

2022 Strong Men & Women in Virginia History Student Creative Expressions Contest

Western Regional Winning Submission

Ainsley Dunning

Grade 12

John S. Battle High School

Ms. Carrie Cornett

Climbing the Ladder

Everyone dreams of the stars when they're a kid.

At least it seems that way when I'm sitting on the floor with wax on my fingers,
coloring outside the lines and inside the lines and all over the page.

When I grow up I want to be...

An artist, or a writer, or an astronaut, or a scientist, or a teacher, or a dancer

Or perhaps all of these at the same time.

Dreams and hopes and stars and futures running over each other like scribbled crayon.

And the response?

You can be anything. Dream big.

But they don't really mean that, do they?

Because after we traded the floor for chairs

and crayons for pencils

and dreaming for career-path-cluster-planning-future

their response changes.

I hung onto dreams of stars and center stage,

but others pulled at my grip.

Their "guidance," or so they called it?

You can't do that as a career, baby.

So as I get bigger, they say dream smaller.

Do they fear disappointment? Failure?

Do they doubt how tall I can grow

because of the soil in which my feet were planted?

Or is it something else

gender-color-sexuality-family-ability-birthplace

alphabet soup of words and things and knotted lines

that make up who I am
but also who others think I am,
which isn't always the same thing
And that's why we need role models, people we can point at and say
but she did it
People who inspire us, not to dream smaller,
but to cast our aspirations out beyond the edges of the universe.
The sky's too small a limit.
Beth Ann Brown is that person for me.
Her childhood love of science fiction,
that imitator and instigator of fantasy and logic,
led to an undergraduate degree in astrophysics.
And still, she pushed farther,
becoming the first Black woman to receive an astronomy PhD from the University of Michigan.
When no trail presented itself, Brown blazed her own.
Or perhaps a ladder is a better metaphor,

climbing through glass ceilings and limitations
to reach the stars.
It is people like Brown,
strong, passionate, ambitious, and
completely unwilling to settle for less,
that remind me I need not hide in order to find success.
I need not search for smaller dreams, or safer pastures.
Although her career is incredible,
NASA and publication and teaching and research,
Brown's outreach inspires me the most.
She joined the American Society of Black Physicists
and used her position to motivate young Black dreamers
to reach for the stars.
She also spoke out for women in the sciences,
because every field needs voices from every mouth.
And so, as I blaze my own trail,
I endeavor to help those who come behind me
while being grateful for those who have come before.
I'm still dreaming of the stars,
and I hope to carry others with me to their light.