program] as a camp counselor. I recently volunteered for the Breast Cancer Awareness Walk. I lost an aunt to cancer, so that was personal, and volunteering for that was important to me."

At school he's on the varsity track team. "We don't use terms like co-captains," David says, adding that he feels he is a leader on the team. He also traveled to Costa Rica with his Spanish class. "Getting out of the country and seeing how people live outside the U.S. is important to me," he says.

Talking about adults who have been instrumental in his success, David first mentions his parents. He also mentions Justin Helmer. "He's been my coach from beginning to end," David says. "He knew me when I was at St. Charles [Borromeo Catholic School]. He's written me letters of recommendation. And he's taught me a lot of life lessons as well." And he looks up to Rafi Hassan, formerly Safe and Civil City director for the City of Bloomington, currently equity and inclusion coordinator for the Monroe County Community School Corporation. "He was another mentor for me while I was on the Commission," David says.

He says he feels lucky, and somewhat surprised, that he hasn't experienced discrimination. "That's something I like about Bloomington," he says. "But I don't think African Americans have totally achieved equality, either. It's not direct racism. It's just indirect now. If there were no racism in America, there would be no need for the Black Lives Matter movement. If these movements are still going on, and more people are joining them, then we obviously still have a problem with racism in America."

As a senior, he's looking ahead to college. "My intended major is sports media," he says. "I'd like to be a sports analyst. But what I want to do isn't set in stone."

"I've had a pretty privileged life for an African American male in America. And I know that."



Whatever he does, it appears he's grateful for the opportunities he's been given—and he doesn't take them for granted. "I'm applying to colleges, I'm applying for scholarships, I've won an award," he says. "I've had a pretty privileged life for an African American male in America. And I know that."

NAOMI YOUNG BLOOMINGTON HIGH SCHOOL SOUTH

Naomi Young, a 17-year-old junior at Bloomington High School South, brings a positive outlook, and a willingness to look for opportunities, to everything she encounters.

A good example? Football. When her family moved from Fort Wayne, Indiana, to Bloomington, Naomi decided she wanted to play football at her new school. She was in the eighth grade. “I asked my dad and he said no, but maybe I could manage,” she recalls. “So, the athletic director at Jackson Creek [Middle School] contacted Mr. [Patrick] Cannon at Bloomington South and Mr. Cannon said yes! I wanted to play football and I couldn’t, but next year will be my fourth year as a manager.”

She credits her parents with her ability to go after what she wants. “My parents push me to advocate for myself,” Naomi says. “They push me to be a leader. I see what they are doing and I’ve decided I want to do that when I’m older. My parents are some of my strongest mentors.”

Naomi’s father, Samuel Young II, is the associate director of the Groups Scholars Program at Indiana University. Her mother, Lisa Young, is the associate director of the Office of First Year Experience Programs at IU.

Their example has led Naomi to consider a career in higher education. “At the moment I want to be an athletic director for college sports,” she says. “That will probably be really hard, but I want to do it. I know one woman, my mom’s sorority sister, who is an assistant athletic director for women’s sports. It sounded great. I like sports, I like students, I like traveling.”

Other mentors include Monica Johnson, director of the Neal-Marshall Black Culture Center. She and her husband are friends of Naomi’s parents. “I met them one night when we first moved here,” Naomi says. “Over the years, I’ve seen what she does for students and I really admire her. I could be her one day—that was a thought. And she’s not, you know, old. She’s closer to my generation. So, she understands what I’m talking about.”

Naomi has a lot of praise, too, for her teachers at South. “I don’t have favorite teachers because I just love interacting with all of them,” she says. “They are all getting you ready for life after high school.” She does, however, take special note of guidance counselor Patrick Cannon, who oversees the football managers—“He gives me joy throughout the day!”—and Kirstin Milks, who is the club sponsor for Community Leadership Building, a group that advocates for social inclusion at South.

“Every year we do something called Mix It Up Day,” Naomi says by way of example. “The first day in the cafeteria is the worst day of the year. So we try to make sure people make friends and no one



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is excluded. It’s fun, and if you talk to people and get to know them, you might get to be friends.”

