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SLAM!

Teens make their point at Youth Speaks Poetry competition



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Amy Osborne / Special to The Chronicle



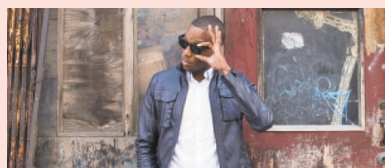
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Misha Kurita-Daz at the Teen Poetry Slam. Photo by Amy Osborne

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COVER STORY

The art in voices of the young

By Claudia Bauer

In the back room of the bookshop, there's nowhere left to sit, barely a place to stand. The air is humid with anticipation and perspiration. The first poet steps up to the mike, hands quivering, to recite free verse on loneliness and lost friendship. When he blanks out halfway, friends and family snap their fingers in the beatnik gesture of encouragement.

But this is not 1955, and Allen Ginsberg isn't unleashing "Howl" at Six Gallery. It's 2016, and the poets are Bay Area teens who've jammed into 826 Valencia for a preliminary round of the 20th annual Youth Speaks Poetry Slam.

Unlike in Ginsberg's era, there is no censorship and no risk of arrest, and background beats are delivered not on bongos but by DJ Treat-U-Nice. Some of these poets may even advance to the semifinals starting Friday,

March 25, and the Grand Slam final at Davies Symphony Hall on April 16, where they'll recite in front of 3,000 raucous supporters.

"We've always taken our slams as parties," says James Kass, "even if the topics the kids are writing about are really serious." Kass, 47, founded Youth Speaks in 1996, while he was getting his master's degree in creative writing at San Francisco State. Hoping to inspire more students of color to study writing, he launched a phenomenon — nationwide, nearly 250,000 teens, ages 13-19, participated last year.

Among Youth Speaks' alumni are West Oakland poet and playwright Chinaka Hodge, who is developing

Youth continues on page 15

Youth Speaks Poetry Slam, inspired in the Bay Area, has reached out to the world for 2 soul-baring decades





Left: Melanie Harra, 16, performs. Top: Judges Talia Taylor (left), Laura Brief, Shani Harris-Bagwell and Frank Lopez go over the rules. Above: Riay Bhargava, 17, performs a poem at the Teen Poetry Slam.

Photos by Amy Osborne / Special to The Chronicle

COVER STORY



Photo by Ashleigh Reddy

Brandon Santiago, Youth Speaks alum, credits the program for changing the direction of his life.

By Claudia Bauer

"The Daveeds, the Chinakas ... we're super excited for them," says James Kass. But when it comes to success stories, "I think of people like Brandon Santiago."

"In the world I was living in before Youth Speaks, there wasn't a context for the different intelligence, or different talents, that I had," says Santiago, who grew up in Lakeview with his mother and one of his four sisters.

After dropping out of high school in his sophomore year, Santiago re-enrolled, only to drop out again as a senior. Bored and frustrated, without a diploma or a job, Santiago tagged along with a friend who was doing a slam.

"It was a room full of people from all over the Bay Area, listening to this young black man," says Santiago, who is of Puerto Rican descent. "That inspired me. Like, wow, there's a platform where folks listen to people like us."

Watch Brandon Santiago recite his epic poem "Brown vs. Board of Education" at San Francisco TEDx in 2014 (May contain controversial content and strong language): www.youtube.com/watch?v=zSTx6RacRxl

Too uncertain of himself to try a slam — "In high school, I didn't even want to raise my hand when I had the right answer," he says — Santiago volunteered for

Spokes, a Youth Speaks mentoring program.

"I started picking up chairs and sweeping floors," he says. He eventually facilitated groups, coordinated outreach

and joined the staff. "If you're a young boy who's made a lot of mistakes and you're also charming, usually you're seen as a con man," Santiago. *Santiago continues on Q17*

COVER STORY

Emotion, eloquence in young voices



Amy Osborne / Special to The Chronicle

Rose Gelfand, 17, and Brandon Yip, 18, learn there will be a tiebreaker.

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a TV series with "Creed" and "Fruitvale Station" writer-director Ryan Coogler, and her close friend Daveed Diggs, who stars on Broadway in the hip-hop musical "Hamilton." "Daveed would win every time," Hodge says of their Berkeley High slams. "But it was never really about that. It was always about the community, and having a place where I could be heard and seen."

A former teacher, Kass grasped the alienation of mid-'90s teens. "They were being mis-portrayed in the media, and particularly kids of color were being vilified," he recalls. "They didn't have a place to come together across community lines, and they didn't have any adults nurturing their writing."

He thought poetry could be a good outlet for them, as it had been for him. "It allowed me to get to know myself," says the self-described hip-hop kid who wrote and DJ-ed with friends in New York. "It also taught us how to listen. Like, 'Oh, you're fresh too! I want to be fresher than you, and you're going to be fresher than me.' It creates this collaborative competition where we're all trying to be our best selves."

Fifty kids did the first slam at the old Intersection for the Arts on Valencia, covered in The Chronicle. "Kids started coming from all over," Kass says. They keep coming — from Lafayette, from Richmond, from the Sunset — because Youth Speaks offers a safe place to express themselves through poetry, plays and fiction, plus guidance that can be life-altering.

Slams are competitive, with winning poets advancing to local semifinals and final rounds, and then to the Brave New Voices national final. But the vibe is supportive, scoring is anonymous and the audience boos low marks and cheers high ones. "Everybody knows it's ridiculous to put a number on a poem," says Kass, "so we make fun of it as it's happening."

In their poems, the teens speak passionately about identity, justice, sexuality, drugs. They aim sharp metaphors at questionable authorities — that night at 826 Valencia, more than one person noted that police and protesters were outside, clashing over the police shooting of Amilcar Perez-Lopez.

