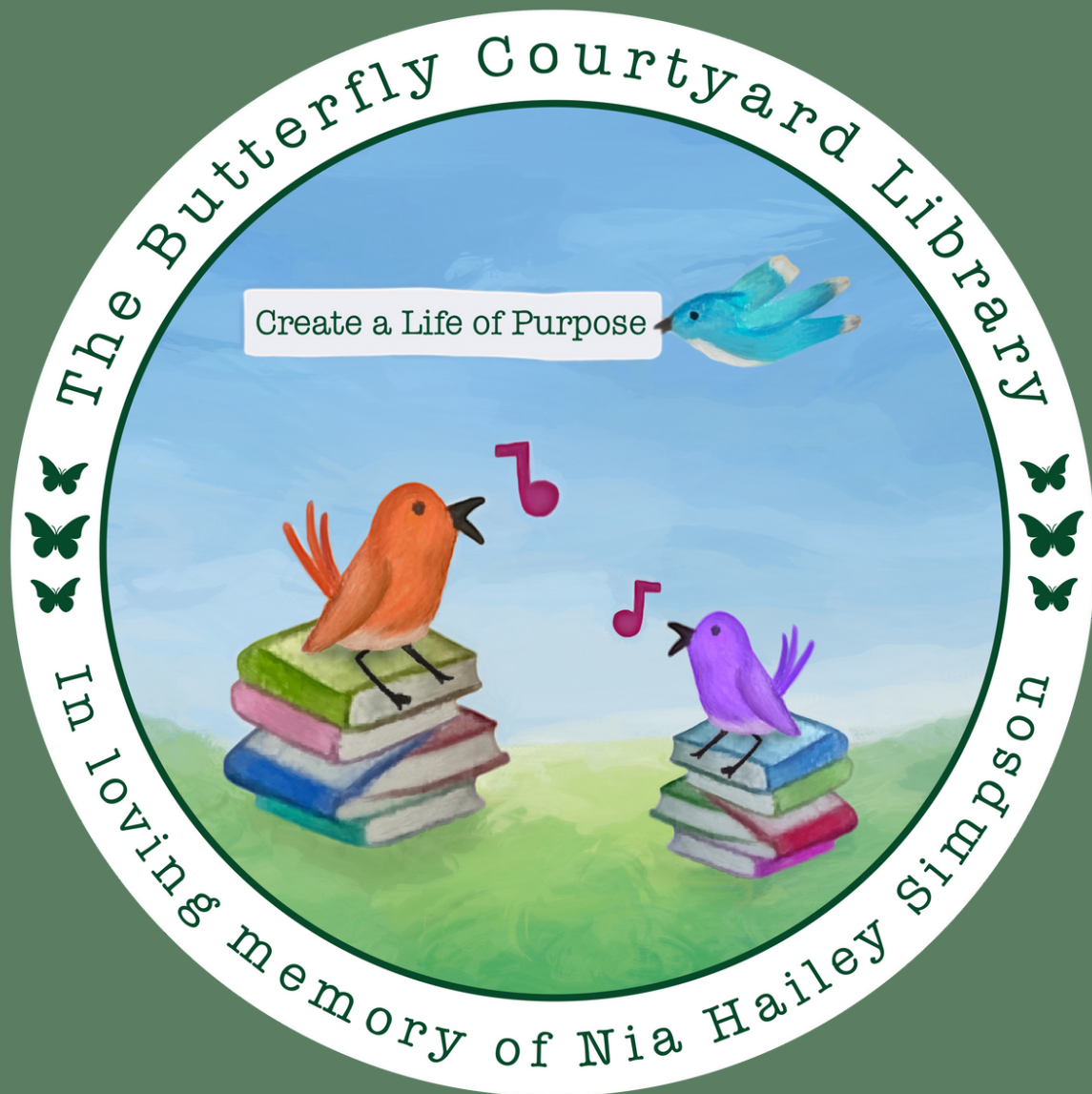


Honoring the Life and Legacy of Nia Hailey Simpson



RHS to Unveil a Memorial Garden

Spreading Nia's message of
"Creating a Life of Purpose"

BY CASEY O'BRIEN

In partnership with the Nia Hailey Simpson Foundation, Ridgefield High School is unveiling a memorial garden made to honor Nia and her legacy this Thursday, September 28th, 2023.

Nia Simpson, a Junior at RHS, was taken to Danbury Hospital on September 11th, 2022, before being transferred to Yale New Haven Hospital on September 12. Nia would end up spending twenty five days in the Pediatric Intensive Care unit at Yale, fighting an undiagnosed condition, before passing away on October 6th, 2022.

