

Young Zaynah was never not singing. From the car to the bathtub, if I wasn't being redirected for a too-boisterous "attitude" or gallivanting around the YMCA in a tutu, I was holding a makeshift microphone and singing my heart out - usually to "Bang Bang," by Nicki Minaj, Ariana Grande, and Jessie J (a questionable favorite for a 7-year-old) or Miley Cyrus', "The Climb," which was my featured performance at my preschool graduation. I started voice lessons with my jazz-musician pastor and courageously performed in church services and Christmas pageants. One year, I recall crying from stage fright at said pageant; my mom and sister came up to sing "Silent Night" *for* me. This marked the start of a period when I stopped singing publicly. I may have hummed privately, but I didn't sing freely. Apparently, this era coincided with my parents' divorce and my father moving out. My free-spirited-performing halted. My mom says it hurt her heart that I suddenly abandoned music, as it brought such joy before.

My reluctance to sing persisted for several years until my mom, sister, and I moved from California to Virginia. Like a sudden renewal, my musical antics resumed. As I grew, music's role in my life grew, too. I started learning the ukulele, recorder (elementary-school me had 7 accomplishment ribbons, of which I was quite proud!), and I took my first music theory classes! I enjoyed my first professional choir experience; The Virginia Choral Society, featuring conductor Alexander L'Estrange with composition, "Song Cycle", about the 19th-century creation of the bicycle. With selections as unique as the experience, I got to see a professional singer's daily life *and* work with an international director. From there, music became my main focus. I earned my first choir solo in sixth grade, my middle school choir won 1st place at my first competition, and, after many tears and much frustration, I learned to sight read!

Entering high school, music exploded in my life. My freshman year, I made District Choir for the first time, was ankle-deep in show choir, and knee-deep in my musical theater obsession. My first two years of high school showed me how heavily I depended on music to cope with my emotions. When spiraling, I knew I could watch "The Sound of Music" and all of my stress would dissipate. If my mind was winding down a self-destructive path, I knew I could trust the Holy Rap Trinity (Nicki Minaj, Meghan Thee Stallion, and Cardi B) to restore me to my confident state of mind. Around that time, I started to notice how music affected me physically. I noticed how my body reacted to arias, ballads - how they made me feel cold, comforted, strong; or how a gospel piece could shake me up inside, or an 80's-rock hit or upbeat musical theater number could make me float and transform me into a carefree bundle of energy. Starting in sophomore year, I deepened my understanding of classical and theatrical music. I started singing foreign language pieces and competing all over Virginia. I felt that I had finally found the thing I could do to uplift myself and also bring joy to others no matter what.

Once I realized my physical-emotional connection to music, I knew there was no going back. I felt how my mind and soul grasped melodies and held them, how I

appreciated each note and song intensely and carefully. I'd come to love music in ways few can. I understand the time, effort, and contemplation invested in composers' pieces, I've made it my duty to please them by telling the stories they've set to notes. Music ties me to myself, balances my mind, comforts my soul. Looking back, I realize it's been my steadfast companion. Nothing compares to the feeling of music, nor the way *I* feel knowing I get to share such a *gift* with others.

In addition to my deep love of music, my growth mindset and commitment to inclusion and diversity will embolden me in college where I will double major in Justice Studies and Musical Theatre. Diversity and inclusion are fundamental to everyday society and to the arts. Post-college, I will leverage my passion for art and theatre as a full-time performer, connecting people; promoting mutual respect and understanding. I aspire to be a voice for change and equality in the arts, and by extension, in society; an agent of positive impact for social justice through my passion in these complementary fields.