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Janasia Johnson, 14, and Jairo Ontiveros, the Arshat Center Arts education director, display the 2016 National Arts and Humanities Youth Program Award after meeting first lady Michelle Obama at the White House.

THE ARTS

Teenager accepts award at White House for AileyCamp Miami

■ Janasia Johnson, 14, visited the White House and met first lady Michelle Obama on Tuesday on behalf of AileyCamp Miami, a program that works with local middle schoolers and which received a national award for its work.

BY JESSICA CAMPISI
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WASHINGTON

While other kids her age were learning new vocabulary words and basic math skills, Janasia Johnson was learning how to live without her mother.

At age 8, Janasia's mother was convicted of second-degree murder and sent to prison, leaving the now-14-year-old to live with her three siblings, grandmother, aunt and two cousins.

"I grew up without a dad, and my mother was incarcerated; I didn't know how to express myself," Johnson said. "I was always

angry."

Last summer, Johnson attended AileyCamp Miami, a six-week summer program that works with middle school students, teaching them to express themselves through dance, writing and the arts rather than verbal altercations. The camp, now in its eighth year, is run by the Adrienne Arshat Center for the Performing Arts and the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater —

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headed by Liberty City native Robert Battle.

Johnson represented AileyCamp at the White House on Tuesday as the organization received the 2016 National Arts and Humanities Youth Program Award, along with 11 other programs nationwide. First lady Michelle Obama congratulated Johnson, an eighth grader from North Miami Beach.

"We believe every single child has boundless promise, no matter who they are, where they come from

or how much money their parents have," Obama said. "These kids represent the very best of America."

Being honored at the ceremony and meeting Obama was very exciting, Johnson said, adding she hopes to be as "open-hearted" as the first lady.

"It was very exciting; it showed me that there's more out there," Johnson said. "I can be anyone I want to be."

Obama praised the youth program leaders for giving students a chance to succeed, even though many kids "think that places like this are not for them."

"Through our programs, students have become poets and dancers and filmmakers and photographers, but more importantly, they've become leaders in their communities," Obama said. "Together, they've learned the power of discipline, of hard work and teamwork."

At AileyCamp, students learn about West African drumming, jazz, modern and ballet dancing, while taking classes in conflict resolution, drug prevention, creative communication and other areas of personal development.

Johnson has used a specific creative outlet — poetry — since she was 8 to express her feelings. In particular, there's one quote, which came from author Robert Te'ew, which she said she'd always remember:

"Don't let negative and toxic people rent a space in your mind," she said. "Raise the rent and kick them out."