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## **Essays Celebrate Civil Rights Icons and Local Heroes**

Students participating in the NAACP Culpeper Branch's Black History Month essay contest focused on hometown heroes as well as many important historic figures from Virginia, making the 2025 contest exceptionally challenging to judge, according to the branch's Education Committee Chair, Dr. Laurel Blackmon.

"We were impressed with the range of essays this year," says Blackmon. "We asked students to write about local people of note, whether that might be someone from their own community or from the Commonwealth of Virginia, past or present. The essays demonstrated a vast awareness of both historic figures as well as local people making a difference in students' lives today."

The branch presents awards for winning essays at the elementary, middle, and high school level. This year, NAACP Culpeper will also award four honorable mention awards. Nearly all of the winning entries were from Culpeper County students, with one top prize awarded to a student in Madison County.

JaMira Bowles, a freshman at Madison County High School, wrote the winning essay at the high school level. Bowles wrote about her mother, Mesha Jones, who is a nurse manager at UVA Health. Jones, who is currently studying for her Doctor of Nursing Practice degree, is the president of the Virginia Nurse Foundation. Well known in the Madison community, she is also the president of the Madison County African American Historical Association. Jones is a recent recipient of the county's Hometown Hero Cultural Enrichment Award and the UVA Health MLK Award for her mentorship and advocacy.

"My mom believes that everyone should have a chance, and when she sees barriers, she works to break them down," Bowles wrote. "One example is when she learned that some students weren't playing sports because they couldn't afford or access sports physicals. She partnered with UVA Health and community organizations to organize free sports physical events for two years in a row, helping 76 students the first year and 96 the second."

"My mom doesn't just talk about making change—she does it," Bowles added. "She makes history daily by fighting for fairness, preserving our history, and lifting up the next generation."

Myca Madelin Lam Peraza, an eighth-grader at Culpeper Middle School, wrote the winning essay at the middle school level. Her essay, "Jump Jackson," focused on the acclaimed NASA engineer Mary W.

Jackson. Born in Hampton, Virginia, in 1921, Jackson majored in Mathematics and Physical Science and went on to become NASA's first female African American engineer. Lam Peraza's essay described how Jackson "jumped" over many barriers throughout her life and persevered to enable new generations of Black women to pursue STEM fields. Jackson was awarded the Congressional Gold Medal and her work was spotlighted in the 2016 film "Hidden Figures."

"As a minority woman in Virginia," Lam Peraza wrote, "I am incredibly grateful that Mary took the first "jump" and many "jumps" after, proving over and over that women of any color can do incredible things, persevere despite barriers, and contribute to their communities."

The award for the best elementary school student essay went to Amara Cooper, a fifth-grader at Yowell Elementary School. Cooper's essay, "Fred Hampton: A Revolutionist," described the life and accomplishments of Black Panther and Rainbow Coalition leader Fred Hampton. "Fred's legacy continues to inspire people today and he taught us the importance of standing up for what is right and making a difference," Cooper wrote.

"Although Amara's essay focused on a notable figure outside of Virginia, our judges were impressed with the research that went into this piece," stated Blackmon. "It was a thoughtful, well-written piece on a young leader who worked tirelessly to improve his community."

Honorable mentions were awarded to four Culpeper County students. Miles Lawrence, a tenth-grader at Culpeper County High School, wrote his essay about his soccer coach, Erick Kalenga. "No matter how hard he trains us, he simultaneously nurtures moral principles in our heads," Lawrence wrote. "He encourages us to remain academically as well as athletically formidable...He makes our experience challenging, meaningful, and fun."

Amaya Parker, a 12th-grader at Culpeper County High School, wrote about her great aunt, Jane Evelyn Pollard. Parker stated that she recently sat down with Pollard to learn more about her "life story." A graduate of George Washington Carver Regional High School in Culpeper, Pollard went on to a 31-year career teaching in Culpeper County Schools, followed by volunteer work with the Culpeper Literacy Council, the Culpeper Human Services Board, and the Early Learning Center (now known as KinderCare). "Throughout her life, Jane Pollard has shaped many young minds in our local community," Parker wrote.

Autumn Adkins, a seventh-grader at Culpeper Middle School, wrote about Maggie Lena Walker, a native Virginian who lived from 1864 until 1934. "Maggie Walker was a hard-working woman who inspired many historical, and modern day figures to follow their dreams," Adkins wrote. "She was an entrepreneur and civic leader who broke many gender and race stereotypes by being the first woman to own a bank in the United States...she has given me hope and the confidence to follow my dreams."

Faith Gentry, also a seventh-grader at Culpeper Middle School, wrote about Ludwell Brown, Jr., who has taught at the school for decades. "Mr. Brown loves his students; he makes sure that every student knows his classroom is a safe place no matter what, and all of his students come first," Gentry wrote. "If you were one of his students, you're always one of his students...He doesn't just teach history, he also teaches life lessons."

Nearly 50 essays were submitted to the contest. Other Virginians highlighted in the essays included Revolutionary War hero James Armistead Lafayette, educators Booker T. Washington and Mary Smith Kelsey Peake, poet and Lynchburg NAACP co-founder Anne Spencer, civil rights activists Dorothy Height

and Barbara Johns, attorneys Oliver Hill and Martin Armstrong Martin, nuclear physicist Robert Johnson Omohundro, NASCAR driver Wendell Scott, tennis star Arthur Ashe, and singer Ella Fitzgerald.

Adriana Saylor wrote her essay about Deputy Melvin White, the resource officer at Emerald Hill Elementary School. "If it wasn't for him I wouldn't be this far," she wrote. "Deputy White has also inspired me to speak up. Deputy White always told me not to be scared to speak up because my voice will someday be heard. Which he was right because right now I'm in parliamentary procedure and I did cheer and I'm not afraid to be loud or be me!"

Nevaeh Sanchez Rivera wrote her essay about Robin Jones, librarian and media specialist at Pearl Sample Elementary School. "When I was in the fourth grade at Pearl Sample Elementary School I was really shy," she wrote. "But when I met her she made me feel confident and strong."

The essay contest winners will be honored at the NAACP Culpeper Branch's next general meeting, to be held on Thursday, March 20, at 7 pm at Antioch Baptist Church, 202 S. West Street, in Culpeper. The event is open to the public.

The Culpeper Branch of the NAACP was established in 1945 and includes members from Culpeper, Madison, and Rappahannock counties. The mission of the organization, which meets on the third Thursday of the month and hosts numerous special events, is to achieve equity, political rights, and social inclusion by advancing policies and practices that expand human and civil rights, eliminate discrimination, and accelerate the well-being, education, and economic security of Black people and all persons of color. The national organization was founded in 1909 and has more than 2,200 units and branches across the U.S. For more information, visit [www.naacpculpeper.org](http://www.naacpculpeper.org).