

Urbana Arts and Culture Program

2021 - 2022 Poet Laureate - Ashanti Files



Ashanti Files was born in Chicago, Illinois, and moved to Urbana in 2004, where she lives with her husband, Ryan, and three daughters, Camille, Kayla, and Cadence. Files works as a registered nurse at Rosecrance in Champaign, where she works in mental health and addiction services. She has published her poetry and fiction writing in journals including, most recently, the Northern New England Review and their FRONT/LINES: Poetry of Nursing and Pandemic Perspectives. In 2019, she published her own collection of poetry, *Woven: Perspectives of a Black Woman*. She is the Founder of Writers of Oya, a writer's program for middle school girls of color in Urbana School District #116 exploring intersections of poetry, spoken word, mental health, social issues, and resilience. Through her mentorship, Writers of Oya participants have performed on CiLiving.tv, Poets in the Park, Pygmalion Poetry Marathon, A March for Nonviolence, and most recently, Station Theater's #ENOUGH: Plays to End Gun Violence. The girls have also appeared in Luminous magazine, Art Now! mini-documentary series, Talks with Tari on 104.5 Radio Free Urbana, and the Urbana-Champaign Independent Media Center's Sounds Like Community. Participants in Writers of Oya are publishing their first collection of poetry, *Unmasked* (forthcoming 2021).

"The jury was drawn to Ashanti Files' dynamic proposal and her documented history of developing writing programs with youth and marginalized groups in the community," said Arts and Culture Coordinator, Rachel Storm, "The fact that her efforts have grown during this global pandemic in which she is also working as a registered nurse makes her all the more remarkable."

Poet Laureate, Ashanti File's Initiatives

- Teen Writer's Retreat
- Black Herstory Slam

- Poet Laureate's Showcase
- Writers of Oya
- ... as well as over 50 guest performances and educational workshops throughout the community.