



Hip-Hop Goes to College

The university's best bet for diversity may be a spoken word program that's taking kids of all colors by storm.

BY SUSAN KEPECS

Speaking out about sweatshops: Spoken word artists (left to right) Joe Shaul, Moira Pirsch, Monica Davidson, and Lyjya Miles wow their peers in Sun Prairie.

All photos by Susan Kepecs

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AMERICA'S UNIVERSITIES ARE BESIEGED by symptoms of mounting malaise. College students can't read or write.

Campus diversity efforts bomb. The University of

Wisconsin-Madison's so white, officials Photoshopped a black face into a recruitment brochure just a few years back. *The Capital Times* recently

reported that the numbers of black and Latino undergrads on UW campuses

hover below 3 percent for each group. But drive by any Dane County high school at lunchtime and take a look at how diverse this once-Germanic/Scandinavian region has become. What's the future for these kids of color?

Finally, there's a pot of gold for the rainbow generation. Meet Willie Ney, executive director of the UW-Madison Office of Multicultural Arts, and the seven-poet national-level teen team from Youth Speaks Wisconsin, a program that Ney administrates. Between Ney and this band of streetwise young spoken word artists, the status quo's about to get shook up. Say hallelujah.

A POWERFUL, POSITIVE VOICE

Spoken word art is hip-hop poetry. Commercial hip-hop is big business, but unless you're into insipid thug themes

set to overproduced, pounding sound, you undoubtedly despise it. Ney calls it "misogynistic neo-Samboism that comes from the white capitalist in the shadows." Newspapers sometimes print its ugly lyrics as parental advisories.

But spoken word is hip-hop of a different stripe.

"It's socially conscious. It's got the beat, but these kids write political, social poems about domestic abuse, police brutality, lack of social justice, and anti-globalization," says Ney. "If all the teens who're always plugged into their iPods were listening to these messages instead of to commercial rap, it would be absolutely transformative. It could change the world."

Youth Speaks is a national spoken word network founded in San Francisco a decade ago by UW-Madison alum James Kass. In cities across the country,

Youth Speaks teens are writing rings around bored college kids. Youth Speaks is a movement gone back to its roots, Ney says—“Back to the urban riots of the Black Arts Movement that grew in the rich soil of late '60s social issues. There's a recurring theme in Youth Speaks poems: 'Hip-hop was hijacked by big business. It's our lifestyle, it's our art and we're taking it back.'”

Youth Speaks Wisconsin, the Madison-based chapter, began by serendipity. In 2003 Ney was the assistant director of UW-Madison's Latin American, Caribbean and Iberian Studies Program. As outreach, he produced related Sin Fronteras (education without borders) programs for the campus and community. On the advice of award-winning San Antonio film director Ray Santisteban and San Francisco percussionist/Latin jazz educator John Santos (both have had prominent residencies on the Madison campus), Ney brought some ear-popping spoken-word artists to Cinefest Nuestra America, Madison's popular annual Latino film fest that was tied that year to the Wisconsin Book Festival.

It's worth mentioning names: Tejana poetry-slam champion Tammy Gomez; second-wave Nuyorican activist poet queen Mariposa; Afro-Chicano truth-teller Brutha Los from the Bay Area. Their performance was an astonishing introduction to slam poetry for mainstream white Madisonians like me.

Also on this brilliant bill was national poetry slam champ Marc Bamuthi Joseph. Bamuthi, it turned out, was also artistic director of Youth Speaks San Francisco. He raved about his Madison experience to Kass, who called Ney with a proposal: put together a Madison team for the 2004 teen spoken word finals (Brave New Voices) in Los Angeles.

HIP-HOP ON LIBRARY MALL

The rest, Ney says, is history. Since Los Angeles, Wisconsin's growing team has done numerous local slams, performed at university and high school events, and participated in the two succeeding national meets. In April the

seven teens who topped this year's local Youth Speaks finals—most of them winners for the second or third time—traveled to Brave New Voices 2006 in New York City. Forty-six teams participated in the event. While most inner-city teams are all black, notes Ney, the Wisconsin team, like Dane County's population, is thoroughly multicultural.

