



Najya Williams

2016 Scholarship Recipient



Najya Williams (cohort of 2016) at Busboys & Poets

A second-generation Washingtonian—born to D.C. native mother and a Guyanese immigrant father—Najya is no stranger to the complexities of the city and those who live and breathe its air. In August of 2017, the 19-year-old released her long-awaited *Cotton*, a collection of original poetry that invites readers to ruminate over experiences of “social injustices and pain” in her life and community. By publishing her collection under her personal imprint, The BGM Press, Najya draws attention to her use of the acronym form of “Black Girl Magic,” a galvanizing phrase that—now a staple slogan within the Black community—celebrates the resilience, talent, and beauty of Black women in the face of constant adversity. “Black Girl Magic” has also been invoked by Najya in her valedictorian speech and poetry. In the same vein, she dotingly mentions her mother and grandmother, the latter of whom she considers her “second mother.” When her grandmother lost her battle to colon cancer in 2006, Najya says she “found solace in writing poetry,” and began “stepping outside of [her] world in exchange for someone else’s.”

Najya unabashedly declares that she “didn’t use to be a good writer,” believing that it “took a while to find [her] voice.” That time seemed to arrive when she was a high school student at The School Without Walls, where she eagerly participated in a Martin Luther King Jr. celebration at the Washington National Cathedral, and performed spoken word poetry at Busboys and Poets. During her junior and senior years, Najya also participated in The School Without Walls’ intensive dual-enrollment program with the George Washington University. One course in particular—a mandatory writing course entitled “Writing for Social Change”—provided her with chances to examine the interactions and relationship between her community and those outside of it. In a 2015 research paper published by Pennsylvania State University Berks’ Undergraduate Journal of Service Learning and Community-Based Research—titled “From Tragedy to Reality: Analyzing the Rhetoric of Inner-City Communities and Their Members”—she outlines the perceived ineffectiveness of the “rhetoric of tragedy” utilized by service organizations toward inner-city communities, and proposes her own theory, *urban realism*, as a potential solution.

Najya’s drive to incite change has only intensified since entering high school. In 2015 alone, she wrote several articles on personal growth and self-care in an age of increased activism for online publications such as *For Harriet* and *Spoken Black Girl*. Najya also utilizes spoken word poetry as a form of artistic and activist expression. In her freshman year at Harvard University, she performed at events for the Harvard Black Students Association, the Harvard African Students Association, the Association of Black Harvard Women’s Tribute to Black Men, and the Kuumba Singers of Harvard College Black Arts Festival. Her time at Harvard has also been marked by guest speaking engagements at the DC Public Schools Educator Summer Academy and the Economic Club’s 2017

Scholarship Ceremony. As a 2016 recipient of the David M. Rubenstein/Economic Club of Washington, D.C. Scholarship, Najya also functioned as her cohort's representative. In her speech, she thanked David Rubenstein—the President of the Economic Club—for his generosity and dedication to furthering higher education in the District. She also touched upon college fears and experiences, yet normalized them in a way that fostered unspoken comradery among the new cohort of scholars. Though she is only a rising sophomore, Najya is already eager to participate in the Economic Club's Summer Internship program, and potentially occupy leadership positions in future alumni and mentorship programs.

As of today, Najya is utilizing her time at Harvard to explore fields she would like to specialize in as a professional. An activist at heart—with a penchant for understanding and highlighting distinctly human experiences—she is interested in neonatology as a career, as it combines her love for the sciences with her desire to act on behalf of and serve vulnerable individuals such as children. She presently majors in sociology—another field that requires its proponents to examine uniquely human phenomena—saying, “I can see myself incorporating these theories into my everyday work as a doctor.” Her commitment to intensive training is exemplified by her work as a Clinical Research intern in the Emergency Department of Children’s National Medical Center and as a course assistant for Introduction to Medicine at George Washington University. She also intends to apply to Harvard’s medical immersion program in Chile, an experience she believes will provide her with more clinical training and a chance to improve her Spanish language skills.

Yet despite her drive and success, Najya confesses to having a difficult time accepting and owning compliments. Najya describes how she simply doesn’t know why she’s often singled out when she believes there are an abundance of talented, successful individuals.

“When people put me on a pedestal—idealize me—I’m awestruck, because I’m asking myself, ‘why me?’ I’m working on trying to be more receptive to compliments. It’s gotten better! I don’t turn as red anymore. Being able to say ‘thank you’ or ‘I appreciate that’ displays growth.”

Najya credits her mother for influencing her to become more aware of her value and integrity. In moments that are taxing, “[she] tries to remember her voice.” She also contemplates the role writing has played in her development, and finds that the growth she experiences in life often runs in parallel.

“I used to be more cautious with my opinions because I didn’t want to start trouble. But today, I’m more assertive—more in control of my narrative—and I think that’s reflected in my writing [and] in my voice.”

In discussing her legacy, Najya declares that she wants reflections of her complex journey—not reflections of any single, particular instance (of success or failure) in her life—to be the “focus of [her] story.” This is evident in *Cotton*, and is even reflected in the title itself; just as cotton is majestic, rich in history and diverse in its uses, its interior can hide painful and crude truths that can be challenging to process. By offering a multi-dimensional inquiry into the painfully hidden and the beautifully displayed, Najya is holding true to her story.