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Local Education

A D.C. school's first graduation is a mix of excitement and mourning

Jakhi Snider was fatally shot in November 2022 while walking to a football game. He was one of four Digital Pioneers students killed that school year.

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Digital Pioneers Academy seniors cheer on their peers as they each walk the stage to receive their diploma at Howard University's Cramton Auditorium on June 14. (Marvin Joseph/The Washington Post)

By Lauren Lumpkin

The auditorium chairs were filling up. Mothers and fathers, uncles and cousins anxiously waited.

It was graduation day — the first of Digital Pioneers Academy’s seven-year history. From humble beginnings at a church in D.C. to two campuses and more than 680 students, the moment the senior class had been working toward was finally here.

Sixty-six graduates, in emerald and gold caps and gowns, walked proudly into the room. They took selfies and posed for videos, soaking up the applause around them.

But there should have been 67.

Jakhi Snider, who would have been a senior last school year, was fatally shot in 2022 while walking to a football game over Thanksgiving break. He was one of four Digital Pioneers students killed that school year.

Their deaths are part of a trend in a city that continues to be racked by gun violence: These are the kids who will never go to prom, never apply to college, never graduate.

For those they leave behind, the grief is daily.

Jakhi played football for a local youth league and was waiting for the day his Southeast Washington high school would start a team of its own. He had dreams of going to college, where he would keep playing ball, his friends said.

He arrived at Digital Pioneers as a sixth-grader in 2018. The charter school had just opened its doors to 120 students, with a goal of offering Black children from low-income communities the type of high-level computer science classes typically found in schools in wealthier neighborhoods. But just as Jakhi and his classmates were getting used to their new school, the pandemic hit and scattered them to their bedrooms across town.

They returned to the classroom in 2021 as ninth-graders.

A year later, Jakhi was killed.

November: The comeback year

The metal stands were packed with fans dressed in every emerald and gold item of clothing imaginable. Built from the ground up in 2023, the Digital Pioneers Academy football team had won every one of its 11 games in fall 2024 and made it to the playoffs.



Digital Pioneers cheer squad members support the football team during its playoff game in November. (Graeme Sloan/For The Washington Post)

Devon Jones, a 12th-grader, hadn't even planned to play. Last summer, as the team started practices, he was working full time as a lifeguard. He needed the paycheck.

His school principal, Mashea Ashton, had other plans. For the 51-year-old school founder, football is more than an extracurricular activity — it's a matter of life or death. She arranged for Uber vouchers and post-practice dinners for every player who needed them.

"We have to do something," Ashton remembers thinking after the school lost two students — 14-year-old Antoine Manning and Jakhi, 15. Then, English teacher Keenan Anderson, who had grown up playing football, died after being restrained and Tasered by police in Los Angeles. "We know our kids, and our community need sports."

Ashton got to work: She found a practice field, bought uniforms and hired a coach. By fall 2023, she had her team.



Devon Jones walks off the field after the team's playoff game against St. Albans. (Graeme Sloan/For The Washington Post)

They won only a single game that season. Last school year, however, the team finally jelled.

During the playoff game, Devon was on the field with his “brothers,” their teenage bodies clashing and contorting on the turf. Fans shouted from the bleachers, and rap music blared from a speaker. On the sidelines, cheerleaders stomped on the pavement.

Seniors DeShaunte’ Goldsmith and Tra’Nyah Ransford led the squad. Two years ago, they’d worn school-branded T-shirts and green shorts. By the playoffs, they had matching track suits.

“Even though we didn’t have proper uniforms and stuff, we still pushed through,” said DeShaunte’, who dreamed of going to Spelman College and becoming an OB/GYN. “We knew our time would come if we stayed around.”