Track is something else Naomi does with a positive spirit. “The main reason I joined track was because I love the team,” she says. “I don’t necessarily need to win. If I do? Great! But I love the team. We’ve made this little family.”

While she’s not naïve, she doesn’t give much space to those who try to intimidate her with racist comments. “I kind of disregard a lot of stuff—‘stuff’ being racism,” she says. “I’m one of those people who says, ‘Just be that way.’ Unless you are stopping me from living my life, just be you. Sometimes you can’t change someone’s opinion because they are so focused on just that one point.”

One of the highlights of her life has been attending not one but both of President Barack Obama’s inaugurations. The first time she was 5, and she says they got to Washington, D.C., so late they were shut off from reaching the National Mall and had to watch the proceedings from a McDonald’s. “So we did it again,” she laughs. “I’m in fifth grade. We get there way too early. I’m sleeping against a tree. We’re so cold. But I’m so happy. I may not have appreciated it as much as I should have, but I got to see the first black president inaugurated—twice! And then to see all he did for this country. Wow!”

And, in typically positive fashion, she adds: “My brother and I still argue about whether he waved to us in the parade. Because, I swear, he was waving right at us.”

AVERY NJAU BLOOMINGTON HIGH SCHOOL NORTH

When she was 9 years old, Avery Njau decided she wanted to audition for a part in the Cardinal Stage production of *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*. The daughter of Angela Van Rooy and Jackson Njau had no training—she had never taken any dance lessons, had no background in theater. “And she wanted to audition for one of the lead parts,” Angela says with a bit of amazement. “I asked her if she realized she would be doing this alone, in a room with four or five adults watching her and she said yes. And she was cast as an Oompa Loompa.”

Since then, Avery, who will be 15 on March 1, has been in several Cardinal productions, most recently in the role of Jane in *Mary Poppins*. “At first, I was really scared I would forget my lines, but at the time, I didn’t realize how many times you would go over them,” she says. She admits rehearsals can be stressful. “But toward the end I wished I had appreciated the rehearsals more because I was so sad the show was going to be over.”

A freshman at Bloomington High School North, Avery is on both the track and cross country teams. “With training, that’s a year-round sport,” she says. She is also involved with Bloomington BEAT (Bloomington Expressive Arts Training), a show choir.

One of her favorite school subjects is biology. “I’ve always been attracted to life sciences,” Avery says. “Now we’re getting into human biology and genetics. I want to be a doctor, so that is super interesting to me.”

Avery makes a connection between her interest in acting and medicine.

“I see both of them as giving service to people,” she says. “One of the reasons I like acting is that I see people smiling in the crowd. Now imagine applying that to real life—diagnosing something, curing something, delivering a baby. It would be so rewarding to help people in that way. Being a doctor would be helping people more than anything else because it is literally saving lives.”

She knows it takes a lot of people to make the world a better place, and she has her own set of heroes. “Martin Luther King, Michelle Obama, Nelson Mandela. I can’t choose,” she says. But she easily picks a local black leader as an inspiration. “Gladys DeVane,” she says with a big smile. “She is so amazing. She’s so strong. The things she has done in her life and all of the things she has done for other people. It is so great that she is a local hero here. And the coolest part is that I’ve been able to meet her and work with her.” In

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October, Avery had a part in *Resilience: Stories of Monroe*, a play created by DeVane, Elizabeth Mitchell, and Danielle Bruce.

As a young actress, Avery says she has often been the only black child trying out for a part, and she has some advice for younger black kids. “Don’t ever be afraid to go after something,” she says. “If you are the only black kid in the room, it doesn’t matter. And, this is sad, but make sure your parents give you the police talk. You don’t ever want to get in a bad situation. Always be safe and respectful. It’s sad, but it needs to be said.”

DEXTER GRIFFIN BLOOMINGTON HIGH SCHOOL SOUTH

It's clear Dexter Griffin is an outstanding young person. Now a senior at Bloomington High School South, in 2016 he was named the Bloomington Commission on the Status of Black Males Outstanding Black Male Leader of Tomorrow High School Award recipient. In 2017, he was the city's Lemonade Day Champion. He's served as an associate on the Commission on the Status of Black Males, been a supernumerary actor in four operas with Indiana University, worked with Reimagining Opera for Kids for three years, and has studied music since he was 8. And yet ...

