



Paducah Tilghman High School
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Allison Stieg, Principal

November 15, 2021

Dear Martin Luther King, Jr., State Commission Awards Committee:

I'm honored to nominate Nadiya Williams for the 2021 Adult Leadership Award. This 18 year old young lady has shown not only on the outside what it means to remain committed to furthering Dr. King's dreams, inwardly she is a beautiful soul who desires to maintain and create harmony among all people.

Meeting Nadiya is a treat. She is bright-eyed and carries a wide smile on her face. She is very honest in her approach to race issues and will speak genuinely and with great care about her feelings and her desires for our world. Our Paducah Independent School District's Chief Equity Officer, Shonda Hollowell-Burrus, knows Nadiya very well through school and through her involvement in our high school's African American Leadership Club. Ms. Burrus says Nadiya has a quiet spirit but when she speaks, you listen because you know her words will be thought-provoking and profound. She says that Nadiya is the epitome of grace, respect, and accountability, and navigates very successfully through her day. She says Nadiya is very secure in her faith, even at the young age of 18.

Nadiya shares that her involvement in Dr. King related events throughout her life has been, in a word, "empowering." She told me about one of the times she participated in Paducah's annual march along Park Avenue to the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. monument in observance of Martin Luther King Day. Her face lit up as she described it as being uplifting and empowering to see everyone coming together "as one" — just like she knew Martin Luther King would want. She also uses that word to describe her visit to the Civil Rights Museum in Memphis. She said going from room to room and seeing the visuals, hearing the sounds, and just being all encased in what it must've been like to have lived during that time was not only moving and empowering, it was also very sobering to her. And being in the hotel room where Dr. King spent his last hours on that fateful day stopped her in her tracks. She had such a strong emotional reaction. Being there. In the room. Where Dr. King actually stood before that tragic event. It was hard for her to find the words to describe it to me.

Nadiya's parents and grandparents have instilled in her the value of education and a curiosity to learn about her culture, family, slavery, and the truth about our American history. Her great grandmother had only a 6th grade education so it's been very important to her that Nadiya get educated and do well with her studies. Her mother worked for several years at our local country club and was often mistreated by the white patrons there. To her family, it's a high priority that Nadiya understand history and that she herself pursue education so that she has more opportunities along her life's journey.

Reading has always been important to Nadiya's family and they have aimed to instill a love for reading in her. Her father has given her books every Christmas, primarily about race and black culture. She is a big reader. And she frequents the library to find books about and by African Americans that will help her learn and grow. In fact, when I was talking with Nadiya one day, she pulled out one of these books and it was entitled, "For Black Girls like Me." She also enthusiastically told me about another book she had just finished about three young black moms and their experience becoming a mother in their teens. She said it was very eye opening. Nadiya says she purposefully looks for black authors so she can get a better feel for her own heritage. She also likes to read online articles after she hears of an event or

story in the news. She said she'll research it so that she can be more familiar with the facts and be able to discuss it better. Most recently, she heard something about the first African American to receive his PhD in zoology — she was so fascinated by the story she had to run home and google it to find out more about this man and how he accomplished his PhD!

She also searches for documentaries on Netflix about black history, culture, black issues, and about Martin Luther King. She told me about a documentary she recently watched that made her very upset and angry. It was a true story about the five young men who were arrested and jailed for a Central Park murder they didn't commit ("The Central Park Five"). She said she could hardly watch it but felt it was important enough that she made herself continue watching. She often watches documentaries in her free time when she's not studying or reading.

Nadiya has been active in protests and peaceful marches here in Paducah. She took part in a protest on Park Avenue and another near our public library most recently where community members got together to remember and protest against the killing of Breonna Taylor. She also took part in a gathering to protest the retaining of our school superintendent, Donald Shively, after a terrible, very offensive picture surfaced showing him in black face. When asked what she came away with after participating in these protests, she doesn't hesitate to say they make her feel she's not alone, that there are "people of all colors who care about black people." She said the diversity at these events makes her feel "warm and comforted."

Nadiya proudly talks about her church. Her church often has conferences for empowering black women and she always participates. An older lady at her church has made it a routine to take Nadiya and two other young black ladies to any and all meetings, speeches, and events held at area churches or at their own church. This lady has done this for years, desiring that these young women be educated, well-versed in the goings-on of the black community, confident, assured, and grounded. Nadiya is grateful to have this lady as a sort of guardian angel, someone who is taking such an active part in her upbringing.

It's very important to Nadiya that she take part in helping others along the way. She's a mentor for the Oscar Cross Boys & Girls club, she's a part of our high school color guard and refers to it as a "sisterhood" in which you become a role model and mentor to other young ladies (most of whom are students of color), she is a Paducah Bank Teen Ambassador which is a diverse group of young people from area schools who come together to learn about the community, she sings in our school choirs, is a member of our Interact Club and Beta Club, is a mentor in the school Black Coal & Roses Society (assisting and mentoring young black students to gain confidence, worth, self esteem), and is highly involved in her church. She's also keenly interested in supporting black owned businesses, both local and online. She is very involved and very interested in helping others along the way! But one of the most admirable things about her is she pays attention at school and speaks up when she hears racist remarks or sees actions that aren't inclusive. She is forthright but respectful to students when they speak offensively — she desires to educate them as to how they are hurtful instead of getting angry and resentful. She desires conversation with others instead of confrontation. She is to be admired for the way she maturely handles and diffuses situations with her calm yet direct approach.

Thank you for considering this well-rounded and beautiful soul, Miss Nadiya Williams, for the Martin Luther King, Jr., State Commission 2021 Adult Leadership Award. She comes highly recommended by everyone who knows her.

Julie Howard Price
Paducah Tilghman High School
College & Scholarship Counselor