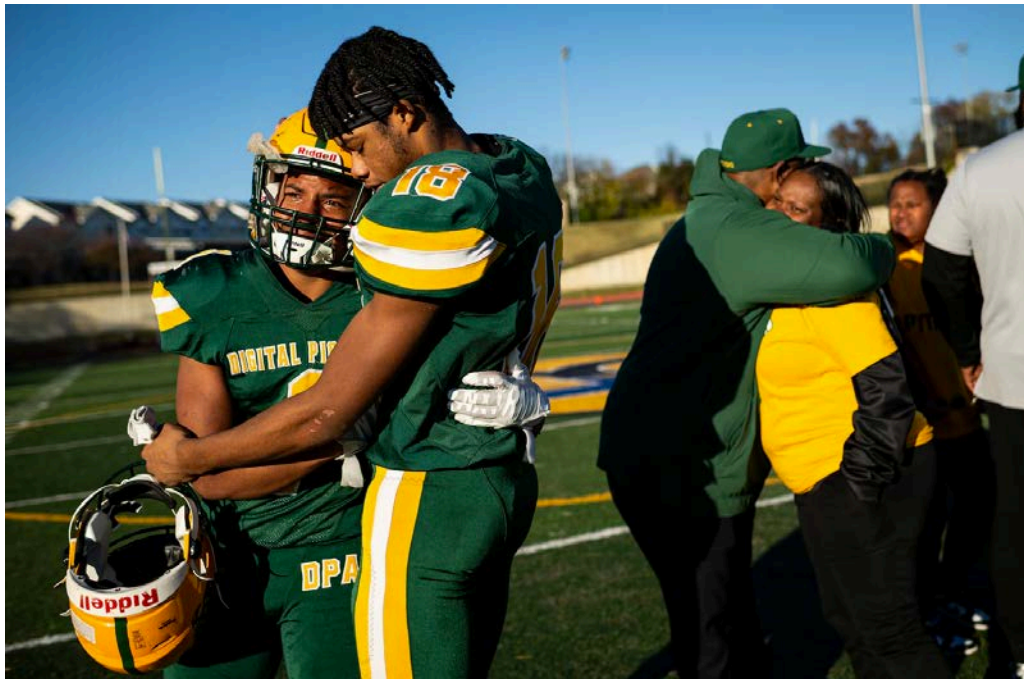
The boys scored two touchdowns, but it wasn’t enough to preserve their winning streak. The Pythons lost, 12-20. The season was over.

Coach Rob Harris called the team into a huddle on the field as the boys wiped tears from their eyes.

For Devon, the loss was deeper than what the scoreboard showed. Jakhi and DeMarcos Pinckney — another classmate gunned down, on Father’s Day in 2023 — were supposed to have been in the game with him.

Jaylin Osborne, 15, another student who had hoped to join the Digital Pioneers football team, was shot outside the apartment he shared with his family, just nine days after DeMarcos.

“When they passed, this all they wanted,” Devon said, choking back tears. “They wanted to play for a football team. They couldn’t wait for us to get a football team.”



Pythons players King Williams, left, and Devon Jones embrace after their playoff loss. (Graeme Sloan/For The Washington Post)

April: Weighing what’s next

The cafeteria was thrumming with the voices of students and their parents. Students piled their plates with free food.

Ashton had required every senior to secure at least two college acceptances to graduate. But many of them still had not filled out crucial financial aid forms. So she and her staff got balloons, dressed the cafeteria tables with green coverings and invited

every family to an event they dubbed FAFSA Night.

For three-quarters of the senior class, they'll be the first in their families to attend college. On FAFSA Night, they weighed their options. The school that offered the biggest scholarship package, or the one that's in their dream city?

Ashton, wearing a dark green blazer, spoke into a microphone at the front of the room. "You pushed through the heartbreak, the doubt. The system's not built for you," she said. "And now you are standing on the edge of something incredible. And, yet, some of you might be asking: 'Am I ready?'"

Ciara Wynn was *almost* ready. She hadn't settled on a college yet.

Dubbed a "Million Dollar Scholar," Ciara had racked up more than \$1.1 million in scholarship offers. She kept her long list of acceptances saved in a spreadsheet.

Jakhi was one of Ciara's best friends, her mother said. The two would hang out at a friend's house, watch movies and share dinners. They were constantly laughing — at other people, at each other, at themselves.



Jakhi Snider played in a local youth football league before his death in 2022. (Ashley Snider)

“We’d just laugh at anything,” Ciara said. “Somebody would say something dumb, and we’d just laugh.”

Sometimes, she’d write to him in the Notes app on her phone: *I miss you. I wish you were here.*

Beyoncé Griffin had known Jakhi since elementary school. She was excited about the prospect of studying psychology and living somewhere outside D.C.

“I made it, but without my friend,” she said after FAFSA Night ended. “It makes me kind of feel resentful.”

Her dad, Bayete Griffin, chimed in. “They call that survivor’s remorse.”



Digital Pioneers Academy founder Mashea Ashton arrives with seniors on College Decision Day. (Graeme Sloan/For The Washington Post)

May: Big decisions

Ashley Snider, Jakhi's mom, was looking forward to celebrating the senior class. Her son wouldn't be there, but his friends would. The boys and girls Jakhi had known since elementary school were now young men and women. They still kept in touch with her.

