

## KOURTNEY BURNS SCHOLARSHIP FINALIST



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**is a junior at Shaker Heights High School. She is an honor roll student who loves to sing and dance. Kourtney would like to become a high school choir teacher. She hasn't chosen a college yet, but is interested in Ohio University or Miami of Ohio.**

I stepped in to find myself nearly strangled in a tight, shiny mess. “Mom, the dress doesn’t fit!” I yelled out of the dressing room of one of the several stores I wandered into that day in hopes of finding my first homecoming dress. “Honey, maybe you should look in the women’s section.” My heart sank, and the tears came flooding down my face as I plopped down on the bench beside me. “I’m only fifteen, I belong in the juniors’ section,” I wept, for I’d been on a desperate search for a dress since one o’clock, and the mall was now near closing. As I trudged to the car that afternoon, I thought to myself, “I’m fat, I just shouldn’t shop anymore, forget about homecoming.”

Most of my school career I had been ridiculed for my size, and although I wasn’t much bigger than the other kids, someone always found reason for me to believe that I was huge in comparison to everyone else. As I got older, I did in fact get larger, growing more and more uncomfortable with myself. In the summer, my swimsuit would bunch in unflattering places, making me feel extremely self-conscious, my shorts were a little tighter than they should’ve been because of my legs being slightly larger than those of the other girls my age and I just felt like the elephant in the room wherever I went, no pun intended. Once I realized that I couldn’t even shop in the same clothing section in stores as my peers did, I felt even more horrible. I got more tired than everyone else in gym because of my size, and was often made the subject of many snickers and jokes, picked last on teams, and labeled as the one nobody wanted to play with because I couldn’t keep up, making me feel even more isolated.

One day in my freshman year, I found a program of multicultural girls who were dedicated to uplifting young women like myself, called the MAC sisters (Minority Achievement Committee). Some of the upperclassmen learned about me, and taught me that not only was I beautiful, but smart too, and that I had a bright future ahead of me, regardless of my size. When I became a sophomore, I was chosen to assist in leading this same group of underclass girls and mentor them, bond with them and help them throughout their academic careers, just like the program once did for me, helping them find their way in life through advice from our own experiences. Girls now look up to me, and I feel inspired and rewarded to continue mentoring and helping them to find confidence academically and with a positive self image. With these lessons instilled in them, they will teach others for generations to come about diversity and acceptance as I did, learning to “pick my battles” as my mother always told me.