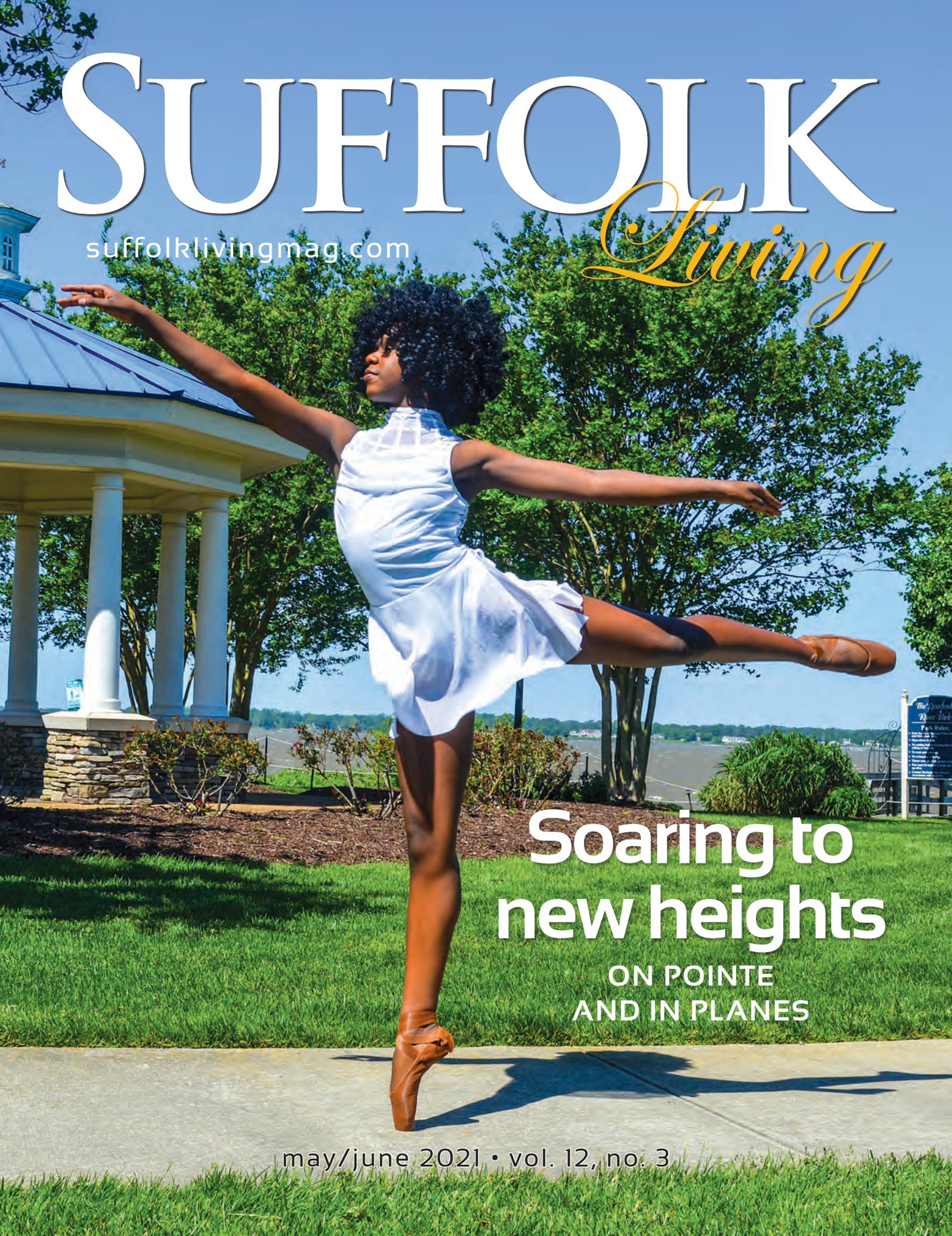


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Motivated by advocacy

Outstanding Teen titleholder treasures platform pageants give her

Story by Tracy Agnew
Photos by Jen Jaqua

Television shows about pageants often portray them and their participants as bastions of superficiality, but for one local teen — Miss Piedmont Region Outstanding Teen, to be precise — nothing could be further from the truth.

Ayana Johnson hopes to upgrade her title this summer and become Miss Virginia Outstanding Teen — but even more than that, she hopes simply to be able to spread her message of advocacy to people who have not yet heard.

Her cause? Ayana, 14, has sickle cell disease, and she wants to bring attention to the cause of young people with sickle cell and other blood disorders and chronic illnesses.

“I really started pageantry because of what I wanted

to spread awareness for,” she said. “I wanted to have a platform where even if I go to a pageant and I don’t necessarily win, just having the open floor to talk about causes that are important to me — I love just being able to have that platform to try to create a safer space for those types of people that might not fit the mold of ‘normalcy.’”

Ayana, who has been dancing since the age of 3, does a dance for her talent during pageants. She most recently danced to “Diamonds are a Girl’s Best Friend” but is working on a new routine for her upcoming pageant.

While she enjoys the dance, her favorite part of pageantry is the interview portion, she said.

“I like to talk about why I’m competing and why

See AYANA page 25

Ayana Johnson shows off two of her many talents at once — violin and dance. She is 14 years old and has been dancing since she was 3.



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I want to win the title," she said. "I always remember that's my motive and why I really started."

The rising Nansemond River High School sophomore said she also enjoys showing that young women, and pageantry, can be about more than just outer beauty — although she stuns in a flowing yellow gown in the evening gown portions of competitions. It's also about intelligence, passion for a cause, and being mentally strong, she said.

"I want to show that to the judges," she said. "I'm showing them that I have something that I'm passionate about and I want to share with other people."

When she is old enough, Ayana hopes to compete for the title of Miss Virginia and then Miss America.

"Miss America is one of the largest scholarship competitions in the entire world," Ayana said. "Even our own Miss America, Camille Schrier, has over \$70,000 in scholarships."

When she's not doing pageantry, Ayana can often be found practicing her dance or violin or doing advocacy in the sickle cell community. She is a champion for Children's Miracle Network Hospitals.

She also spends time on social media building a safe community.

"I've been using my social media in the best

way I can to create a community of people that feel safe talking about maybe a chronic illness or that they had a bad day or something," she said. "People message me or comment on my stuff and tell me that whatever I posted really helps them, so that is another defining factor for me for why I do what I do and spread awareness for what I'm spreading awareness for."

Ayana can be found on Instagram at [_Ayana_Lee_](#) or on Facebook by searching Ayana Johnson.

Ayana is fundraising for her appearance in June in the Miss Virginia Outstanding Teen Pageant. Visit [spot.fund/cz7FAa](#).

