



Culpeper Branch

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NAACP Culpeper Announces 2026 Black History Month Contest Winners

The Culpeper Branch of the NAACP has announced the winners of its annual Black History Month contest. Four students earned first place awards and three students were recognized with honorable mention awards. All of the elementary school winners are from Emerald Hill Elementary School in Rixeyville. Both of the high school winners are 11th-grade students at Madison County High School.

At the elementary level, Cecilia Figliola, a fifth-grade student at Emerald Hill, earned first place in the Essay Category. Her essay addressed the legacy of Barbara Rose Johns, a central figure from Virginia in the fight for integrated schools. The judges noted that Figliola's essay, entitled "Barbara Rose Johns: A Fight Against Segregation," was exceptional in that it "captured the bravery and determination of Barbara Johns, then only 16 years old, as she led an impassioned fight for equal rights. Cecilia's essay was well-researched and thoughtfully crafted—recognizing that one person can make a historic difference and create powerful change."

In the Artistic Expression Category, Gracie Dunford, also a fifth-grade student, won first place for her drawing depicting segregated schools. The judges noted "Gracie's drawing depicts the isolation, fragmentation, and inequity that is inherently caused by segregation and the false claim of 'separate but equal.' This was an excellent interpretation of the contest prompt in visual form."

Three elementary school students received honorable mention awards for their submissions. Sawyer Eastham, a fourth-grader, earned an honorable mention in the Artistic Expression category for his short film depicting the 1955 arrest of Rosa Parks in Montgomery, Alabama. Eastham used Legos® to create the characters and settings in his film. Charlotte Jones, a fourth-grade student, and Emma Gabarrete, a fifth-grade student, both submitted essays about school segregation that received honorable mention awards.

At the high school level, Madison County High School's LaNiya Chew and Trinity Shoultz tied for first place in the Essay category. Both students used the contest opportunity to interview their grandmothers about their experiences in school. Chew's grandmother, Sandra, began her studies in segregated schools in Northern Virginia then attended high school during the early days of integration in the 1960s. Shoultz's grandmother, Laverne, was enrolled in segregated schools in Madison County, then attended George Washington Carver Regional High School in Rapidan. Shoultz also interviewed her high school speech coach, Fay Cunningham, for an additional perspective on the era of segregation.

Regarding Chew's essay, judges commented "'LaNiya's excellent essay reveals a journey into family history and a reflection on her own experiences as a biracial student, as well as those of her grandmother, who was among the first students to attend integrated schools in Virginia. The essay clearly documents the challenges that Black students faced in transferring to predominantly white schools with white teachers, often facing bullying and isolation. LaNiya's gratitude and appreciation for the barrier-breaking experiences of her grandmother were especially touching.'

Judges noted that Shoultz's "essay thoughtfully considers the perspectives of two people with very different experiences as students. We especially appreciated the photos of Trinity visiting the historic Carver Regional High School building, where her grandmother graduated!"

The winners received their certificates and cash prizes at a special reception on March 19 at Antioch Baptist Church in Culpeper. Judges included representatives of the NAACP Culpeper Branch and the board of the Madison County African American Historical Association (MCAAHA).

NAACP Culpeper regularly meets on the third Thursday of each month at 7 pm. Meetings are typically held in the Culpeper Business Center on Lovers Lane, where the branch office is located. Meetings are in-person and via Google Meet. For meeting links and call-in information, contact admin@naacpculpeper.org. More information on the Culpeper Branch of the NAACP can be found at <https://naacpculpeper.org/>.

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Photos (no credit needed):

Cecilia Figliola and NAACP Culpeper President Kaleb Hackley

Gracie Dunford and Kaleb Hackley

LaNiya Chew

Trinity Shoultz

(L-R) NAACP Culpeper President Kaleb Hackley, Sandra Chew, LaNiya Chew, Trinity Shoultz, Laverne Shoultz, and MCAAHA President Dr. Mesha Jones