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Allison Stieg, Principal

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

I'm honored to nominate Mr. Coy Booker for the 2021 Youth Leadership Award. This sixteen year old displays a wisdom and an awareness far beyond his years and an attitude that all of us would benefit from if we employed it ourselves.

First and foremost, this young man is a true gentleman. I have observed him on more than one occasion move over to allow an adult or young lady to sit down or enter a room first. He is kind and quietly thoughtful and seems to be always aware of others. He never seeks nor does he seem to desire the spotlight. Our Paducah Independent School District's Chief Equity Officer, Shonda Hollowell-Burrus, has been greatly impressed at how Coy will quite subtly, and without prompting, take leadership at the school's African American Leadership Club meetings by getting all the young men in the room to help organize the chairs at the beginning or put them away at the end of each meeting. Ms. Burrus has also noticed that, as she is putting away her things before leaving the building after the meetings, all the students have left except for Coy and the other young men who follow his lead in waiting for her to make sure she gets out to her car safely before leaving. This is Coy.

Coy is very heartfelt about his desire for all people to get along. And he truly believes that personal relationships are the answer. He feels strongly that in order for the races to truly be united, we've got to get closer to each other, get to know each other, and form connections. We've simply got to talk to one another, he says. One time when we were talking about this, I mentioned a line from a book I'd read by author Brene Brown: "People are hard to hate close up. Move in." Coy got a huge smile on his face, nodded enthusiastically in agreement, and immediately quoted to me, "Proximity breeds care; distance breeds fear." Yes! I asked him who said this. He said it was a twist on a quote of Geoffrey Chaucer (author of "Canterbury Tales") who said, "Familiarity breeds contempt." The speaker was former NFL star Emmanuel Acho. I was blown away. First of all, what 16 year old is familiar with Geoffrey Chaucer and, more importantly, has put to memory a quote of such great import! Again, this is Coy.

Words are very important to Coy. He not only has put to memory sayings and quotes that are meaningful to him, he talks about what he considers the very important words of Martin Luther King, Jr. Coy has found recordings of Dr. King's speeches and has spent time really listening in order to understand. He has even researched some of the speeches in his quest to understand the meaning of each and every word. He has read about others' reflections on Dr. King's speeches and how those reflections and interpretations still ring true today. He remembers hearing some of Dr. King's speeches recited at church during special events and, even as a younger boy, he was intrigued and curious about them. I've asked him if he's put to memory any of Dr. King's words and he didn't hesitate before reciting from memory, "Riots are the voice of the unheard." Coy is a young man who takes words seriously and places them on his heart for consideration.

Coy is very positive and is quick to put a positive light on all of his experiences. We talked about his visit to the Civil Rights Museum and he said it was very impactful, for sure, but he couldn't help but think how far we'd come. That's what gives him hope. He also has talked about participating in the

“Stand for Solidarity” peaceful protest at Paducah’s Noble Park last year. His takeaway? He said he felt truly cared for by the diverse group gathering together and he couldn’t help but wonder how anyone could be against it. He said it was very beautiful and empowering.

Coy truly tries to see both sides of an issue, especially sensitive issues like race, prejudice, equality, and opportunity. He’s mentioned to me before that he wishes people wouldn’t be so quick to censor themselves or him before an issue is fully discussed. He truly desires the opportunity to hear others, as well as be heard himself, but too often people shut down out of frustration or anger. He tells me he doesn’t hold anything against people, even people who have wronged him. He mentions our school superintendent and the surfacing last year of a terrible, racist picture of him in black face. Even though Coy doesn’t believe the superintendent handled the situation well after it became public or made genuine attempts to do and say what was necessary to start healing, Coy says he doesn’t hold anything against him. He respects him as a human, and accepts that there exists this serious flaw in him. Coy seems quick to forgive and move on.

Coy is very invested in the school groups in which he takes part and helps lead. One of these groups, Boys to Gentlemen (“B2G”), is intended to provide adult male role models, guidance, and a safe venue to talk about sensitive issues facing the young men in our school. On one occasion, Coy was excited to tell me about the latest topic they had discussed: emotionally vulnerable black men. He had taken a lead role in the discussion and prepared a formal presentation on the topic that he gave to the group. He was very proud of the work he put into this. Coy himself has not had a consistent male role model in his life, being raised by a single mom, so he is very interested in learning how to be the kind of emotionally healthy man needed by his family, school, and world.

Coy is very proactive in trying to remain open to ideas, especially as he processes race issues. He mentions that he listens to podcasts and YouTube videos on race and equity issues. He says he listens to learn, and learns so he can speak intelligently. Most recently, he said he was listening to everything he could find on men (especially black men) being vulnerable and having emotional intelligence after discussing it in his B2G group. He hears about current events or topics that he knows will help him to grow and then finds a podcast about it to understand better what’s going on. He and his mom also watch a lot of documentaries together on Netflix and Hulu on slavery and true American history, as well as movies with black actors.

I have the privilege of serving with Coy on our school’s Family Resource Center (we call it “Tornado Alley”) Advisory Board. Coy is the student representative. He shows up for every meeting and always takes an active role in the discussion. He does not hesitate to step up and vocalize what he feels the students need. I can tell he actively listens to all that is being said at what some students might characterize as a boring meeting but he is always at the ready to contribute. He is no slacker. And he genuinely cares. I’ve also seen him in action as one of our school’s Student Ambassadors. He is the only African American male student to step up and be involved in this program. I’ve observed him quite at ease as he meets, shakes hands with, and converses with people in power, such as the University of Kentucky President Dr. Eli Capilouto. Coy always remains calm and poised, with steady eye contact, firm handshake, and a pleasant disposition. He is quietly self-assured and well spoken. Everyone — teachers and students of all skin colors — at our school likes him; you simply can’t help it. He’s just an authentic, kind, likable young man.

Thank you for considering this wonderful and mature soul, Mr. Coy Booker, for the Martin Luther King, Jr., State Commission 2021 Youth Leadership Award. This sixteen year old is a delightful human being who would carry this honor with much care and appreciation.

Julie Howard Price  
Paducah Tilghman High School  
College & Scholarship Counselor