

## Sidney Lanier School student wins national Yes I Can Award

Ask Ja'Quan Price if he likes to draw, and you'll get an enormous smile and two very enthusiastic thumbs up.

Ja'Quan, a 10<sup>th</sup> grader at the Sidney Lanier School, has Autism Spectrum Disorder and significant difficulties with speech and language. But he has no problem communicating when he has a marker or pencil in his hand. Not only can Ja'Quan produce sophisticated drawings of dinosaurs, hyenas and other subjects at a moment's notice, but he'll also supplement his artwork with information about those subjects—everything from their scientific names to their habits.



Ja'Quan's exceptional talent recently earned him the 2023 Yes I Can Award for Art from the national Council for Exceptional Children (CEC). According to the CEC, the awards "celebrate the achievements of youth with exceptionalities encouraging these individuals to seek their highest potential and increase public awareness of the abilities, aspirations and personal qualities of those with disabilities."

Ja'Quan's teacher Grace Gaylard discovered his artistic ability the first day he came to Lanier in 2021. During a trip to the media center, students were directed to draw a picture of a unicorn, the school's mascot. Gaylard says she was moved to tears by the quality of his work.

"That picture is now laminated and hangs above my desk," she said. "It reminds me every day to look past what my students can't do and focus on what they can, and that everyone has something special to offer the world."

Gaylard and other Lanier staff who work with Ja'Quan, including speech/language pathologists Miki Castaldo and Margaret Cauthen, have found that he is caring presence in the classroom, with a big smile and a gentle demeanor. He's someone the other students in his class look up to—figuratively and literally, since Ja'Quan is 6'4" tall. He's also enthusiastic about sharing his artwork with others.



"He's has this love for people and wants to share what he enjoys with them," said Gaylard. "He uses his art as a way to interact, and it brings him a lot of joy and satisfaction that he can do that."

"I do think his art is his most natural way of communicating," said Castaldo. "I also know he's very capable of a lot of things we haven't seen yet."

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