Ney's drive to provide opportunities for these young artists is relentless. Last year Youth Speaks Wisconsin became the very first local chapter housed in an institution of higher learning, under the outreach auspices of Ney's office. Strong institutional support kicked this teen poetry program into very high gear. Members meet weekly at Madison's Lussier Teen Center to read and critique new works. Youth Speaks outreach coordinator Josh Healey, a prominent local activist slam poet, mentors these sessions.

This fall, some of the nation's premiere spoken word coaches step on board. Husband-and-wife team e.g. bailey and Shá Cage, pioneers on the Twin Cities' spoken word scene and founders of the Minnesota Spoken Word Association, become the artistic directors of Youth Speaks Wisconsin. And Bamuthi will be in residence in Madison all spring.

Also this year, the program's outreach spreads deeper into Dane County schools. Over the summer, Youth Speaks Wisconsin and the UW-Madison School of Education offered a teacher-training institute aimed at preparing educators to incorporate socially conscious urban art forms into their school curricula.

And here's the ultimate bold step, backed by Ney's response to what he sees at the national finals. “There's a common language of truth, honesty, and liberation—it's a totally uncensored expression of the teen self. But its parameters are ages 13–19. What do you do with 20-year-olds? Some of them become mentors to the younger generation, but too many get lost. They have no clue what they want to do. They don't even think about college.”

The obvious solution was to turn urban art forms that these kids already

know—spoken word, dj-ing, freestyling, break dancing—into creative, socially responsible, economically viable avenues for success. To that end, a year from now the UW-Madison's First Wave Spoken Word and Urban Arts Learning Community, the first-ever college program of this kind, opens its doors.

First Wave will provide a comfortable environment for the hip-hop generation, offering a certificate in spoken word but also well-directed integration into the larger university world. Students accepted into the First Wave Learning Community won't be college dropout statistics. Applications will be intensely screened; a 3.5 GPA is expected for acceptance. “These kids aren't getting a free ride,” Ney says. “They're competing with any other student applying to get in. What we're giving them is the incentive to do so.”

Most likely they will be veterans of Youth Speaks programs. Because of that



“It could change the world”:
UW-Madison's Willie Ney believes in the positive power of spoken word.

experience, they'll be ready to hit the ground running. “They won't get sidetracked in the ridiculous debauchery that plagues this campus. We'll set them up with internships in media and other industries. They'll be creative and original,” says Ney.

At an institution that's fared so poorly with diversity initiatives, campus climate is the wild card. “Hip-hop culture is marginalized and ghettoized,”

Where the Sun Shines a Little Bit Cockeyed

Madison, where the sun shines a little bit cockeyed
where there's more honesty than lies—sometimes
where a doctor's son can be a drive-by shooter
and a prisoner's daughter can be a hopeful Christian
where I walk along the streets all hours of the night from west to east
we have a lot less crime but a lot more police
you come to Wisconsin on vacation
and you leave on probation

walking down State Street
and seeing the future leaders of our community
drunk / running / hands open
wishing the sun would shine a little brighter on this city
and give people something else to do
than down bottles of alcohol
making them 'go stupid'
the Madcity blues liquefied in the shape of a beer bottle
so we can drown away our pain

Madison where the lakes are frozen 9 months out of 12
and people's minds are the other 3
see, we come from the city that's growing too old too fast
and now it's stuck in a mid-life crisis
cuz life goes easy up at the university
but adversely for the rest of us
even the best of us get told we won't amount to nothing
so we don't count on nothing but ourselves

the sun doesn't sit high here / it's on a lean
cuz everything ain't the way it seems
we're not small enough that everybody knows everybody's business
but we're not perfect / in fact, far from it
we have the highest # of incarcerated black men in the country
we get excited about brat fest and the only place we see graffiti is at the teen center
Madison where the sun shines just a little bit cockeyed like he's winking at you
staring hard on a lean for every flaw that goes unnoticed

by Moira Pirsch, Sekou Muhammad, Les Robbins, and Monica Davidson

Ney says. "For First Wave to succeed, the campus community has to learn to celebrate rather than fear it, give it legitimacy instead of dismissing it as irrelevant."

