



April 21, 2026

To Whom it May Concern,

It is my great honor to write a recommendation for Marleigh McKay. I have had many wonderful students in my long teaching career but Marleigh stands out for so many reasons.

I first met Marleigh when she was a first grader. I was the Peace Teacher at Lafayette Elementary School for 20 years where I created the Peace of Mind curriculum which combines mindfulness, brain science, conflict resolution, kindness, gratitude and social justice. This program started at Lafayette and is now being used in schools throughout the DC area and across the country. I mention that here only because Marleigh is a big part of why the program has been so successful.

In first grade Marleigh was a quiet, well-behaved child who seemed to have a special something about her - a certain gravitas that was a bit surprising in someone so young. She wasn't precocious, she just seemed to be more serious than the other children. She was fun and funny but when she asked questions in my class they were always a little bit deeper, a little more thoughtful than her peers. She seemed shy but felt compelled to overcome that shyness to speak up when she was curious about something. Even from a very young age she had an intensity about learning that was remarkable.

At our school we had an annual auction to raise money for school programs and "Be the Peace Teacher for the Day" was one of the auction items. Marleigh was the winner when she was in second grade. I expected that like many of the winners that came before her she would want to sit quietly next to me while I taught my daily classes. But Marleigh really wanted to be the Peace Teacher. She came prepared with ideas, she led the mindfulness practices, read the books, and led the classes in every way. She had clearly been studying the way I taught the classes and copied my style but brought her own special touch to the day. I was thrilled and my students loved it. From that day on I knew that Marleigh was really something special. Her embrace of what I was trying to create with the Peace of Mind program meant a lot to me.

One day her grandmother told me that Marleigh was part of a pretty high-level dance troupe and that some of her "dance sisters" were very nervous about an important performance. She told me that before they went on stage Marleigh gathered the girls together and taught them one of the mindfulness practices that she had learned in my class called Four Square Breathing. She sent me a picture of the girls all gathered around Marleigh breathing slowly in and out in their dance costumes. Needless to say they went on stage and were amazing.

A few years later I had the idea to write a book about mindfulness for children. The picture of Marleigh teaching Four Square Breathing to her dance sisters popped into my mind and I decided that the book should be about children teaching other children about mindfulness. Marleigh was my muse. The book is called Marleigh is Mindful and in the book Marleigh and friends talk about challenges that they face and how different mindfulness practices can help them handle those challenges. A few years later we made a series of animated videos based on Marleigh is Mindful with Marleigh as the guide taking the viewer through all of the different mindfulness practices.

I had heard from preschool teachers who were using my curriculum and books that their children were obsessed with Marleigh and that I needed to write a book about Marleigh at their age. So last year I wrote a book for preschoolers about feelings called Marleigh's Big Feelings. I doubt I will ever stop being inspired by Marleigh.

I'll never forget the day that I went to visit a school that was teaching my Peace of Mind curriculum which includes the books about Marleigh. The plan was to give each student a signed copy of Marleigh is Mindful. I asked Marleigh to go with me as a surprise guest. Even though she was an extremely busy high school student she happily agreed to go with me. When Marleigh walked in the kids went crazy. It was like Beyonce had come to their school. They were so thrilled to meet the real Marleigh! She signed every book and talked with every child. She was patient, kind, poised and just wonderful in every way.

Marleigh has supported my non-profit, Peace of Mind, in so many ways over the years. She has spoken at every annual conference we've had since she was in 6th grade and her remarks are always the high point of every event. She has a way of talking about what she learned in Peace of Mind and why it's important that could convince anyone. Who wouldn't want their students to grow up to be like Marleigh? She is kind, intelligent, loyal, curious, deeply committed to peace and justice, funny, humble, creative, dedicated, hard-working, talented and peaceful. We are so lucky that she has been willing to continue to represent Peace of Mind to stakeholders because she embodies everything that we are trying to accomplish. Of course I can't take credit for the wonderfulness of Marleigh - her amazing family had a little something to do with that - but it fills me with so much pride to know that I played a little part in helping her on her way.

Marleigh is the kind of student teachers talk about in the staff room. That's not always a good thing but when we were talking about Marleigh we said things like "what do you think she'll do when she grows up?" "Is it too early to join her presidential campaign team?" "At what age do you think she'll achieve her EGOT (Emmy, Grammy, Oscar, Tony award)?" When she was in middle school she got a chance to meet Michelle Obama and have her picture taken. When that picture circulated we all were like - "You see? That's where she's heading!"

I get a lot of opportunities to showcase students and Marleigh is always the first one I ask. Whether she is giving a speech, speaking on a panel, leading a mindfulness practice, making off the cuff remarks, or teaching younger students she is always so authentic and her special combination of confidence and humility is always so effective and disarming. People can't get enough of Marleigh.

And none of what I've said even touches on her creative passions of dance and photography. She is incredibly talented in these and so many other areas and in most young people that might become their whole personality. But with Marleigh that isn't the case. She wears it all so lightly even though she works so hard. She is like a Renaissance teen - someone who has many interests and talents and somehow manages to make her mark in so many different aspects of her life.

You might read about this elsewhere in her application but one day with Marleigh really stands out for me. I was working with a group of students to write to the Mayor and City Council to advocate for changing the name of our local park. We had been learning about the history of the way land in our neighborhood had been taken from Black farmers in the early 1900s to build a school and park for white families. We wanted to change the name of the park to reflect that history. Marleigh wrote a very persuasive letter and so I chose her as one of two students to testify in person in front of the city council. She did a great job and the bill was passed. A few months later at the dedication ceremony a very large crowd was gathered including the Mayor and many of the descendants of those original Black farmers. I was scheduled to be one of the speakers but at the last minute I (gently) pushed Marleigh in front of the microphone and asked her to speak. She gave an off the cuff speech that left everyone in tears talking about how the name change made her feel as a Black student in a mostly white community. I doubt that any of the adult, professional speakers present that day could have managed anything like what Marleigh accomplished just by being herself. I'll never forget the way her younger brother and all of the children in attendance that day watched and listened to Marleigh. Her influence on others, just by being her authentic self, is significant and left an impression on them that I'm sure changed them for the better.

This is much too long but there is so much to say! It is one of the great joys of teaching that if you are lucky you get to watch your students grow up. I got to teach Marleigh every year from 1st grade to 5th grade. And because of her involvement in Peace of Mind we have stayed in close touch. Marleigh has grown into a wonderful young woman which doesn't surprise me one bit. She has overcome challenges and always seems to manage to land on her feet. I cannot wait to see what comes next for Marleigh. I know for certain that whatever she decides to do she will make a positive impact. She's been doing it since she was a little girl. She has made a huge difference in my life and I am so proud to now be able to call this remarkable young woman my friend.

Sincerely,

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