

DGS grad wins national Afro-Academic music composition contest

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DOWNERS GROVE – Filmmaking, singing and musical performance – 2016 Downers Grove South High School graduate Gabrielle Henderson can do it all.

The incoming DePaul University freshman was nationally recognized for her musical compositions in July at the ACT-SO competition in Cincinnati, Ohio.

The annual competition, run by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, brings together high school students from across the country involved in their local ACT-SO – or Afro-Academic, Cultural, Technological and Scientific Olympics – chapters.

Students then compete in 26 different categories in humanities, science, business and art.

Henderson, who will be studying film and television with hopes of being a director in the fall, received the top-ranking gold medal in the musical composition section. She has competed in the competition since her sophomore year, going to nationals in musical performance and filmmaking in previous years.

Know more

To learn more about the NAACP's ACT-SO program, visit naacp.org/programs/entry/act-so and dupageact-so.org.

She recently spoke with Suburban Life reporter Nathan Lurz about her experience at the competition.

Lurz: What got you involved with the chapter and competition, and why have you stuck with it over the years?

Henderson: It's fun for me to be in an extracurricular activity that covers things that they don't have at school ... I have an outlet for that to make films, do music composition. It's an interesting experience, and I get to meet a lot of new people and it's a great networking opportunity.

Lurz: Can you walk me a bit through the lead-up to the competition?

Henderson: I wrote the piece last summer in 2015 ... It's a vocal jazz piece. I showed it to my music teacher at Downers Grove and she helped me out a bit with it. ... I tweaked it, added a few more instruments. This was in

January 2016. Then I taught it to my choir, the DGS Madrigal Singers, and they learned it and helped me record it for local competition.

Lurz: What's the experience of competing actually like?

Henderson: The day is pretty long – most people only do one category, but I did two. Filmmaking was an open competition, so people could come and watch. ... They showed everybody's film, then you had two or three minutes to present it after we watched it and answer questions and let the judges get more of a feel for it.

The music composition was a closed competition, so it was just me and the judges. They had all listened to all our songs beforehand, so we just went in there, they asked some questions and I gave my thoughts on the piece. That was the fastest part – most of the time was just waiting.

Lurz: Was it intimidating facing the judges like that?

Henderson: It was kind of scary, and I was nervous. ... Other categories aren't performance-based or are more presentation-based ... so I was looking at the other people, asking, "Am I as good as theirs was?" But the judges were all

very neutral, though the music competition judges were a little less neutral because they said they loved my piece ... but they all asked the same questions. It was nerve-wracking, watching everyone else go.

Lurz: What were you feeling when they told you that you had won? Especially after you had competed in last year?

Henderson: I was a little down at first because they announced the filmmaking first, which I didn't get a medal in, so I just said "Okay, I don't want to get my hopes up."

I was a kind of out of it – there were five different medals on our team, so I was really excited for them ... but I was very surprised. I didn't expect it at all.

Lurz: What have you gotten out of the experience of competing?

Henderson: It's been extremely meaningful for me. The ACT-SO is an NAACP program, so it's all black students, and with the current stuff going on in the country, it was really refreshing to see students my age who are smart and ready to fix the problems in the world and do all kinds of amazing things. It's honestly been one of the best experiences I've had.