

Portraits

By BOB SYLVA
Photography by KEVIN GERMAN



Maya Littlejohn, who has lived most of her life at the city housing project Phoenix Park, will enter Christian Brothers High School in the fall.

Poised for success

Maya is everyone's dream girl. So funny, so talented, so promising. At 14, she has brown eyes and pink braces. She loves to sing, dance, play basketball, run track, and listen to old school music.

She loves oatmeal - and boys.

At least, in theory, behind the storm cloud of her hovering father. "He's a tall man," she notes. "He does my hair in the morning. He does all the family stuff. And he keeps the boys away from me." She cries, in mock-exasperation, "I've got to breathe!"

Maya Littlejohn has lived most of her life at Phoenix Park, a city housing project on Franklin Boulevard which, in its previous life as notorious Caselli Circle, had long been a complex plagued by crime, drugs, gangs, despair, community neglect.

Not a great place to grow up. But somehow Maya survived here. Even flourished. Today, she's in the Girl Scouts. She tutors children. She helps in the computer lab. She is one of those kids who, radiating a sparkle, draws attention. As for herself, she has her eyes set on a place beyond the security gates.

Last year, Maya and some fellow seventh-graders took a field trip to Los Angeles. It might as well have been Paris. She visited UCLA, USC, the Getty Museum. She stayed in a hotel for the first time in her life. She had never been away from home before. "I was so scared," she says. "There were all these people. But after awhile, I didn't want to come back."

On June 15, Maya will be among the first graduating class at Seton Aureus College Preparatory, or S.A.C. Prep, which was started four years ago by

EVEN WITH THE ODDS AGAINST HER, MAYA LITTLEJOHN IS FLOURISHING

Alton Nelson. It's a charter school, located inside Genesis Missionary Baptist Church in Meadowview. "She just gets it," says Nelson of Maya. "She sees the opportunities in front of her. She doesn't allow her environment to define who she is."

This fall, Maya will attend Christian Brothers High School. The tuition at the private school is \$10,400 a year. The school has extended Maya's family substantial financial assistance. But Maya's father is a proud man. He vows to somehow earn money to help defray his daughter's expenses.

Right now, in what seems a noble if Herculean task, he's out recycling cans and bottles. But he's not the only person shouldering enormous weight. Maya, too, carries a burden of great expectations.

"We have watched her grow up into a brilliant young lady," says Jackie Rose, longtime director of residence services at Phoenix Park. "We're pretty proud of her. What it means is that it's possible for all kids at Phoenix Park to succeed. Maya is a role model of what someone can do if you believe in your self."

Now, on a late afternoon, the streets of Phoe-

nix Park swarming with kids, Maya and her siblings are lined up like the Von Trapps, heels clicking, to greet a visitor. There's Maya, at 5-foot-8, a giant; then Devon, 12; Key'ana, 11; and Clarence, 9, who is the cutest little boy imaginable.

Kishanna Sims, 32, is a tiny, wiry woman with large eyes and an animated manner. She works yard duty at Parkway Elementary School. She had Maya when she was 17. Then three more children by another man now deceased. "I went through things," says Kishanna of her life. "I had my ups and downs. But I never did any drugs or drinking. I want respect, to be treated honestly and fair. I want to be loved. That's what I want."

Enter Michael Sims, an answered prayer. Sims, 42, is a huge man with a vise-like grip. He has a gentle manner, a soft voice. "That's what everybody asks me!" he laughs, asked why he would take on such a teching brood. "I just had a connection as soon as I saw the kids. I just love kids. The kids love me."

Sims works as a laborer. Right now, he is slowly losing his vision. But he runs the household. He does the dishes, cleans, folds the laundry, fixes his daughters' hair. At Phoenix Park, he is the man, a solid, dependable community leader.

"She's so smart," he says of Maya. "She wants to learn everything. She asks so many questions. She does calculus now. It's hard for me to help her. But I will do whatever I can to help these kids succeed."

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