

Keneisha Hailey

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\$5,000 WINNER

**Neighborhood Market #7137
Jacksonville, NC**

My parents divorced when I was nine. It was really painful because I didn't understand why my father was leaving. I was close to him and look like him and I felt he shut me out. I'd stay up every night hoping he would walk through the door. I also started having seizures around that time and I struggled a lot.

When I was 14, my mom started dating a guy who had two kids.

My stepsister, Amber, and I became close and she suggested I watch the movie *Antwone Fisher* about a guy who had a rough childhood. Antwone wrote a poem: "Who Will Cry for the Little Boy?" about the little boy who was crying inside. And that was my first time loving a poem. Right after watching the film, I wrote my own version: "Who Will Cry for the Little Girl?" It incorporated the pain I was going through. Communication wasn't encouraged in my household and writing poetry gave me a safe space to express myself.

I won four poetry competitions run by our church.

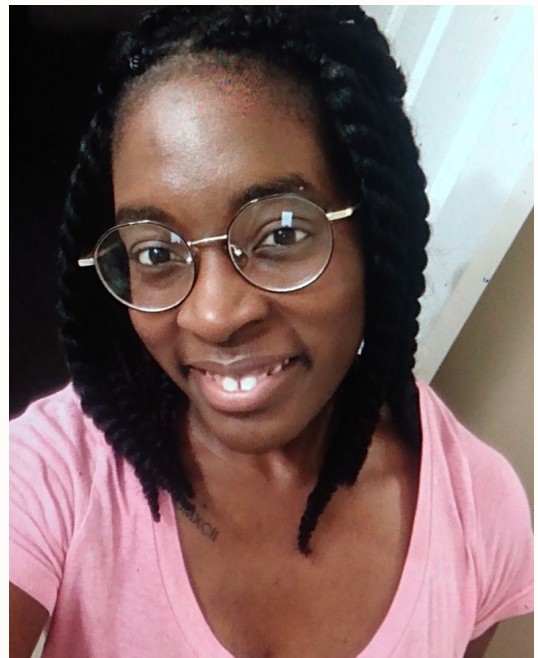
One was about my difficult experience transferring from one high school to another. Our church secretary, Ms. Flakes, encouraged me to write poems for special events. She said I had a lot of talent and bought me a journal. Later, I started college, which I loved. I had to leave because I needed to get a job and make money. But I kept writing poems.

I'm 32 now and six months ago, I thought my talent had come to an end.

I had writer's block. The words weren't coming together and I felt frustrated — I was having a hard time at work and drinking too much. I was eating a lot of pastries and cookies. I felt worn out. Then, walking to work one morning, I had to stop because my feet were swollen and I was out of breath. That's when I decided to make some changes.

I begin each morning by writing down my goals. Then I do 50 jumping jacks.

That wakes me up and gets me going. I take some deep breaths and make a cup of tea. I started a low-carb, Keto diet. Wow, it was hard at first, but I was motivated, and soon I had more energy and felt lighter.



I was inspired to pick up my pen again.

I committed to just beginning a poem. I went to the park, sat by a waterfall with my journal and wrote half a poem. The words were flowing again and I was so happy. I kept writing poems every day and felt so creative.

My best friend and roommate, Latoya, is my biggest supporter.

She's helped me through so much. She'll say, "Hey, don't give up." A defining moment for me was when we were sitting on a park bench together and she played a song by Sade called, "The Sweetest Taboo." I felt raw and I was crying. The next day I wrote a poem for Latoya, and she was so honored. It's called "Everything is You." It starts:
"I stared at my wounded inner child.
To steer, not jump, as the ship sails."

Reading poetry inspires me.

I love Maya Angelou and my favorite is "On the Pulse of Morning." I love how much hope is in her poems because that's what I longed for during my teenage years.

I have a window in my room and I look out at the trees as I write.

I've tapped back into my gifts and I feel successful. I'm closer to my mom, and my father reached out to me last week after 10 years. I'm not sure what will happen but I'm hoping for the best because I want to get to know him.

I believe in myself as a poet and I'm publishing a collection of my poetry as an e-book.

My goal: to encourage young people who feel isolated and let them know that the world is a better place because they exist.



THRIVE