"I don't think I strive to be a leader," says Dexter, the son of Donald Griffin Jr. and Nicole Griffin. "I do strive to be different and unique. And I strive to improve myself, which might make it seem like I'm a leader. But I'm just me."

Being Dexter, right now, means getting ready for college. "I hope to study music performance," he says. "I'm busy with auditions and applications."

Though he is only 17, Dexter says he feels like everything he has done for so many years has led up to this. "Throughout middle school and high school, it's felt like each step was getting me ready for college," he says. "I've been studying music for nine years. Now it's crunch time. It's kind of stressful."

After college, the goal is to travel and use his talent. "I hope to perform all over the world," he says. "Not just opera, but jazz and contemporary music. When I'm older—and maybe a bit more tired—I would love to open my own record company and produce music for opera singers and contemporary artists and rappers."

He loves his hometown, saying it's amazing you can be in southern Indiana and yet be in a city that is so culturally diverse. "If you go to 4th Street, you can feel like you are anywhere," he says. And yet, he sees the downside. "We forget that there is a Bloomington bubble," he says. "Sometimes I feel like Bloomington is not supposed to be in Indiana, like it was put here by aliens. Bloomington is different, especially when things come out like racism and bigotry."

Dexter shares an incident that happened this summer, one that shocked him. "My dad and I were driving, right here in Bloomington, and this guy called us the n-word and tried to drive us off the road," he says. "If we weren't looking, we would probably have been severely injured or killed. When we were getting pushed off, we were going into oncoming traffic. My dad was angry. I was angry. But it was numbing in a way. Racism is numbing."

He thinks one way to change things is by rocking the status quo. "I'm a big fan of Muhammad Ali," he says. "Ali changing his name was a big moment. People hated him for doing that, but it was a big

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thing. I always think that, as a black person, it's abnormal for me to be singing opera. So when I sing opera, I think about Muhammad Ali changing his name back then, when that was a weird thing for a black person to do."

But maybe the best way to get to a better world is to simply show more compassion, Dexter says. That's why he volunteers. "I do it because it's what's right," he says. "If I'm going to volunteer, it shouldn't be about my enjoyment, it should be for the person or the people I'm helping."

Equality, he says, is a pipe dream. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't strive for it. "Maybe the best we can hope for is treating each other as equals even if we truly aren't equal," he says. "That's okay. Love one's neighbor as you love yourself."

TAMARA BROWN INDIANA UNIVERSITY

When asked if she calls herself an activist, 18-year-old Tamara Brown reflects for a moment, then shakes her head. "I think I'm more an advocate for the people," she says. "I believe in advocating for those who can't advocate for themselves or who feel they can't advocate for themselves. So, if I have their permission, I will wholeheartedly do it for them."

Tamara says her advocacy started with her family. "I grew up with two moms," she says of her parents, Jenifer Berry and Gynger Brown. "I had to advocate for their parenting skills. I had to show I was well-rounded. And especially because—two black women. That was an ordeal."

She knew early on to reach out for help with issues she cared about—and to reach high. "I sent my first letter to President Obama when I was in the fourth grade," she says. "It was about LGBTQ rights. Oh, I see that letter—the typos, the errors. But the passion! And I got a letter back. I was so excited!"

A 2018 graduate of Bloomington High School North, Tamara, along with Caleb Poer and Ruth Nall, was instrumental in the formation of Bloomington Students Against Assault Weapons (BSAAW), a response to school gun violence following the February 2018 shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. The group helped organize local participation in the National Student Walkout on April 20, 2018, the 19th anniversary of the massacre at Columbine High School in Colorado. Now a freshman at Indiana University, Tamara says BSAAW is still a major focus of her advocacy.

"It's our baby," she says. "We work with high school students to help keep their peers aware."

At IU, Tamara says one group she is deeply involved with is No Lost Generation. "It raises funds for refugees and migrants who need resettlement," she says. A nonprofit management major, Tamara says she isn't sure what she wants to do after college, but plans to focus on the plight of refugees.

