

November 15, 2016



Janasia Johnson, 14, will receive an award from first lady Michelle Obama Tuesday on behalf of AileyCamp Miami. Janasia, whose mother is in prison, learned to channel her feelings into writing through the program.

She lost her mother but found her voice

■ A Miami teen who learned to cope with her mother's incarceration through a local arts program will meet first lady Michelle Obama. Janasia Johnson, 14, who was inspired by the Adrienne Arsht Center's AileyCamp Miami, will accept an award for the program at the White House on Tuesday.

BY JORDAN LEVIN
jlevin@miamiherald.com

Eighth-grader Janasia Johnson was 8 when her mother was sent away for second-degree murder. And though the North Miami Beach teen has

lived with her grandmother (along with three siblings, an aunt and two cousins) since birth, her anger at the loss often boiled over.

"When you have a mom, no one can take her place," Janasia says. "Certain things I can only

express to my mom because I know she will understand me. When she left, I started acting up; I had an attitude. When I get mad about stuff, I don't like talking, and anger would build up in me."

Last summer, Janasia, 14, learned to channel that anger at AileyCamp Miami, a summer program for middle-school students that teaches self-expression and self-esteem through

dance, drumming and skills such as conflict resolution and dealing with peer pressure. The camp, now in its eighth year, is run by the Adrienne Arsht Center for the Performing Arts and the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater — headed by Liberty City native Robert Battle.

"I always liked writing since my mom left," Janasia says. "I learned to let

SEE JOHNSON, 6C



Janasia Johnson, front, on right, performing with AileyCamp Miami at the Adrienne Arsht Center last summer.

FROM PAGE 1C

JOHNSON

out my emotions in writing and not let them out on other people." She filled her iPad, a notebook, her letters to her mother with poems.

Because she learned to express herself by writing instead of fighting, on Tuesday Janasia will meet First Lady Michelle Obama at the White House, where she will represent AileyCamp as it receives the 2016 National Arts and Humanities Youth Program Award.

Jairo Ontiveros, the Arsht Center's director of education and community

outreach, says Janasia's determination and awareness made her stand out among the 100 kids at AileyCamp.

"She wrote a poem at camp; the first line was, 'I've been broken since the day I was born,'" Ontiveros says. "This young lady knows how to channel that anger and frustration through her poetry."

"We didn't notice her at first because she didn't want to be noticed. Now she's coming out of her shell. She ran for class president and she lost, but she said, 'Mr. Jairo, what

we learn is to keep on going.'" So she's going to try again. We realized she had a voice ... of a student who can be impacted by this. She has the makings of a great leader."

AileyCamp is one of 12 programs nationwide to receive the award, which comes with a \$10,000 grant and is run by the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities with the National Endowment for the Arts and National Endowment for the Humanities.

The honor comes with other thrills for Janasia. When she arrived in Washington, D.C., on Saturday, it was the first time she had traveled on a plane or outside Florida. (She said

takeoff was scary, flying was fun but landing made her ears hurt.) Ontiveros is taking her to visit the new National Museum of African American History and Culture and to the National Mall.

"We really want it to be impactful," Ontiveros says. "She's so proud to repre-

sent the program and Miami, and to inspire other children to do the same."

The Arsht Center will host a watch party for other AileyCampers on Tuesday. And Janasia will wear a new black dress and a burgundy blazer to meet the First Lady.

"Everybody has good things to say about her," says Janasia. "She always has a smile on her face. Meeting her, probably some of her happiness will rub off on me."

Janasia, who attends the Seed School of Miami, a college preparatory, public boarding school for children in extreme poverty, foster care, or with an incarcerated parent, says her mother, who is at the Gadsden Correctional Facility in the Florida Panhandle, is elated.

"I was talking to her on the phone last night. She was really happy," Janasia says. "She said, 'I'm proud of you. You have really changed. I just want you to be positive and make something better of yourself.'"



Courtesy of the Adrienne Arsht Center

Janasia Johnson, 14, in front of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater exhibit at the new National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington.