

# A PIONEER FOR PEACE

Kaiya Williams receives Peace Award for leading Black Student Union

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Through friendships and food, challenges and changes, McLean’s Black Student Union (BSU) has grown into a vital pillar of the McLean community. At the center is an ambitious girl whose leadership has allowed the club to prosper.

Senior Kaiya Williams took the reins this year as president of the BSU. Under her leadership, the club has expanded significantly. The BSU’s activities this year have included holding meetings that spotlight important people and events in Black history, supporting the Muslim Student Association’s October walkout, a field trip to the National Museum of African American History and Culture and a cookout in tandem with Langley’s Black Student Alliance (BSA). Williams was rewarded for her efforts with the Fairfax County Peace Award.

The BSU, open to everyone regardless of race, is on a mission under Williams to promote inclusivity at McLean and remember African American history.

“The people of Black history worked day and night to be where we are today, and I feel like sometimes we kind of take that for granted,” Williams said. “We’re only getting better, but we have to remember where we started.”

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- JASMINE ANDRESOL  
BSU FOUNDER

Though McLean is generally more progressive than other areas in the U.S., discrimination is still present. Williams’ work with the BSU has helped stimulate conversations about the subject, celebrating

how far society has come and discussing how far it must go.

“I’m versed on the subject, so I’m willing to talk about it. Not everybody is, which makes people think that there’s not a safe space for them, and also because they don’t trust the other person’s knowledge of racial matters in the United States,” BSU sponsor Christopher Phillips said. “Some people like to bury their heads and kind of go, ‘It’s not really happening,’ but it is.”

Williams’ journey began with the club’s founding in 2021 when she was a sophomore. One of the events that shaped the club was when McLean’s rock, freshly painted by the newly formed BSU for Black History Month, was vandalized.

“I feel like [the vandalism] really kind of shook all of us up and made us feel really scared for our safety,” Williams said. “It was scary to think that even though everybody preaches diversity, it wasn’t actually being taught.”

However, the BSU persevered through the challenge, hosting a rally to discuss what had been done and why it was unacceptable. Over the coming years, the BSU continued to grow and prosper.

“Throughout the two years that I ran [the BSU], Kaiya was always there for support. Had it not been for her outstanding ability to mobilize her friends and peers to join the meetings, the club may not have withstood in the way that it did,” BSU founder Jasmine Andresol said. “From the beginning, Kaiya was the heart of the Black community at McLean in the way that she brought everyone together.”

Williams was appointed president after Andresol graduated, when she was faced with the difficult task of continuing Andresol’s work: expanding the club and its activities. The club has biweekly meetings highlighting notable members of Black history, including actors, musicians, activists and politicians.

“I had utmost confidence in [Williams]’ ability to not only preside over the club, but also innovate and improve upon it in ways that I could not,” Andresol said.

As the year progressed, Williams adjusted her leadership style as she learned how best to manage the organization.

## HIGHLANDER OF THE ISSUE

“I feel like I’ve recently begun to use my voice,” Williams said. “Most of the people in the club already all know me, so they know when I get up that I have something to say.”

Williams is most proud of her collaboration with Langley’s BSA to organize a cookout between the two groups, hosted in Langley’s cafeteria. The two clubs bonded over activities and homemade food.

“I really enjoyed being able to meet the president of the BSA and her leadership. They were so welcoming and so were their club members,” Williams said. “Classic food like macaroni and Hawaiian rolls and many games helped us get to know each other.”

The cookout was a success that will be expanded upon in the future.

“We might plan on doing a bigger cookout at the end of the year, and that would be with a lot more of the schools in the county,” senior BSU member Jaren Tennort said.

As global conflicts have intensified over the past year, Williams extended the BSU’s support for other student groups, assisting the McLean Muslim Student Association (MSA) in their Humanitarian Walkout for Palestine.

“[The BSU’s involvement] was important because it helped information reach further out to various groups of students, regardless of background or religion,” sophomore MSA member Holly Raheb said. “We likely wouldn’t have had such a great outcome if it hadn’t been for the support we received. By spreading information about the walkout, the groups also were able to help make more people aware of the current status and ongoing genocide happening in the Gaza Strip.”

Given Williams’ efforts to promote inclusivity at McLean as well as her energetic personality, College and Career Counselor Mary Barnes suggested she apply for the Fairfax County Peace Award. Barnes and Williams had interacted in the past when Williams worked as teacher’s aide (TA) in the Career Center.

“I was familiar with [Williams] being in the leadership role of the Black Student Union... I just like her energy, enthusiasm and her willingness to help,” Barnes said. “Some TAs come in and just sit down and do their work until somebody tells them to do something. She always comes in and [asks], ‘What do you need? How can I help?’”

The Peace Award is granted to students



**PURVEYING PEACE** — Kaiya Williams shakes hands with United States Rep. Gerry Connolly, who stands to the right of FCPS School Board member Karl Frisch. Williams received the Fairfax County Peace Award, given to one accomplished student per FCPS high school, for her work with McLean’s Black Student Union. (Photo courtesy of Margaret Rogers)



**PRESIDENTS UNITE** — Senior Kaiya Williams, president of Black Student Union, poses with Langley’s Black Student Association president, Celia Myers. The two collaborated to organize a cookout this year.

with a “desire to bring kindness into the world around them” and the determination to “seek the peaceful resolution of challenging issues,” according to the Student Peace Awards of Fairfax County website.

After submitting her application, Williams was delighted to learn she had won. Just 27 students, one per high school, were chosen.

“I felt so honored. I was representing McLean High School and I felt so happy to accept this award,” Williams said. “It was also a time to reflect on all the things I’ve done for the community and how much I want to do in the future.”

In addition to a monetary prize, Williams received a check to a charity of her choosing. She selected Black Girls Code, an organization created to foster a new generation of Black women in computer science, a field largely dominated by white men.

“[Black Girls Code] has been a huge part of what helped me discover my passion for the computer science field,” Williams said. “It felt right for me to give back to what helped me get where I am today.”

The awardees attended a public reception

to receive their certificate and meet the state representatives. At the reception, one speaker stood out to Williams.

“[The speaker] was talking about how, in order to achieve peace, you must talk about even the hardest of issues. [Their speech] did, unfortunately, get some people mad because it did begin to get a little controversial, but I feel like it was important to say,” Williams said. “There’s no way to gain peace if you’re not willing to talk about your issues.”

Williams, who plans to major in computer science, has been accepted into over 70 universities and has received more than \$1 million in scholarships. Williams’ legacy at McLean will be continued after she graduates next year as the BSU continues developing and spreading its messages of inclusion and diversity.

“[McLean] was so amazing and such a welcoming environment,” Williams said. “I was able to make so many new friends, and if I had any words for my McLean legacy, I’d say to have fun, live in the moment and just enjoy the time you have with all your friends.”