The loss of Nia Simpson devastated the entire Ridgefield community. Nia was known to all as a constant source of positivity, warmth and love.

A member of student government, the Ridgefield Girls Lacrosse team and the Ridgefield Girls Hockey team, Nia was an ever present source of light for the community. Best known for her contagious laugh, Nia always knew how to make those around her feel seen and supported.

“Nia will be remembered for her creativity, empathy, and motivated spirit,” says Nia’s mother Safiya Simpson. “Throughout her life, Nia made a friend everywhere she went,

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which is an example of her kind spirit.”

Nia in Swahili means purpose, which was something Nia strived to create every day. Nia kept a gratitude journal and was very intentional with how she lived her life. Nia had big dreams such as attending UCLA, however she also knew the importance of being present in the moment and appreciating the life that you have.

Nia made a lasting impact on so many people in our community as she exemplified how to live with gratitude, optimism and intention.

Family, friends and peers of Nia felt strongly about doing whatever they could to help honor her legacy.

Therefore, the 2024 Student Government Council and the 2023 Executive Board at RHS partnered with Nia’s foundation in order to create a memorial that will help spread her message and outlook on life.

Members of student government met many times with Mrs.Simpson, Dr. Greenwood and Tauna Idone, an executive board member of Nia's foundation, to discuss how they wanted to honor Nia. After various meetings, it was decided that a garden would be built outside the student center in memorial of Nia.

“Nia was such a light in my life and in so many others, and a garden is certainly a beautiful representation of the light she shined,” says Mika Bernard (‘24), one of Nia’s closest friends.

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With general designs and plans thought out, students worked with Ms. DeJulio and RHS Principal Dr.Greenwood to make sure their ideas could actually be implemented.

“We met routinely over a number of months to design our plans and adhere to the Board of Education policy for memorials and dedications.

We envision a space where you can both hang out with friends and also enjoy some quiet time when needed.”

Our hope is that the garden is a place for both quiet reflection and student collaboration. We envision a space where you can both hang out with friends and also enjoy some quiet time when needed,” says Dr. Greenwood.

When student government presented their ideas to the Board of Education they gained unanimous approval for the memorial and its construction. With the official go ahead, student government began to fine tune the details of the garden to create the space they envisioned.

“Once we got approval, we were really able to go all out and plan everything out. We came up with deadlines and times where we were going to start cleaning up the space. We also started buying any of the needed materials,” says ‘24 Class President Abby Seal.



The garden is composed of many different parts, all aimed at honoring Nia in different ways while also creating a space that could be used by everyone. The first aspect of the garden that was created was a mural to represent Nia’s message of creating “a life of purpose.”

“The mural was something that we had been planning as soon as we decided to renovate the garden. It was the first thing that the council decided to do, and we did many drafts and revisions. We wanted everything to be very intentional from the colors, to the style of art and flowers. We also knew that we wanted to include Nia's message, so when I sketched the design initially I started

with that message in mind and worked around it,” says ‘24 Class Vice President Chloe McKinstry.

McKinstry, along with Donally Rodgers (‘24) and Lexi Bariola (‘24), took the lead on the mural's creation. They used vibrant colors, especially tones of purple, which was one of Nia’s favorite colors. The mural was meant to be bright, lively and the most eye-catching aspect of the memorial, as it encompasses the main message of Nia’s life.

“We wanted everything to be very intentional from the colors, to the style of art and flowers”

Directly underneath the mural lie hundreds of kindness rocks painted by students at RHS. Students signed up for FLEX sessions to paint rocks as a way to honor Nia in their own way. The rocks represent how immense Nia's impact was on the community, as a sign of how many lives she touched.



Kindness rocks that have been painted taken by Mika Bernard ('24)



Students painting kindness rocks taken by Caroline Trinkaus ('24)

In addition to the mural, there are three mosaic butterflies featured on each side of the painting. Butterflies were one of Nia's favorite creatures and they are also symbols of loved ones passed on. Butterflies are pictured throughout the garden from the mosaic, additional painted butterflies on the wall to butterfly stickers placed on the student center windows.





One special aspect of the reading nook is a sticker that will be placed in each book. The sticker encompasses a drawing from Nia that she created in a reading class at RHS. Charli Macklemore ('24) took that design and using Procreate and Adobe Illustrator digitized it so it could be made into a sticker as another small way to honor Nia and her memory.



