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Eureka Alum Tia Wilson excels at Notre Dame Outstanding 2017 VICC grad to teach English in Uganda this summer

Tia Wilson, a former Voluntary Interdistrict Choice Corp. participant, graduated from Eureka High School in 2017 with a basketful of honors and awards, including a full-ride QuestBridge scholarship to the University of Notre Dame.

Now a sophomore at Notre Dame, Wilson is double-majoring in Africana studies and in management consulting at Notre Dame's Mendoza College of Business. Her career plans include becoming a consultant solving problems for nonprofit organizations and startup companies. Eventually, in the next five to six years, she hopes to form her own small venture capital company catering to black businesspeople starting their own companies or nonprofits. "I feel as if there is a lack of black representation in the business world, so I am hoping I can do something to alleviate the deficit we see," Wilson said.

After serving as an intern with Deloitte LLP's tax department in San Francisco last summer, she realized she did not want to work in accounting.

At Notre Dame, Wilson is one of eight in her Class of 2021 to be named to the AnBryce Scholars Initiative, a program aiming to identify and cultivate future leaders who will be committed to making a difference in the world. AnBryce Scholars are the first in their families to attend college and have encountered significant socioeconomic challenges in pursuit of their education. Academically, they place in the top 1 to 2 percent of the nation in their class performance and/or national test scores. As an AnBryce Scholar, Wilson gets opportunities to participate in global immersion programs and study-abroad experiences.

Recently, she took a spring break trip with other AnBryce Scholars to San Francisco, where they met with several companies, including Apple and Golden Gate Capital. "AnBryce is more than just a scholars program," Wilson said. "It is truly a family, and the resources I gain from AnBryce partners are out of this world."

During the 2018 fall break, Wilson took a Notre Dame-sponsored pilgrimage in France, where she learned about Catholicism and the journey of the Holy Cross congregation.

This summer, she will volunteer through Notre Dame's International Summer Service Learning Project (ISSLP) to teach English in Kyarusozzi, Western Uganda. She was one of only 69 of 260 applicants to be chosen for an ISSLP project. For eight weeks, she will teach at a high school run by the Congregation of the Holy Cross, where she will use Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Black Panther* graphic novels and others to work on the students' English comprehension. Through peer-to-peer editing and mentorship, she will help students write their own stories. "Since the literature is not largely available at the school, we will create it," she said.

Wilson's aim is to put herself in the shoes of her much-admired Eureka High language arts teacher, Becky Stevenson, helping to bridge the gap between African Americans and African students. "In order to be a better citizen of this world, cross-cultural understanding will need to exist on both sides," Wilson said. "Through this experience I am hoping to understand the lives and culture of Western Uganda and help my students understand a bit more about the lives of African Americans."

In her upcoming junior year, she will spend the fall semester studying in Dublin, Ireland, taking business courses and classes on racism and social justice movements. While there, she will volunteer at the nonprofit Youth and Educational Service for Refugees and Migrants, which helps migrant youth better acclimate to Irish culture through English classes, homework help and assistance with other cultural competency skills. "The skills I gain teaching English in Uganda will help me with my work in the organization in Dublin, so I am looking forward to my future," Wilson said.

Wilson got a good start on her academic and professional future while attending Rockwood schools. At Eureka High School, Wilson participated in the student equity team, theater and track. She was a mentor for Eureka's e!Crew freshmen mentoring program and co-founder of Women Empowering Women, a group of upperclasswomen who mentor a group of black freshman girls through their first year of high school. Tia received the VICC Academic Achievement Award every year in elementary school.

Wilson is the first Eureka student to receive the competitive QuestBridge Scholarship, which is awarded to fewer than 5 percent of applicants.

"Tia deserves all the opportunity to reach her full potential, because it's unlimited," said Becky Stevenson, the language arts teacher at EHS who so impressed Tia Wilson. She taught Wilson in a ninth-grade honors class and employed her as an aide for two years. "She was one of those right from the start that you knew had something special. She is ambitious and determined. She was really invested in her own learning, in herself, in being the best person she can. And she's been invested in the future she wants for herself since I met her. She's one of the hardest workers I've ever been around."



Tia Wilson displays her Black Lives Matter flag in front of the Eiffel Tower while on a visit to Paris last year. She strives to take a picture with her flag near a significant monument whenever she travels abroad.

McGrath VICC students garner honors for hard work and dedication

The Brentwood Board of Education recently honored McGrath Elementary students Cloë Bass and Tahli Times, both participants in the Voluntary Interdistrict Choice Corp. transfer program.

The Board of Education recognizes students from pre-kindergarten to grade 12 several times a year during board meetings. Classroom teachers make the nominations, and principals bring forward three to four students at each presentation. The board presents a certificate of recognition to each student.

