



Communities In Schools®

Kalamazoo

Graduate Spotlight

on JaVon Wilson

It's all about community for this graduate.

CIS is delighted to highlight one of the 2024 graduates, JaVon Wilson, who graduated this spring from Kalamazoo Central High School.

Walking across the graduation stage is no small task. It takes hard work, dedication, and drive to stay on track, overcome barriers, and reach that finish line. JaVon says, "I am proud that I finished high school. It proved that I could do it. There was a lot of struggling, especially after our COVID years. But I knew I could do it—and I did."

JaVon connected with the Communities In Schools of Kalamazoo (CIS) team in elementary school by joining the after-school program. He saw his peers having fun together and he wanted to join in the fun. "I liked the sense of community I received from the after-school program," says JaVon, "I remained in the program because it helped develop my people skills and provided additional opportunities for growth. When I think of CIS, I think of sharing and opportunities." Since middle school, JaVon continued to work with CIS coordinators and

believes that working together—with family, CIS coordinators, and friends—is how he made it to graduation.

"When I think of CIS, I think of sharing and opportunities." - JaVon

"I wasn't the only one going through this journey. We did it together," says JaVon.

Freshman and sophomore years for JaVon would not be considered a "traditional" high school experience. For JaVon, these years were learning behind a computer until he went back to in-person instruction as a junior at Kalamazoo Central. When he returned, he felt like a new kid in a strange school. Most students transitioned



JaVon is a 2024 graduate from Kalamazoo Central High School with a bright future. He is excited to start college at Michigan State University in the fall. With a passion for music, JaVon is tapping into his talents for a career path in music production and audio engineering.

back to in-person learning the year prior and many of his existing friends attended Loy Norrix High School, a high school across town. Not only were his grades slipping a little, due to remote learning, but he desired a sense of community at the school. JaVon says, "At first it was a lonely experience and really chaotic. But it got better, I made new friends, and connected."

JaVon does not shy away from the work required to fulfill his dreams. When asked how he defines success, JaVon says, "Success is two steps. One, when you are stable enough to provide for yourself and your family. Two, when you give back. This keeps you in a humble state of mind." In both the classroom and in our community, JaVon now thrives. He is in the National Honor Society, DECA, the Track Speed Club, African American Males group [African American male students at Kalamazoo Central High School who gather insight on how they can better the school and support themselves to reduce classroom failures, suspensions, and improve graduation rates], Link Crew, Kappa League, and volunteers in his church. In January, JaVon was nominated for and named the Education for the Arts (EFA) student of the month for his work and leadership in his Kalamazoo RESA class.

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From our executive director

The interesting thing about looking into the mirror is that you see the same thing every time...you. No matter how many years or how frequently... it's still you. Even with the changes that inevitably come with time, they are so incremental we often don't notice them. So, to get a true sense of change, the mirror isn't always the best tool. Instead, it's photos or videos – those snapshots in time, taken from a different vantage point outside of ourselves – that allow us to see how much we have changed.

You'll hear a version of that story during graduation ceremonies and celebrations across our community. Caregivers will pull out baby pictures and contrast them with how their adult "babies" now look. Students will scroll through phones and social media to reflect on how they looked and sounded at different stages of their Pre-K to 12th grade journeys.

As Communities In Schools of Kalamazoo (CIS) celebrates the 2024 graduates and wraps up a year of recognizing our 20th anniversary, we reflect on what we see in our "mirror". We see an organization that empowers students to stay in school and achieve in life. We see relationships between students and caring adults (CIS site coordinators). We see the food, clothing, school supplies and hygiene items we provide students. We see the volunteer tutoring services that we coordinate. We see the services that our partners collaboratively deliver to students at school – counseling, enrichment, life skills, wellness checks and dental visits. Again, the same things that we have seen in our mirror for 20 years.

But the snapshots in time mentioned before allow us to see how much we've changed over those years. Serving students in 8 schools to now serving in 22 schools. Mental health supports that were infrequent are now a core service. Pull out tutoring getting enhanced by push in tutoring and specialized tutor training. Increased depth of supports and site coordinator capacity in all our schools.

Community support for CIS has always been robust. But even that robustness has grown by leaps and bounds over the years. Thank you for adding yourself to and/or increasing your support each year. Because of you, even though CIS remains recognizable, we've changed so much for the better for the benefit of our students.