Digital Sticker created by Charli Macklemore that will be featured on reading nook books

“I can't express how meaningful it is to create a sticker that will be featured in the garden library, one that will honor and carry forward Nia's legacy of ‘Creating a Life of Purpose,’ ” says Macklemore.

“I approached this design with great care, aiming to stay as true as possible to Nia's original drawings. I wanted to honor Nia by depicting a sunny, blue-skied day. I had the privilege of sharing a few classes with Nia, and she always radiated kindness and vibrancy. The result is a sticker that I hope captures the essence of the life she lived and the optimistic person she was.”

The theme of the entire garden is the creation of a space that is full of comfort, life and vibrancy. This was seen best in the garden itself, filled with colorful flowers and pollinator plants of all kinds which will attract butterflies and bees. The beauty of the garden will also serve as a daily reminder of Nia's spirit.

The final aspect of the garden is a series of picnic tables and adirondack chairs. Students wanted to make sure that the garden could be utilized as a place for socializing and gathering. With many places to sit, students can come to the garden to enjoy some peace and quiet or have fun with friends.



The garden's creation has been a culmination of months of hard work by both students and staff at RHS. Hundreds of people have gotten involved to help make the memorial a reality. The ability of the Ridgefield community to come together to support a larger purpose has been nothing short of extraordinary.

“I get so emotional because it makes me so happy to know that everyone sees the value in creating such an amazing space to honor Nia. I'm overwhelmed by the beauty of the community coming together,” says Ms. DeJulio, the Student Government Advisor.

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Similarly, Mrs. Simpson explains, “I am continuously in awe of the kindness of everyone throughout Ridgefield. I am honored to have been blessed to raise a daughter who left an impact on those who knew her.”

The garden will be officially unveiled on Thursday, however students and staff hope it will be used and maintained for years to come.



Picture of students helping plant flowers in the garden by Caroline Trinkaus ('24)

Currently, the plan is for the rising Senior class to assume responsibility for the garden each year to help preserve the legacy of Nia.

“My hope for future students is that they utilize this garden as a way to carry on Nia's legacy. Her phrase, to "Create a Life of Purpose," is something that can touch many lives and therefore, I hope students see this message and find meanings within their own lives that fulfill their dreams and desires,” says Bernard.

Nia was a beautiful soul and her story continues to greatly impact the RHS community. When you walk through the garden, please take a moment to reflect on the remarkable life and legacy of Nia Hailey Simpson.

What Does Create a Life of Purpose Mean to you?

“Never taking a moment for granted and reflecting the life that you have around you” (’24 Executive Board President Hannah Yu).

“Create a life worth living and use every minute you have on this earth to strengthen your mind, aid others, and to spread love and joy” (’24 Rebecca Avalar).

“Live your life in a way that will make a positive impact on the world around you. Make lasting memories, and do it with people who you want to preserve those memories with” (’24 Class Senator Paige Poulton).

“Take advantage of all the amazing things life has to offer. Explore every passion, make connections with others, and be around people and things that continue to inspire you” (McKinstry).

“Be present and be involved in every aspect of your life” (Dr. Greenwood).

“Never let a day go to waste. It is so often that we take life for granted and don't appreciate all of the little things it has to offer. Nia had so many aspirations and goals and wanted to make everyday count. She embodied someone who lived everyday to the fullest, and it is so important that as a community we do the same” (Bernard).

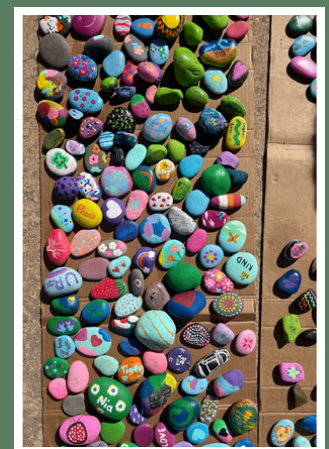
“To live life with a bright smile on my face, just like Nia did” (’24 Public Relation Executive Board Member Caroline Trinkaus).

“Forging a better life not only for yourself but for other people. Its when you are taking steps to advance the lives of everyone around you” (Seal).

“Everyday when you are living, make choices that better the society that you are in. We are constantly deciding the type of people we want to be thus we should do our best to give back and be the best versions of ourselves” (Ms. DeJulio).

Thank you to everyone who helped make Nia's memorial a reality

To find out more and to support, visit: www.niasimpson.org



Photos courtesy of Caroline Trinkaus