They had gone to prom, committed to colleges and traveled to Disney World for their senior trip. Other than graduation, the only thing left was College Decision Day, when each student announced where they'd go in the fall.

Ashton asked Snider, who works for the D.C. Lottery, if she wanted to come to the event. "Of course," Snider said.

"I was thinking, 'I want to see the kids,'" she said. "It's a big day for them."

Jakhi was one of 44 kids who had been at Digital Pioneers since the beginning, when it operated out of the unused wing of a church. Ashton recruited students, including Jakhi, from nearby Stanton Elementary School with promises of rigorous coursework and high expectations.

"We did a tour of the school. They had good computer science," Snider said. So she enrolled Jakhi and, later, her 11-year-old. Her other two children will start in middle school. Since the beginning, the school has felt like a family.

She sat near the front of the middle school gym. In front of her, 66 seniors buzzed. Alfred Mason III, the school's director of operations, kicked things off.

"Before we perform this celebration, we pause to honor and remember someone who should be standing proudly with the Class of 2025: Jakhi Snider," he said. "He was thoughtful, he was funny, he had big dreams."

He invited Jakhi's family to accept a green and gold cap, gown and stole. Snider held the garments in her arms.

She watched as a projector showed portraits of Jakhi's friends, along with the number of colleges that accepted them, how many scholarship dollars they had secured and where they were headed in the fall.

Ciara had settled on Widener University in Chester, Pennsylvania. DeShaunte' waved a handmade blue and white poster as it was announced that she was headed to Spelman College in Atlanta.

Tyquel Gafford, Jakhi's cousin and the class salutatorian, was going to Tuskegee University in Alabama to become a veterinarian — although he later decided he would attend the University of the District of Columbia to save money, with the goal of transferring to Tuskegee after two years.



Salutatorian Tyquel Gafford arrives during a ceremony on College Decision Day. (Graeme Sloan/For The Washington Post)



DeShaunte' Goldsmith celebrates her acceptance into Spelman College in Atlanta. (Graeme Sloan/For The Washington Post)

Devon, who'd been accepted to five colleges, would continue lifeguarding. He'll try to get surgery on his wrist, then think about reapplying afterward and playing football. He's considering a career in real estate and becoming a firefighter EMT because he likes to help people.

He hung back after the ceremony, thinking about Jakhi. He'd known him since he was in preschool.

It had been a difficult day for Snider, too.

"I was sad," she said later, thinking about her son. He could brighten any room with his smile and rarely got upset.

When she got home, she hung the cap and gown in her closet. She plans to preserve it in a frame.



Mashea Ashton takes a group photo with Digital Pioneers Academy's first graduating class. (Marvin Joseph/The Washington Post)

June: The last lap

The basement of Howard University's Cramton Auditorium was a scene of happy chaos. In one corner, boys took pictures. Nearby, girls recorded themselves performing TikTok dances. A father embraced his football player son, who had been crying.

"I finally made it," the teen said later. But the pride he felt was tinged with sadness. "I've been with these kids for 12 straight years. I'm hurt to see them leave."

It was graduation day — the last time this group of students would all be classmates. It would be the last time they'd be in a place where everyone knew Jakhi.

Ciara showed off a new set of nails. DeShaunte' decorated her cap with photos she had taken with her cousins, friends and sisters. Tyquel quietly mouthed the words of the speech he'd deliver.

A long table was scattered with the detritus of a morning spent getting ready: half a bottle of blue Gatorade, an unopened package of poundcake, a jar of edge-control gel. Devon was in great spirits. He had bought a new outfit and woke up at 4 a.m. to get his hair styled into neat twists. He hyped himself up with rap music as he got ready. At Howard, he donned Louis Vuitton sunglasses.

“I’m feeling good,” he said, his smile wide.



Chelsea Allen, director of curriculum and instruction, takes a selfie with Devon Jones, left, and Ciara Wynn. (Marvin Joseph/The Washington Post)

Upstairs, families thumbed through the graduation program. On Page 4, Jakhi smiled in a white polo. It was a picture similar to the one Ashley Snider has tattooed on her right shoulder, along with the number Jakhi wore when he played football: 8.

“While he is no longer here, his memory continues to inspire us,” a short paragraph said. As the graduates filed in, they left one chair empty.

Ashton spoke about the school’s humble beginnings and hopes for the future. Students accepted awards for showing commitment and empathy. Then Tyquel began his

speech.

