Santa Cruz violinist lands prestigious scholarship

Sumaia Jackson, 20, scores full ride to Berklee College of Music

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SANTA CRUZ — Sumaia Jackson was sitting on a planter box along Pacific Avenue with a friend in May when her cellphone beeped with a new email.

Excitedly, she read the announcement from the Berklee College of Music notifying the 20-year-old accomplished violinist that through a scholarship, her tuition, housing and other fees would be covered for four years.

The Presidential Scholarship, Berklee's highest honor awarded to just seven students each year, is worth approximately $225,000 over four years, school officials said.

"It was totally unexpected," Jackson said in an interview on Sunday. "I would not have been able to go if I didn't get massive amounts of financial aid. It would have been a stretch even with a tuition scholarship."

Jackson was born and raised in Santa Cruz, growing up with her younger brother between mom's house in Live Oak and dad's place on the Westside.

Her parents — Dalmo Martins, a physical trainer, and Kathy Jackson, a transcriber who now lives in Cape Cod — sent their daughter to Santa Cruz Waldorf School and then homeschooled her for high school.

Jackson attended Cabrillo College, where she met some of her favorite music instruc-

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tors, during high school and for two years after high school, until she began attending Berklee in September.

Her music career started at age 5, when she was at a party and saw an older girl playing the violin. Jackson begged the girl to let her have a chance to try the instrument out, and a natural talent sprung from there.

“I was just very fascinated,” Jackson said.

Classical violin lessons started shortly after the party, and by fourth grade, Jackson was playing with the Cabrillo Youth Strings. In sixth grade, she became a member of the Santa Cruz County Youth Symphony, a group she played with for eight years.

At age 17, she moved on to classes at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music and was getting regular calls to play gigs around Santa Cruz and other locales, she said.

While the violin was her first love, the fiddle has become a close second.

As a teen, Jackson attended Alasdair Fraser’s fiddle camp on the Isle of Skye in Scotland and other fiddle camps in Big Sur, Tennessee and Mount Shasta.

She credits Cabrillo teachers Ray Brown, Fred Squatrito and Cheryl Anderson for expanding her range beyond classical music into jazz and contemporary music.

“Those classes taught me so much,” she said.

Jackson chose Berklee because the Boston school of contemporary music, which has many well-known alums, including members of popular bands including Weezer, Black-Eyed Peas, Aerosmith and the Cars, teaches more than just music, she said.

“They don’t lock you away in a practice room for eight hours a day,” Jackson said.

“They teach you how to be in the world as a musician. They prepare you for jobs and gigs.”

Jackson is considering a double major in performance and music production and engineering with the hopes of one day possibly landing in a band or working in a recording studio.

“I just want to play music with a lot of people,” she said. “I would love to be on tour at some point.”

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