It may take time, but Ney's confident. "I know the '07 group will be amazing. Just by being artists who compete nationally and get paid to perform in local schools, Youth Speaks teens stand out. But it's not just about poetry. It's about moving poetry into action. It's empowerment. It's organizing around the themes and issues that come up in the poems. These kids are already leaders in their high schools. You bring 20 or 30 of them here and a few years down the line you have 100. That's enough to change the climate of an institution. It's different than McNair scholars [low-income and minority students with demonstrated academic potential on a directed track toward graduate programs]. They're holed up in the library, but these kids are performers. Their visibility will be much higher. They'll have a real presence. There'll be ciphers"—spontaneous freestyle hip-hop groups—"on Library Mall."

By the time First Wavers graduate, they'll have the education and connections they need to produce whatever they want, Ney says. "In place of the black man in the ghetto with the gun who creates fear, a university education will create the leaders of tomorrow in industry, the media, and law. They'll be able to succeed and still be part of their own community. Instead of becoming marginalized, they'll be energized."

ENGAGEMENT THROUGH POETRY

Maybe it sounds too good to be true, but I know a thing or two about being a university student, and after attending a couple of Monday afternoon meetings there's not a shadow of doubt in my mind that Wisconsin's Youth Speaks team teens are college material. They're socially aware, eloquent, and enthusiastic.

Les Robbins has that gangsta-rap look that sends chills down suburban execu-

tives' spines—baggy jeans and bling. He's also blessed with tons of charisma. "Poetry's empowerment with words," he says. "I had a lot of pain and I needed to put it down. Poetry gave me a new way to see. Instead of doing stuff like stealing cars I do something else with my time, I express myself so people can hear me. Poetry opened new doors. When I first started I never thought I'd be in this place, going to national events and meeting so many people from across the world. Writing took me to a whole new level."

Robbins is a La Follette High sophomore who's shooting for First Wave when he graduates. "I wouldn't want to go to a regular college. I want to do what I'm interested in—music, poetry, and art. That's what makes other kinds of required courses bearable. Without poetry I wouldn't be in school, period."

Poetry's our political regime, he adds, signaling the whole group.

Robbins dances when Alice Chang reads her latest poem. "He's my cheerleader—my hype man," Chang says. Like Robbins, she's angry. "Slam is 'in' right now. Commercializing it makes me want to lash out. A writer's job is to educate people. I'm from Taiwan. Most teens don't even know where that is. They think it's Thailand."

She's always been a reader; she's both peer and mentor for the rest of the team. They call her their poet laureate. "Youth Speaks lets you meet a lot of people you think you'd be very different from. Like Les isn't the type of person I usually hang out with," she says, grinning. First Wave, an English degree, and law school are in her plans.

Sekou Muhammad is a pan-Africanist roots writer. "My parents taught me about my history from a very early age. My poetry always ends up being about that. I've lived in Jamaica, I've been to Africa. I come back and see people capitalize off the suffering of others. Poetry gives us a voice to change what's going on in the world. The possibilities are endless."

At a regular Monday meeting, post-New York, he offers up for critique a poetic tribute he's just written to his 90-year-old great-grandmother. He's the

only one in the group who's not considering First Wave. Instead he's going to Morehouse College, where Martin Luther King Jr. earned his BA. "I'm gonna try to start my own leadership group, 'Youth Empowerment Association of Atlanta.' Yeah! I'm gonna study business administration, entertainment business, and journalism. There's a big spoken word scene in Atlanta. I'm hoping to make a bridge between there and Madison."

