



But Slams Will Never Hurt Them

by Marco Villalobos

EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

Youth Speaks offers free afterschool writing workshops for teens. In New York, Youth Speaks is sponsored by Teachers & Writers. Youth Speaks NY Fifth Annual Teen Poetry Slam begins March 2, and the Brave New Voices festival (described in this article) will begin on April 24 in Chicago. For more information, visit www.youthspeaks.org.

There are a certain number of ways to make a person cry. For me, the count used to be five. Not bad. I consider myself a stalwart in the world of tear ducts. Recently though, I had to add another avenue toward crying to my list, bringing the total to six.

At its yearly poetry slam finals in New York City, the nonprofit spoken word program Youth Speaks plays host to an auditorium of teen poets who bust at the seams with verse. At last year's finals, a girl whose name I don't recall, an any-girl who showed up from East New York, took her life up to the mic and spit out an artful poem. It was a moment of resolution that gave me the feeling that the poet had at that very instant worked her way out of duress, carrying an entire audience along with her. The poet had hit a particular note and her method, though simple, remains challenging: to write honestly about one's own life. At the end of her reading I added honest poems to my list.

The young writers who shared their work that night were competing for coveted positions on a poetry slam team slated to represent New York at the annual Brave New Voices festival. The festival gathers together hundreds of teen poets from across the nation for a few days of youth-centered poetry and performance. K-Swift, a past New York City Youth Speaks participant and the coach of the 2002 New York team, likens the Brave New Voices event to celestial epiphany. "It is like witnessing firsthand the birth of 10,000 angels," says Swift. "The people at the slam shower one another with amazing amounts of love and connect in real ways in only a few days."

Events like Brave New Voices—and the workshops that lead up to them—are changing the way that young writers perceive the tradition of poetry. According to K-Swift, they “create an excitement around writing.” The slams and workshops show students that poetry is a part of a larger conversation: that it needn’t be solitary but is in fact social. The drive toward securing poems, friendships, and reputations involves the students’ passion and intent.

Part of Youth Speaks’ appeal stems from its voluntary nature. The fact that students *choose* to attend these afterschool sessions inspires them to regard their work more seriously. It inspires Youth Speaks teachers, in turn, to adopt new teaching strategies. Students are apt to take risks and work independently, so that, according to poet and teacher Willie Perdomo, it’s possible to hand out Auden’s “September 1, 1939” and “drop image, line and metaphor definitions on students and say, ‘Okay, now you take it from here.’” While there is no definitive formula, Youth Speaks sessions generally consist of equal parts conversation, critical discussion of popular texts and student performance, and periods of focused writing. “By building fun, student-centered workshops and holding slams,” says K-Swift, “young minds are far more engaged.”

What makes Youth Speaks workshops so dynamic is the fact that the poetry drives the discussion: we use poems to see where they take us. For this reason, YS mentors like myself tend to bring provocative poems to the table (such as “On the Subway” by Sharon Olds) and aim to engage students in a free-ranging discussion before getting into a specific writing exercise.

When discussing Olds’s dense and suggestive poem, for example, we read through it repeatedly. The first topic that usually emerges is race relations: specifically, fear of the black male. This frequently leads the students to speak about privilege. Often they want to know what’s wrong with this woman, why is she wearing a fur coat on the train; and, more directly, if she wears a fur, why doesn’t she have cash for a cab? We ask them to look at the colors for clues: What do they communicate? What about the boy in the poem, what’s he thinking? Then, depending on the direction the conversation takes, we might discuss whether or not the narrator’s fear is a form of desire.

As mentors, once the discussion gets under way and we feel that the group is engaged, we initiate some simple writing exercises. Freewrite about someone for whom you have (or have had) mixed feelings, or describe a time when you felt a certain power and realized someone next to you didn’t have that power. Try to incorporate the use of color and texture (sensory images) as Olds does.

Youth Speaks also appeals to students because of its mentorship structure. A team of three mentors hosts each workshop: two adult mentors—typically writers and artists themselves—and a youth mentor. As Program Director Jen Weiss explains: “I want the kids to feel like they are involved not only in the process of writing, but also the processes of teaching and learning.” Youth mentors—often former YS students—help bridge the gap between the adult mentors and the workshop students. “The youth mentor function is quite possibly the most dynamic and complicated area of our programming,” Weiss says. “There are always students who approach us about wanting to be youth mentors, so I know that it serves its fundamental purpose: getting the students to recognize their individual responsibility to structuring the kind of creative writing experience they want.”

The dialogue that emerges in Youth Speaks workshops is often more intimate and intense than the standard teacher-student scenario. And this intimacy has nothing to do with the size of the workshops. In any forum—even open slams with overcapacity crowds—the students make each other (as well as adults) react emotionally to their attitudes, their beliefs: in short, their poems. A solid year with these young writers has made it obvious to me that the old adage about sticks and stones underestimates the true power of words.

10 POEM PICKS FOR TEACHERS

Hattie Gossett's "Pussy & Cash"

Audre Lorde's "Coal"

John Rodriguez's "How to be a Streetpoet"

Wanda Coleman's "Noise"

Samwiri Mukuru's "Nairobi Streetlights"

Denise Duhamel's "Things I Could Never Tell My Mother"

Anthony Walton's "The Encyclopedia of Rhythm and Blues"

Norman Jordan's "Black Warrior"

William J. Harris's "Why Would I Want"

Juan Felipe Herrera's "2Pac Blood"