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# Just as you are

KariJay's hip-hop for self-empowerment

BY ASHLEY HAYES-STONE



PHOTO BY ASHLEY HAYES-STONE

In KariJay's music video for "Ten Toes," she and her squad invade Arden Mall with good vibes.

the program Sacramento Area Youth Speaks, writing poems with a social justice focus, and eventually getting into introspective song lyrics.

Just listen to "Ten Toes." Paired with an uplifting rhythm and lyrics ("It ain't worth your tears / It ain't worth your pain / every time you see them / put a smile on your face"), the song embodies self-empowerment in spite of fake friends and naysayers.

Expect poetic hip-hop and neo-soul on *Kari*, which includes some songs that capture her most vulnerable side. She says she's finally ready to release her two-year long project, but it's not easy.

"The challenge for myself is to share my more intimate works that no one's heard," Kari says. "It's really just like the different facets, and it's all that I can bring and hope to accomplish in music."

Being a poet and hip-hop artist isn't enough. In 2018, she co-founded an organization called The West2West Movement, inspired by a study-abroad trip to West Ghana during her freshman year of college in 2016. West2West's goal is to create a cultural exchange with the African diaspora. She holds local Saturday schools and field trips to West Ghana for students.

"Every person with African descent deserves this experience, and I feel like all people should experience where they came from," Kari says.

As for her name, Kari lets the Jay speak for itself.

It stands for "Just As You Are," she says, "to denote that we come into the world with everything we need inside ourselves."

**Sometimes finding yourself requires a name change.** Takarra Johnson's needed to embody her growth. She had just joined her high school slam poetry team, was learning about social justice movements and music production and was expanding her definition of spirituality beyond the church.

And of course, her new name needed to be "hella deep." She landed on KariJustiss. But it didn't fly.

"My friends were like, 'That's hella corny.'" she says. "... I was just trying to make the 'J' in my last name stand for something other than Johnson."

The 22-year-old Sacramento hip-hop artist now goes by her longtime nickname, KariJay. After a few roots-connecting trips to West Ghana and moving from creating spoken-word poetry to music, Kari is dropping her debut self-titled album this summer. But what does the Jay stand for now?

Growing up in a Christian household, Kari became a youth speaker at Blessed Faith Ministries at eight years old. The church laid a foundation for her music; after school, she spent time in the ministry's music studio.

During her sophomore year at Sacramento High School, she discovered slam poetry through

**"The challenge for myself is to share my more intimate works that no one's heard."**

KariJay

Check out KariJay's performance at the Capitol after the Black Women's March on Saturday, June 22. The march runs from 9am-12pm, beginning at Crocker Park. 211 O Street. For more info, visit [bwusac.com/bwm2019](http://bwusac.com/bwm2019).