Moira Pirsch and Lyjya Miles are poet-activists. "Youth Speaks really did change my life," says Pirsch. "It's given

me a lot of opportunities to do what I love. I see how much it's improved my life as a writer and as a person. Part of that's being able to start clubs and lead workshops in the middle schools to spread the word."

Pirsch and Miles led some spoken-word workshops at Sherman Middle School last spring. Says Miles: "Going into Sherman and helping kids write poetry, seeing the youth of tomorrow pouring their hearts out, does me a lot of good. We watched tears from these 11- and 12-year-old kids. We saw them cry about their dad beating their mom."

Youth Speaks at Book Fest

Youth Speaks poets will give numerous performances at the Wisconsin Book Festival beginning Wednesday, October 18. They include Kevin Covall on October 18; Mayda del Valle and Dasha Kelly on October 19; and Linton Kwese Johnson on October 20. All three of these performances are at 7 p.m. in the Wisconsin Historical Society auditorium, 816 State Street (on campus). The Youth Speaks Spoken Word Showcase, featuring the Midwest Teen Teams/All Stars (including the four artists named above), takes place on Saturday evening, October 21, in the Union Theatre, 800 Langdon Street. Exact time and more information at www.wisconsinbookfestival.org



"Helping kids write poetry, seeing the youth of tomorrow pouring their hearts out, does me a lot of good," says Lyjya Miles, performing here at Sun Prairie High School. "Youth Speaks is my life."

Sweatshop Perspectives

Monica: I'm workin in a factory

Moira: They've captured me

Lyjya: imprisoned me to steel walls plenty guards

All: I mean supervisors

Moira: watching me haunting me in my sleep

Joe: my kids haven't eaten in days

Monica: there's no God because if there was

All: I would pray

Moira: And my fingers are achin', my fingers are achin'

Lyjya: it's hour 13

Joe: day 5 million

Monica: pair of pants infinity

Moira: and so, I sew, I sew, and I sleep and I sew,

Joe: and the manufacture of this 5 pocket denim isn't fillin'
up bellies

All: SO

Monica: I have a question

All: What's in your pocket?

Lyjya: string bracelet little sister made for me on my
thirteenth birthday, it just broke today and it sort of
made me want to cry

All: What's in your pocket?

Moira: Pictures, the 3 loves of my life, ages 1, 6 and 8,
youngest princess said her first words yesterday, I
missed it

All: What's in your pocket?

Monica: Coins, I've got 60 cents in my pocket, 1/2 a day's
pay and family needs milk and bread, hoping the
clerk'll trust me to pay him tomorrow

All: Break

Throw Pants to Lyjya

Lyjya & Moira: Direct deposit is my best friend! I am 17
years old, working 26 hours a week but it feels oh so
good having 468 dollars in my account just waiting to
be spent

Monica & Joe: Paycheck 184.86 cents neglected to pay my
cell phone bill but still posted up at this economy
driven institution and that's not all...I'm at the Mall

Moira: Sooooo, I really like these jeans, and Brad will too!
But I'm going to the club so I better buy 2

Monica: Staring at these denim letting these fit my curves
the same way my skin fits me

Lyjya: supporting factories overseas releasing these until
I'm broke

Monica: I faint for jeans the same way a crack head does for
coke

Joe: And where on earth are these made?

All: Well I really don't care!

Lyjya: All that matters in my life is that the boys are gonna
stare cuz they already want me cuz their hearts are in
my locket,

Moira: but I really don't care because their eyes are in my
pocket!

Monica: hanging on the tongue of a boy, girl you need to
stop it, cuz I keep these dollar bills in my pockets, I'm
just wondering whose pockets I'm filling

All: Break

Throw Pants to Joe

All: What's in your pockets???

Joe: In my pocket, I got the world.

Moira: spinning this globe with my fingertips I have three
cars

Monica: four mistresses

Lyjya: new suits

Joe: and the nation under my finger.

Monica: I have congressmen in my pockets

All: the U.S. of A. in a choke chain

Joe: letting me ply my trade right into your hometown

Monica & Lyjya: In my pockets, sweatshops tearing ripping
beating my money out of the hearts of my captives.