James Devers, Executive Director



Graduate Spotlight on JaVon Wilson

(continued)

CIS Site Coordinator at Kalamazoo Central High School, Shondresha Wrighten, says, "This is my first year supporting JaVon with CIS services and guiding him with his secondary plans. JaVon is very friendly and focused about his future. Whatever he puts his mind to, he is sure to accomplish it."

As a result of his hard work, JaVon graduated with his 2024 class, with a resumé full of achievements. Next year, he is aspiring to develop his skills in music, performance, and music production while attending Michigan State University. Music isn't JaVon's only passion. His experiences have given JaVon a deep appreciation for community and a desire to give back to community. "As a member of Kappa League, I have received so much insight into caring about those in my community. I want to focus on making a difference in the youth," says JaVon, "In 20 years, I see myself as a world changer by simply 'helping,' by giving back to the community."



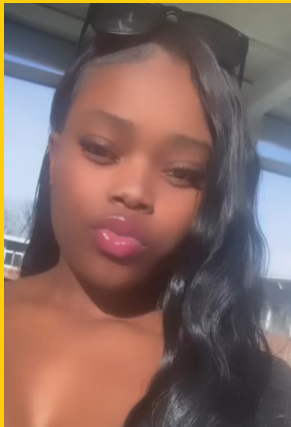
Senior Photo was provided by JaVon for sharing purposes.

Congratulations to the 2024 CIS Graduating Class!

We're working together
for student success.

Join us in celebrating the 2024
Communities In Schools of
Kalamazoo graduates! June is our
time to celebrate the students who
have set out to see their promise
fulfilled—to graduate and be
prepared for the next step on their
unique path.

Read more about these remarkable
individuals!



AaRika

Describe yourself in one word: *Outspoken.*

When I think of CIS, *I think of people whose jobs are dedicated to helping students.*

Where do you see yourself in 10 years? *In Texas working as a nurse.*

What advice would you give a freshman starting their first year in high school? *Stay focused because your friends aren't going to be able to walk the stage for you. Make time for your friends outside of class time.*

What has been the highlight of your senior year? *Homecoming pep rally.*



Clarise

Describe yourself in one word: *Respectful.*

When I think of CIS, *I think of the kids that need help and I also think about the nice caring people that are helping those kids.*

Where do you see yourself in 10 years? *I see myself with a nice family and in a nice house.*

What advice would you give a freshman starting their first year in high school? *Always do good starting freshman year because if you don't, it'll come back to you during your senior year.*

What has been the highlight of your senior year? *Getting to know all my teachers more and becoming closer with some of them.*



David

Describe yourself in one word: *Unstoppable.*

When I think of CIS, *I think of people that can and will support you to reach your goals.*

Where do you see yourself in 10 years? *Teaching in my own classroom and/or going for my master's degree.*

What advice would you give a freshman starting their first year in high school? *No matter how dark and scary the tunnel is, there will always be a light at the end of it.*

What has been the highlight of your senior year? *Being able to show up to school and see a smile on everyone's face.*



Murisa

Describe yourself in one word: *Hardworking.*

When I think of CIS, *I think of the ways they help all the students feel worth and that they belong in school and help students to be better in school.*

Where do you see yourself in 10 years? *A rich woman.*

What advice would you give a freshman starting their first year in high school? *Always keep your grades on a good track and never hesitate to ask for help when you need it.*



Rachel

Describe yourself in one word: *Tired.*

When I think of CIS, *I think of people who help.*

Where do you see yourself in 10 years? *Having a decent job and being happy with myself.*

What advice would you give a freshman starting their first year in high school? *Take it slow, it goes by fast.*

What has been the highlight of your senior year? *Marching Band.*



Ty

Describe yourself in one word: *Respectful.*

When I think of CIS, *I think "helpful and encouragement" because they help us with everything we need like clothing and other things like that. They also care about every one of us and push us to be our best selves.*

Where do you see yourself in 10 years? *Accomplishing my CNA education in nursing, married with a family, and living life.*

What advice would you give a freshman starting their first year in high school? *Be on top of your grades and attendance. They are the two most important things in your first year. Ninth grade isn't easy but try your best and you can push through it.*

What has been the highlight of your senior year? *Getting better at basketball and having a good year with my girls being their manager.*

Shawn

Describe yourself in one word: *Achieving.*

When I think of CIS, *I think of how helpful and caring they are for their students.*

Where do you see yourself in 10 years? *Somewhere living my dream life.*

What advice would you give a freshman starting their first year in high school? *Start off strong to finish strong. Don't fall behind and utilize your resources.*

What has been the highlight of your senior year? *Making the great comeback that I did to graduate from Kalamazoo Central High School.*

Mauwa Describe yourself in one word: *Loving.*
When I think of CIS, I think of helpers.

