

## TEACHING CREATIVE WRITING

Wendy R. Williams, *Column Editor*

*A poetry-averse English teacher transforms lives by embracing the power of student poetic voice.*

### Three Lives Revolutionized through Spoken Word Poetry

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#### PETER: FROM POETRY-HATER TO SPOKEN WORD EDUCATOR

I despised poetry for the longest time. Even as a high school English language arts (ELA) teacher, I taught the bland, obligatory poetry unit in which students looked for poetic devices. They complained and fought back. It was a disaster.

Flash forward. I brought in a former student to lead a poetry activity, and in passing, he mentioned the idea of a poetry slam. My most apathetic students perked up. It was 1998, and the poetry slam was a novel idea in educational settings, but we decided to have an in-class slam the following week. A student with one of the

lowest grades in the class ended up winning. Inspired by this student and others who followed, I started a school spoken word poetry club. The success of that club later prompted me to spend two years living in London, England, where I developed spoken word programming.

In 2003, I returned to the Chicago area with the epiphany that I could no longer operate as a traditional ELA teacher, and drafted a proposal to become the school's spoken word educator. While I was away, a researcher from Harvard University came to our school to study what was then called the "achievement gap," and in interviews with Black students, my name was frequently mentioned as someone who had encouraged and motivated them to succeed. With that knowledge, and the conviction that I could do this programming elsewhere, I held firm in my rationale to receive release periods for all five classes to implement my plan.

Most of the school administration supported me, but one administrator seemed nervous about the precedent that might be set. If they let one teacher with a

bold idea get paid like a "normal" teacher, how could they deny others? I argued that if I succeeded with my plan, perhaps it would embolden others with unique skill sets to do the same and thus better serve our students and expand opportunities in the teaching profession.

"We'll give you three release periods—that's never been done before," the administrator said.

"It's all five, or I'll move to New York" was my firm response. I was not bluffing.

We finally agreed to pilot the program for one year. Almost twenty years later, the program is still going strong.

As the school's spoken word educator, I conduct two-week poetry residencies in every first-year English class and one-week residencies in every sophomore English class. These residencies culminate in class poetry slams, school semifinals, and finals. Administrators, former students, and renowned poets serve as judges.

The program has alumni who serve as paid teaching assistants, and together we reach approximately 1,700 of the 3,400 students in the school each year. Typically,

we create prompts inspired by the work of contemporary poets, usually writers of color, and use exemplar poems to encourage students to reflect on and share their lived experiences. Along the way, we recruit students—many of whom have not enjoyed poetry prior to the program—to join the spoken word club. The club puts on two or three public showcases each year, and approximately sixty students perform collaborative pieces in these shows. We have a slam team that students can try out for as well. We call this three-tiered approach (residencies, club, and slam team) the Oak Park Model.

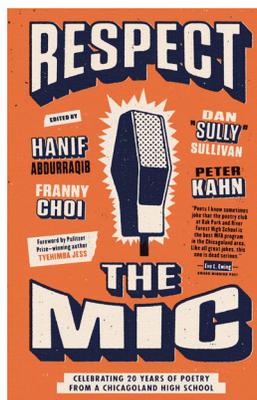
Writing and sharing one's experiences through spoken word poetry can combat the background noise often associated with adverse childhood experiences. Our program assists students in developing a variety of skills: writing, critical thinking, public speaking, creative thinking, and leadership. It also strengthens students' academic self-confidence, emotional intelligence, engagement, and motivation. Our students (many



Peter Kahn, Adam Levin, and Christian Robinson (from left to right) are finally vaccinated and maskless in Logan Square, Chicago, June 2021. Photo courtesy of Peter Kahn and used with permission.

of whom were previously underperforming) have gone on to earn full college scholarships because of poetry. They have become ELA teachers, rappers, and master of fine arts graduates. More powerfully, dozens have said they avoided dropping out of school or dying by suicide. Recognizing the benefits of this program, the school has generously invested in this model by freeing up curricular time and funding a special budget.

To commemorate the accomplishments of our spoken word club, we published *Respect the Mic: Celebrating 20 Years of Poetry from a Chicagoland High School*, an anthology of poems by current and former club members, including NBA champion Iman Shumpert. An accompanying website features writing prompts, videos, and other resources to help teachers use this anthology to inspire students.