"I hope to work with refugees and migrants and help with resettlement," she says. "I'm interested in working in countries to help those who aren't able to leave or who choose not to leave."

She says she sees the problems migrants and refugees face from multiple perspectives. "My roommate is from a family of immigrants," she says. "And across the hall live some far-right conservatives—who also happen to be immigrants, but they were adopted. There is privilege in being adopted off the streets of India. That's wonderful. I'm happy for them. But people running from political violence aren't any less deserving."

Another perspective is from her own experience. "I've faced discrimination for being black. For being a woman. For being queer. For cutting my hair. For not shaving my legs sometimes," she says. "My race is just one thing that is systematically structured into our



"I believe in advocating for those who can't advocate for themselves or who feel they can't advocate for themselves."

country. Same with not being heterosexual. With being a woman. What that means is I have to fight like hell to get to the same place as someone who is not inherently like me. And that's not fair. So yes, I've faced discrimination. And I'll fight to move past it."

Thinking about people who have inspired her, Tamara mentions Shirley Chisholm, the first black woman in Congress. She says Chisholm's famous quote, "If they don't give you a seat at the table, bring a folding chair," has helped her out in many situations.

"I was always the scholarship kid, and I'm really good at writing scholarship essays now," she says, laughing. But being a scholarship kid means she might end up in situations where she feels like an outsider. "So I really carry that idea with me. If I don't feel comfortable someplace, I bring that folding chair. I come in, I sit down, and then I may end up running that table. Shirley Chisholm opened a lot of doors. I don't think a lot of young black women realize she opened those doors, but I'm grateful she did."

As an advocate for the people, Tamara says she has some words of advice for the youngest among us. "One thing I always say to children in general, and especially to young black kids, is believe in your ability," she says. "There will be others who will doubt you. They will doubt your ability to break the barriers they have built for you in their own minds. Never believe that the stereotypes that have defined our people in the past have to define who you are in the present. I believe in young black kids. I believe in their abilities."

CALEB POER

INDIANA UNIVERSITY

As passionate as he is about voting and registering others to vote, and even as a political science major at Indiana University, Caleb Poer has been reluctant to consider running for political office himself. But the recent midterm elections turned the tide for him. “After seeing how the House elections went, where you see a bunch of young people and people of color, people who don’t follow a pattern, no dog-whistle politics, to see all the fresh faces?” he says. “Yes, the prospects of me running for political office one day are much higher now.”

Caleb is a freshman at IU and turned 18 just three days after the November 9 midterm elections, so he wasn’t able to vote. He was big on registering others, though. He sees voting as a powerful way to address society’s ills. It’s as important to him as any form of activism.

“I remember the first time I encountered racism,” he says. “It wasn’t necessarily an awakening, because my parents had explained it to me, but I really became aware of it when we were waiting for [George Zimmerman’s] indictment in the Trayvon Martin case. Black Lives Matter shot up from that, and that movement was the first thing I really attached myself to. And it came hand in hand with the realization that the only way to affect change was to vote. You really need to have a legislative component or your work can be wiped away so easily. And, right now, our elected officials don’t necessarily represent what our country looks like.”

A 2018 graduate of Bloomington High School North, Caleb became active in student groups as a high school freshman and says his parents, Lynette Johnson and Darrell Poer, have always supported his activism.

His leadership skills became apparent when, during his junior year, a group of students began wearing Confederate flags as capes to Bloomington North. As the incidents escalated, and school administrators failed to act, Caleb took to social media and organized a protest outside the Monroe County Community School Corporation (MCCSC) administrative offices. During the protest, MCCSC Superintendent Judith DeMuth spoke with the protestors. The outcome: The Confederate flag was banned in all MCCSC schools.

Then, after the school shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, in February 2018, Caleb was instrumental in coordinating fundraising that allowed 50 Bloomington students to attend the March for Our Lives rally in Washington, D.C., and in organizing the local student walkout against gun violence that took place in April of that year.