The poets also discover their own power. "At home, my perspective didn't

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Santiago from page 16

says. "At Youth Speaks it was like, 'We see something else in you. We see the ability to connect as an educator and a mentor.'"

By trusting Santiago, Youth Speaks empowered him to trust — and believe in — himself. He went on to earn a bachelor's in cultural anthropology from San Francisco State and an academic scholarship to the University of San Francisco, where he is completing a master's in international and multicultural education. He uses his leadership skills daily at the Future Proj-

ect, directing programming for teens.

"We tend to idealize the moments that are glamorous, like the first moment that you got onstage," Santiago says.

"But Dennis Kim showed me how to write email. Lauren Whitehead taught me the art of listening to young people. Youth Speaks showed me how to communicate effectively. Those are the things that I'm the most grateful for."

Santiago, now 28, is also a gifted poet. He captured his early experience, and that of so many other people of color, in the epic poem "Brown vs. the Board of Education":

"Sometimes I feel like brown skin is the cardinal sin and sometimes I feel like Moses wandering an ocean of dust searching for my promised land."

The teen who never raised his hand in class will emcee the Grand Slam at Davies Symphony Hall, and he can't wait to share the experience with the next generation.

"For a young boy from the hood," he says, "a thousand people listening to what I have to say, and me owning that space for those 2½ minutes — it made me feel like I belong."

— Claudia Bauer



Mike Kepka / The Chronicle 2010

Writer Chinaka Hodge is among Youth Speaks' alumni.

COVER STORY

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necessarily matter," says Brandon Yip, 18, a three-year participant and UC Berkeley freshman. But at slams, he says, "people are inclined to listen because you have the mike."

Marc Bamuthi Joseph agrees. Now Yerba Buena Center for the Arts' chief of programs and pedagogy, he was Youth Speaks' founding program director and Hodge's mentor. "We're cultivating an aspect of our society that is underutilized," he says. "The slam is not just an exercise in young people speaking out, it's an exercise for the rest of us to listen and, hopefully, grow."

Youth Speaks has brought unique opportunities to Kass, too. In 2009 he curated the inaugural White House Poetry Jam, where Barack and Michelle Obama heard Lin-Manuel Miranda share the first song he wrote for "Hamilton." "We've allowed young people to redefine for themselves what poetry is," says Kass, "and I think Lin is doing the same thing with theater."

From the Mission to the White House — 20 years on, Kass describes Youth Speaks' growth as, simply, "crazy." But he's still making good on his pitch to that first group of teenage poets. "Come get down with us," he told them, "and we promise to create opportunities for young people to have a voice on their own terms."

Claudia Bauer is a Bay Area freelance writer.



Amy Osborne / Special to The Chronicle

Youth Speaks poet Cassidy Ryan, 19, at the mike at the Teen Poetry Slam.

'An Apology to My Mom'

One of the poems read by 19-year-old Cassidy Ryan at a Youth Speaks Poetry Slam event

Five years old and tears streaming down my face
as grape juice stains both the carpet and my clothes

My mom comes over with a towel and a clean shirt
And all I can do is sniffle
"Mom I'm sorry."

Fourteen years old sitting in a drive way,
"Dad isn't coming home" rings in my ears

Guilt fills into my body like a balloon filling with air
Reality's sharp point making me pop.

Everything flashes through my mind, everything I coulda done to make him stay
"Mom I'm sorry."

My body is made out of apologies

my existence screams I'm sorry
Because Mom,
I have so much to apologize for.

Mom I'm sorry your students are dying in the streets, incarcerated in eighth grade

Receiving life sentences instead of diplomas.

Mom I'm sorry for the night I scared you

When my phone died and I came home late, and you held me so tight because another kid on our street wouldn't be held by his mom again.

Mom I'm sorry that, the abuse of a man who gave you your three biggest blessings at the same time gave you a constant reminder that your kids would always be f— up.

Mom I'm sorry I can't handle

the pain like you did to save us.

Mom I'm sorry you couldn't save us.

Mom I'm sorry your oldest two children are doing drugs on the weekdays,

Mom I'm sorry your youngest is selling prescriptions to high school kids,

Mom I'm sorry that each of us knows how to read a handle better than we do our textbooks,

That shots touch our lips as often as they echo through our streets.

Mom I'm sorry for the way the world has hurt you.

Mom I'm sorry for the way I have hurt you.

Mom I'm sorry for spilling the juice.

Youth Speaks Teen Poetry Slam Semi-finals: 7 p.m. Friday, March 25, and April 1. Impact Hub Oakland, 2323 Broadway, Oakland, 1 p.m. Saturday, March 26, and April 2. Mission Cultural Center, 2868 Mission St., S.F. Free. www.youthspeaks.org.

Youth Speaks Teen Grand Slam Final: 7:30 p.m. Saturday, April 16. Davies Symphony Hall, Grove Street and Van Ness Avenue, S.F. Free. www.youthspeaks.org.

VIDEOS AND AUDIO

Readers and viewers of Youth Speaks should be cautioned that controversial content and strong language are to be expected.

For a reading of a poem by Misha Kurita-Ditz, go to <http://bit.ly/1WISNNG>

See previous years' final rounds on the Youth Speaks YouTube page: www.youtube.com/user/YOUTHSPEAKS

Learn about Russell Simmons' Brave New Voices HBO series: www.hbo.com/russell-simmons-presents-brave-new-voices

Hear Allen Ginsberg read "Howl": www.youtube.com/watch?v=MVGoY9gom50