## CHRISTIAN: FROM VOICELESS TEEN TO COMMUNITY MENTOR

I moved to Oak Park when I was fourteen, in 2007. My aunt, who helped raise me, had passed away just two months prior. The loss took a toll on my ability to ease

into high school. My grades were good, but I was heartbroken.

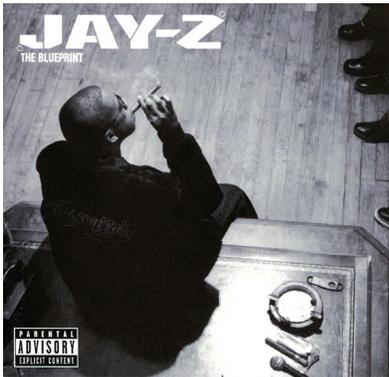
My introduction to the spoken word program happened during my first year of high school. I did not know much about poetry other than that it was boring. I wrote a quick poem about falling out of a treehouse just to get the assignment over with. I began listening to more rap and used the sophomore poetry unit to try my own lyricism. I wrote a rap about racial and ethnic stereotypes, which took me to the sophomore slam final, where I performed in front of 850 of my peers. It was the first time I had processed race, been praised for my writing abilities, and felt heard since relocating to a new city. After that, I joined the school's spoken word club.

**No longer was I a voiceless, grieving teen; I had become a mentor to a community.**

Poetry introduced me to writers across Chicago, paid for my college tuition through the First Wave scholarship program at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, helped me start my music career, and most importantly, gave me purpose. My younger sister, now too a First Wave scholar, eventually joined the school's spoken word club, and I had the chance to mentor her. Watching her perform a poem about the taxation of female hygiene products in front of 4,000 audience members was one of the single greatest moments in my life. No longer was I a voiceless, grieving teen; I had become a mentor to a community.

## ADAM: AN IDENTITY FORGED BY SPOKEN WORD

When my first year of high school began, I did not know how to relate to my peers. It was much easier for me to wrap my headphones around my skull and turn Jay-Z's *The Blueprint* up as loud as I could than to do the awkward, uncomfortable work of trying to find common ground in my conversations with other kids. I had been bullied throughout middle school, so even small slights and misunderstandings threw me into fight-or-flight mode. I was an incredibly difficult young man with a lot of potential and an equal amount of anger and sadness.



I slipped a poem that stank of musty teenage angst under the door to Peter Kahn's office after his week-long residency in my English class. He encouraged me to stop by the spoken word club after school to write and share what I had already put to paper. I can count on my hand the number of meetings I missed after that day. I was the first student to perform in all twelve spoken word showcases and was fortunate enough to earn a full-tuition scholarship to the University of Wisconsin–Madison based on work I did as a member of that club.

Spoken word gave me an identity. Suddenly, the personal qualities that had previously made me an outcast were welcome in a community that cared about and valued me. When I was old enough to fully understand how profound and life-changing this experience had been, I resolved to pay the work forward. I worked as a spoken word teaching assistant at Oak Park for four years and will continue working in public education to find ways to offer young people

the opportunities I craved when I was their age.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

Teaching—and being taught—poetry can be a painful endeavor. Focusing on student voice, though, can make it incredibly meaningful and empowering. The three of us owe our careers to the Oak Park Model of integrating spoken word poetry. Thousands of students have benefited as a result, and we hope other schools will follow suit.

Embracing spoken word poetry will energize your career by placing student creativity, identity, and voice front and center. You will find your students bonding and smiling with fingers snapping. [EJ](#)

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An NCTE member since 1995 and former featured speaker, **PETER KAHN** is the author of the poetry collection *Little Kings*. He lives in Chicago, Illinois.

**CHRISTIAN ROBINSON** (Rich Robbins) is a rapper, poet, and educator. His most recent album, *On the Horizon*, is available on all streaming platforms. Christian lives in Chicago, Illinois.

**ADAM M. LEVIN** is an educator, writer, and rapper. He received his master's in education from Roosevelt University in 2019. Adam lives in the Chicagoland area, where he is a high school teacher.