“No matter what anyone says, always make sure that you know in your heart that you matter,” he said. His voice cracked and tears welled in his eyes. “People used to down-talk DPA. The down-talk was everywhere. It got so bad that we even started to down-talk ourselves. But look at us now. We are here. This is our time; we’re shining.” It was time for the diplomas. Mason, the school’s director of operations, called each graduate to the stage. The audience cheered after every name.

Then he paused.

He waited for the crowd to quiet down.



Ashley Snider holds a canvas with an artist's depiction of her late son, Jakhi. (Marvin Joseph/The Washington Post)

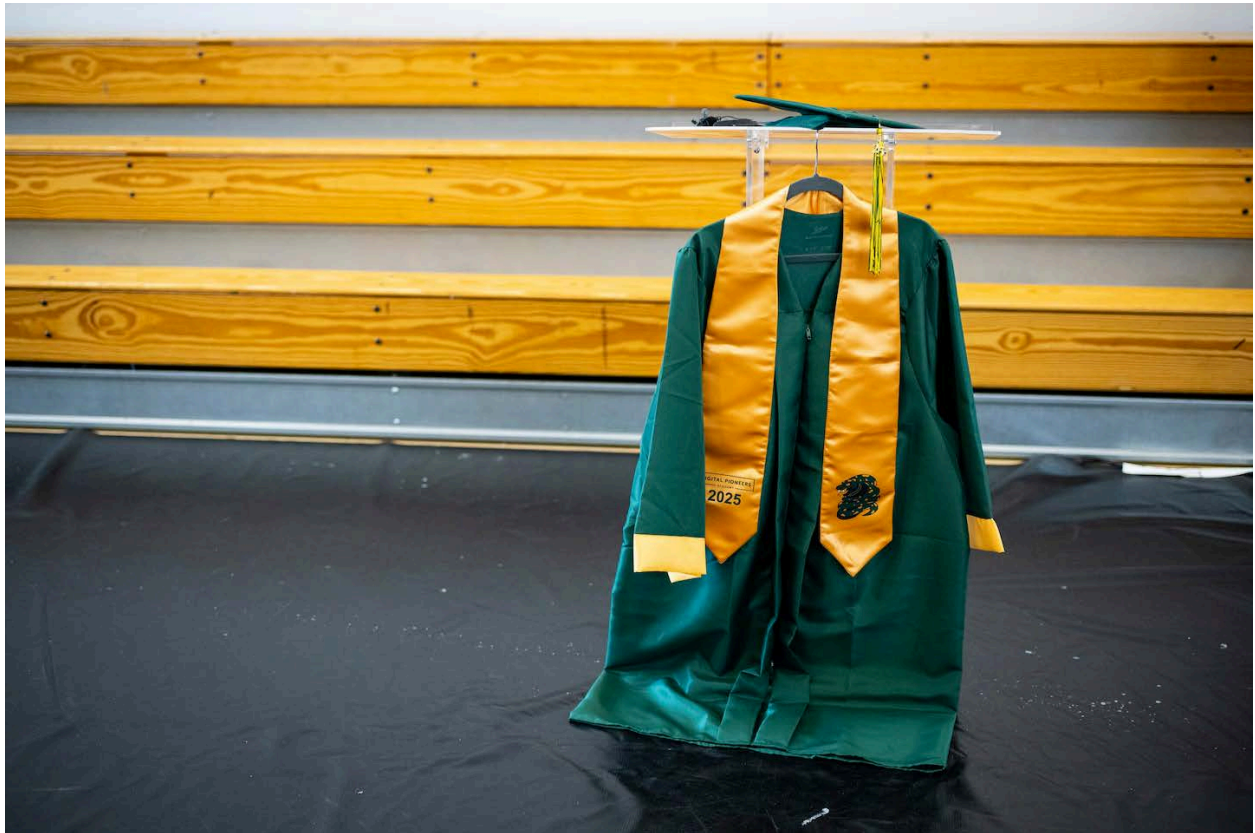
“I would now like to invite to the stage,” he said, “the family of Jakhi Snider.” The auditorium exploded with cheers, applause and tears.

Jakhi’s grandmother danced in a circle. Snider, her sister and 11-year-old son climbed the steps to accept Jakhi’s diploma. Snider waved a painting of Jakhi and fell into Ashton’s arms.

“I cried the whole time,” she said after the ceremony.

But onstage, for those 60 seconds, her sorrow faded. In its place was joy.

“Once I got up there, in my head I knew Jakhi would have been excited. Maybe he was right there with me in that moment.”



A cap and gown was given to Ashley Snider, the mother of Jakhi Snider. (Graeme Sloan/For The Washington Post)