What advice would you give a freshman starting their first year in high school? *Do your best and do your work.*

Naomi Describe yourself in one word: *Beauty.*
When I think of CIS, I think of all the support they have and always welcome me with open arms. I don't feel judged or belittled.

Where do you see yourself in 10 years? *I plan on being a psychology teacher or a second grade teacher.*

What advice would you give a freshman starting their first year in high school? *Do not give up. Start off strong because it's hard to play catch up. If freshmen year goes wrong, you can show progress in the future. High school is a roller coaster and that's just the beginning. Get active around the school and join clubs.*

What has been the highlight of your senior year? *Winning homecoming and being the only and first girl to receive a cheerleading offer on decision day.*

Sienna Describe yourself in one word: *Talkative.*
Where do you see yourself in 10 years? Successful with my loved ones.

What advice would you give a freshman starting their first year in high school? *Work hard, do not procrastinate and stand on business.*

What has been the highlight of your senior year? *Meeting my bestie in Mr. Santilli's English class.*



Sharing Opportunities for New Experiences

If you're thinking, "JaVon looks familiar; where do I know him from?" The probable answer is that you saw JaVon onstage with Imani as a student presenter at our 2023 Champs Celebration. They were a joy to have onstage as representatives of the talent and potential CIS students possess. Currently, Imani is in her freshman year at Ferris State University and JaVon just completed his senior year at Kalamazoo Central High School (see article on page one for more on JaVon).

Our work at Communities In Schools of Kalamazoo (CIS), is to ensure access to the support and resources students need and deserve to stay in school, graduate, seek opportunity, and thrive in life. Those resources include providing basic essentials like clothing, tutoring, mental health therapy, college and career preparation, and so many more. JaVon has been connected with CIS throughout his school career. When JaVon thinks of CIS supports, "sharing" in its many forms comes to mind. One form of "sharing" for JaVon was the opportunity to experience and sharpen his skills through his involvement in last year's Champs Celebration.

"Champs really helped me develop my public speaking skills. I'm used to performing for friends and family. But participating at Champs was very different from what I was used to. It was out of my comfort zone and more improv. I enjoyed every last bit of it!"

To JaVon, "sharing" isn't only in the form of experiences, it also includes sharing a bit of yourself with others. JaVon says, "Sharing is mutual. I like to keep in mind that I'm not just talking to somebody to only receive, but also, what can I bring to the table so we can help each other."

Relationships, trust, partnerships, and experiences all help CIS build lasting bonds with students and their families. Students are at the center of what we do. No work is more urgent or important than ensuring that students have the opportunities they need to succeed.

During the 2023 Champs Celebration, JaVon and Imani participated in an interview with Artrella Cohn, CIS Senior Director of Community Engagement and Student Investment. You can view the video by scanning the QR code with your phone.





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Thank You!

Relationships are the heart of our work. Our site coordinators build lasting bonds with students and their families – connecting them to the right community resource and empowering them to use those supports to succeed in school and beyond. **Your trust and partnership make our work possible. For that, we can't thank you enough.**

CIS News and Updates

- The 2024 Champs Celebration was a wonderful evening of recognizing this year's awardees and celebrating the community of support surrounding students. The event hosted over 300 guests and raised over \$85,000. Thank you to our supporters for helping to make this year's event possible.
- Join us on Saturday, June 22nd at Arcadia Creek Festival Place for our 20th anniversary reunion picnic. All CIS of Kalamazoo friends and family are welcome! Visit our website for more information at <https://ciskalamazoo.org/events/20th-anniversary-reunion/>
- Walking With Purpose is just around the corner! Visit our website to learn more about walking with us this October at <https://ciskalamazoo.org/events/walking-with-purpose>

Sign up for our
e-newsletter



If you believe in our efforts to ensure that ALL kids stay in school and achieve in life, please visit: www.ciskalamazoo.org or call 269.337.1601 for more details on getting involved with CIS.

The work of Communities In Schools of Kalamazoo is supported by the Kalamazoo Public Schools, the City of Kalamazoo, the Michigan Department of Education (21st Century Community Learning Centers), local foundations, and donors like you.

Photos in this newsletter were taken by contributing CIS staff or provided by the featured CIS students, unless otherwise noted.