

Young Voices

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a New York City youth-empowerment movement to bring unprecedented literary experiences to urban youth.

Sekai Edwards of Jefferson High School and Alexis Cannard of Roosevelt High School

She earned a full scholarship to an intensive summer theater program in New York City.

“I was myself, 16 years old, living in a teeny apartment in Spanish Harlem for seven weeks,” says Edwards, who moved on to become president

of Jefferson High School’s Black Student Union and continued finding work as an actress here in Portland. “Opportunities came one after another,” she said.

Cannard says she too has benefited from participating in the program and explained how Mitchell’s lessons have helped her have confidence in herself as a writer.

“She urged us to remember our work was valuable, to get paid for readings and appearances,” she explained. “For me, as a woman of color, to see my work as valuable like that is so important.”

Edwards added that she has inspired to keep hunting for opportunities and not rest on her laurels.

“Winning this has if anything made me excited to move on to a new goal and always have my mind ready thinking about what’s next,” she said. “Momentum is your most powerful tool. Every time I won something it’s just an opportunity to do something else.”

Edwards is headed to Miami this month as a YoungArts National Finalist to perform and compete against other students from across the country. She credits her mom for being her biggest inspiration, “She always tells me to reach for more.”



PHOTO BY OLIVIA OLIVIA/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Sekai Edwards of Jefferson High School, who shares the title as Portland’s First Youth Laureate, is inspired to keep hunting for writing opportunities and not rest on her laurels.

nard of Roosevelt High School both tied for the inaugural Portland Youth Poet Laureate title this fall, having been selected from a group of 12 finalists for the yearlong title. Their victory gives them access to a national book and distribution deal from Penmanship Books, and the opportunity to do a regional book tour.

Both girls have long known each other as they both attended Da Vinci Arts Middle School in northeast Portland. Edwards said that in 7th grade, she participated in her first ever class-wide poetry slam.

“My teacher told me I should try out, that I should write some pieces,” says Edwards. “So I wrote a piece, and then another, and I won.” The next year, several middle schools competed against each other for a larger slam, and Edwards took home that title too. “I started to realize, I had a knack for it.”

From there, Edwards participated in a variety of slams and contests, including with the August Wilson Red Door Project in 2014, the monologue competition that sends winners to compete nationally in honor of the esteemed playwright.



PHOTO BY OLIVIA OLIVIA/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Participating in a youth poet laureate program to uplift young and traditionally marginalized voices has helped Alexis Cannard of Roosevelt High School gain confidence as a writer.

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