He, along with Tamara Brown and Ruth Nall, formed Bloomington Students Against Assault Weapons (BSAAW), a group with which he still works. “We want to make it a citywide group, and get IU students involved,” he says. “It was one of the first things I had a hand in creating. And school shootings are still happening, and I’m still in school. So, I think about it.”

He finds a way to connect almost everything he does, or has done, to his activism. Take swimming. “I swam in high school,” he says. “I was good at it. I had played about every sport, but swimming was



“Yes, the prospects of me running for political office one day are much higher now.”



just different. It was uncommon to see someone who looks like me swimming. And there was a bonus to it—to break those stereotypes.”

But it’s more than that. “It’s even a privilege that I was able

to do it,” Caleb continues. “There’s not a rec league for swimming. There are quite a few pools, but they aren’t necessarily accessible. To learn to swim costs money. So, if you’re somewhere that doesn’t have a pool but does have a basketball court, you’re going to learn how to play basketball. That’s why it’s important that our schools be equivalent. Every sport where it comes down to your ability to be able to pay to be good is unfair.”

Named the 2017 Outstanding Black Male Leader of Tomorrow High School Award recipient, Caleb is a member of the local chapter of the NAACP. “All of the things I volunteer for directly correlate to my life,” he says.

PHOEBE POWELL

EARLHAM COLLEGE

Phoebe Powell is used to having things happen to her a bit early. Seventeen-year-old Phoebe, a 2018 Bloomington High School North graduate, is already in her first year at Earlham College in Richmond, Indiana. In 2018, at just 16, she was named a Bloomington Woman of the Year, selected by a subcommittee of the City of Bloomington’s Commission on the Status of Women.

Phoebe received the award alongside Maresa Murray, Sharlene Newman, and Morgan Newman for their combined work on a study that examined the experiences of black girls compared to those of white girls in the same communities.

“We talked and we related our experiences, but we also looked at the scientific side of it,” Phoebe says. “We took all of that information and we were able to publish it [as an editorial] in the *Indianapolis Star* and later it was published in *USA Today*. A lot of people paid attention to it.”

She says her own experiences as a young black woman in the Midwest sparked her interest in the study. “There were a lot of problems I had at North,” she says. “There just aren’t a lot of black people in Bloomington. In my AP [Advanced Placement] classes, I might be the only black person. In band, there might be only two or three of us. A lot of people think that since there are not a lot of black people they can be unintentionally racist or colorblind racist, and it’s okay. And even when they are made aware of it, they don’t think they have to stop.”

As she’s gotten older, racism has become more obvious to her. “In middle school, I would think people were just joking around with me. It took me a long time to realize the stuff I went through was racist,” Phoebe says. “I remember some of my friends in middle school saying to me, ‘Since we are such good friends, can you give me the n-card?’ I wasn’t even sure what that was about. I still remember the people. I still remember everything about that. Because it was totally not okay. I am still stunned. It took me awhile to recognize it as racism.”

Phoebe says she looks to her family to better understand how to deal with issues of race. Her mother and stepfather, Diana and Kofii Powell, and her father, Dominique Smith, are all important influences, as are her grandparents, Wanda and William Hosea.



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“My mom went to Bloomington North, so she knows how it is around here. And my grandparents are very involved with the NAACP,” she says. “So, I get a lot from my

mom’s personal experiences, and from my grandparents I get the statistical, old-school black information.”

She says she chose to attend Earlham because of its Epic Advantage program, which guarantees every student a fully funded study abroad experience. With a major in human development and social relations, Phoebe says her plan after college is to join the Peace Corps, and Earlham has a program that prepares students for it. And after the Peace Corps?

“I’m 17,” Phoebe says with a laugh. “I can tell you what I want to do for right now, but I can’t tell you what I want to do in the future. I’m just happy I have the Peace Corps planned out.”

Talking about the future makes her think again about her grandparents. Phoebe says it amazes her how much time can pass and so little can change. “I didn’t realize how old my Nana was, but then a lot of stuff that happened to her still happens today,” she says. “That’s really sad. That’s not okay. It makes me so frustrated. My Nana had to go through it as a child, as a teenager, as an adult? And I have to go through that same kind of stuff? No, that’s not okay.” ✕