Joe: I am the pockets of all pockets

Moira: I spend sixteen minutes a day to the sixteen hours of
my workers sewing pockets to fill mine.

Monica: just another sprocket in the industrial machine
making pockets to let us pocket the profits just to
increase my bottom line a little bit more.

All: But wait, how much do these cost?

Joe & All: these are nineteen ninety-five plus the lives of the
two little girls who lost their mother to the industrial
machine

Lyjya & All: Nineteen ninety five plus the life of the mother
who worked to death no food no water no life.

Monica & All: Nineteen ninety-five plus the rape of a people
by nameless executives.

Joe: The cost is not in dollars but in lives.

All: Great I'll take 2

by Monica Davidson, Moira Pirsch, Joe Shaul, and Lyjya Miles

You can tell it felt good to get that off their chests in a way that nobody laughed at them. Youth Speaks is my life.”

At the regional finals last winter Joe Shaul, a teenage electronics wizard, read a poem about being a geek from a laptop he carried onstage. His resonant words got him a place on the national team. “I thought there was no way I could ever do poetry. I just thought it was cool and one day after a large caffeine bender I started writing and I thought wow, I can do this!”

Monica Davidson, who’s been on the team since it started, says she’d never have considered college if not for First Wave; now she’s hoping to get in. “Youth Speaks was different than anything I’d ever done. It was an opportunity for me to share and speak my mind, so I jumped on. I never wrote slam before. I just used to write little love poems—recently I went back and looked at them. I’ve grown a lot since then. Youth Speaks connected me with my mother—we were estranged, but now she comes with me to the nationals and takes the team videos.”

(Right) Les Robbins performing at Sun Prairie High. (Below, left to right) Monica Davidson, Moira Pirsch, Les Robbins, and Alice Chang at a weekly meeting in the Lussier Teen Center cafeteria, Madison.

For the group, Davidson debuts a fearless new work about saying her piece—to her mother. Afterward, the group falls silent. “That was a jaw-dropping poem,” Robbins says quietly.

TEENS GONE WILD

The Wisconsin team didn’t win the national competition, but that’s not what matters. Today’s high school generation is plagued with problems, from ignorance and racism to drugs and poverty. Youth Speaks has their attention. A few weeks after the team’s return from the Big Apple, I went with them to Sun Prairie High, where they performed for a full-school audience.



In a standard-issue wood-paneled auditorium filled to capacity with a much more diverse student body than we’d expected, Healey emcees.

“Whassup, Sun Prairie! How y’all doin’ today, y’all ready for some poetry?”

“Yeah!” the students shout back.

Robbins used to live in Sun Prairie. He knows a lot of these kids. They go wild when he delivers his piece.

They cheer for Pirsch’s polyrhythmic poem about her fallen heroes and are spellbound by Chang’s evocative, just-written work on Africa, “sunken children like lost treasure.”

“How many of you out there are geeks?” Healey shouts by way of introducing Shaul. Lots of techies identify, hollering back from their seats.

Miles, after her piece, marches into the crowd. Sun Prairie’s shrieking students lean out of their seats to touch her.

Davidson grabs the mic with professional finesse. “Put my hip-hop on!” she commands, and the crowd whoops with joy.

Davidson’s message, echoing Ney’s observation, is about saving the art form from the corrupting hand of uber-capitalism. When she’s done Healey invites anyone in the ebullient audience who’s interested in Youth Speaks/First Wave to come see him after the show. For the finale Davidson, Miles, Pirsch, and Shaul do a team piece they co-wrote, a long, musical poem with the double, intertwined theme of third-world sweatshop labor and the love affair American teens have with expensive jeans (see page 18). Robbins, Davidson, and Miles take over the mics, jamming freestyle. Then it’s over. As we head out toward the parking lot, Healey and the team are bowled over by a multicultural crush of kids from Sun Prairie who want to get involved. *

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