Cloë Bass was cited as a hard-working fifth-grader who is always pushing herself to improve in all areas. "Cloë truly listens to all teaching points, tips and advice and uses them to improve her work," said Principal Cindy Neu. "She is also a kind friend and classmate."

Cloë received her Certificate of Recognition in October 2018.

Second-grader Tahli Times was recognized for his intense focus on reading. "He set his own goal of reading because there was a particular level of book he wanted to read," Neu said. "Through his hard work and constant practice, he was able to achieve two reading levels this quarter to meet his goal." Tahli received his Certificate of Recognition in January 2019.

Cloë Bass (left) shows off her certificate of recognition with Principal Cindy Neu (center) and Kerry Trostel, a member of the Board of Education.



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MESSAGE from the CEO



As many of you undoubtedly realize, for the past several years, the VICC Board of Directors, comprising county superintendents and the superintendent of St. Louis Public Schools, has been reviewing our long-range plans via a strategic planning process.

One of the first steps in that direction was to extend the program for an additional five years, enabling us to take new students through 2023-24 with an emphasis upon the placement of siblings of all current students. All students placed and enrolled through this extended time may continue attending their selected school through high school graduation, meaning the program could continue until at least 2036. Due to certain legal limitations on the indefinite continuation of a race-based school integration program, we have been gradually reducing the total number of students participating despite the mutual benefits for all students involved.

One of our biggest challenges remains — how do we continue a program that has proven to be beneficial in light of the legal and financial challenges, given that racial segregation since the inception of the program has certainly not diminished and, in fact, has likely increased in many areas of Metropolitan St. Louis?

Our program has realized and demonstrated much success over the years as documented by empirical data as well as the many individual success stories of countless students. We need to work together as a community and a nation to identify opportunities to continue and expand upon the successes that our students have experienced. It is the goal of the entire VICC Board to continue to work toward that objective whether that is through the continued support of the VICC program or the pursuit of other programs. One option includes working together with the educational community and business leaders in the St. Louis region to transform the VICC program to provide personalized learning and career preparation for all students and to increase academic success, student diversity and student college/career outcomes. Stories such as the one in this issue highlighting the accomplishments of Tia Wilson, currently attending Notre Dame University, among many similar others, inspire all of us to seek ways to continue our program for the benefit of our students.

Everyone is excited and energized about the many options available for all of our students under the current program and the opportunities presented by a new and innovative expanded scope as well. While the details still need to be worked out and resolved, the options available to us are tremendous.

Earl Byrd hits his marks in Kirkwood theater and academics

North Kirkwood Middle School sixth grader Earl Byrd has been turning heads in classrooms and on stages at school and beyond.

“He is an incredibly kind and considerate young man,” said Shonda Ambers-Phillips, executive director of Student Services for the Kirkwood School District, echoing the sentiments of Michelle Fink, Earl’s school counselor.

With a GPA of 3.60 (so far), Earl is in the school’s “Soar” gifted program. He recently was honored with a certificate from the Kirkwood High School Black Achievement and Cultural Club for African-American students who have earned a 3.0 or higher GPA this year. He also has been named Student of the Week.

Earl entered the Voluntary Interdistrict Choice Corp. program in kindergarten at Tillman Elementary, then advanced to North Kirkwood Middle School in sixth grade. Earl’s parents, Frances and Earl Byrd, sent him to Kirkwood schools because “Kirkwood is a good district,” said Frances Byrd. They should know, because Earl’s four older sisters graduated from Kirkwood High School, also through the VICC program.

Earl’s favorite class is science. “Earl is a curious science student who is always making connections and asking ‘why’ questions,” said his science teacher, Chris Reinagel. “He is not content to just know the ‘what’ about a topic we are studying; he also wants to know the ‘why’ and the ‘how.’ You can almost see the gears turning when he probes to find out more about our investigations.” A conscientious lab partner, Earl works well with his classmates, she added.

Reinagel noted that “Earl is a natural at public speaking and has the ability to command a room. He organizes his thoughts well and uses his voice to keep the audience’s attention.”

So it’s not surprising that Earl has parlayed his public speaking ability and sense of humor into success on the stage.

As a member of the NKMS Players, North Middle’s theater troupe, Earl played Dr. Sanson Carrasco in their production of “The Man of La Mancha.” But that wasn’t his first show. Inspired by the stories of one of his older sisters who is active in theater, Earl caught the theater bug in fifth grade and performed in “Seussical the Musical” at Tillman.

He has been singing in his church choir since about the age of 3, his mother said, and performs in church plays. “He has a beautiful singing voice, but he won’t tell you this,” she said. Earl also plays trumpet in band class.

In his spare time, Earl also enjoys skating and video games.

Although it’s a little early to make career plans, “If the opportunity does present itself, I would like to do something with stage performances,” Earl said.

Earl and his family spent part of their spring break visiting Branson, where they attended the musical “Samson.”



Earl Byrd practices his trumpet playing for band class.