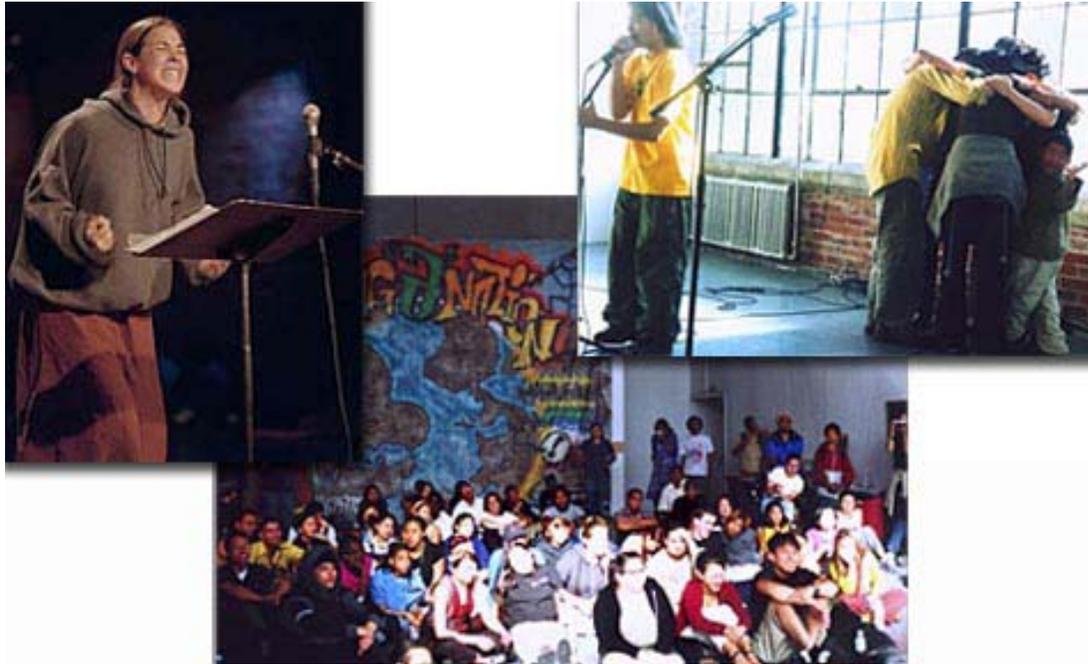


Powerful Learning with Public Purpose

WHAT  
**Kids**  
CAN DO

Feature story posted at [www.whatkidscando.org](http://www.whatkidscando.org) | January 2003



Photos courtesy of Youth Speaks

## Youth Poetry Goes Public

**P**acked into a San Francisco theater, young people erupt in wild applause as an Oakland teenager chants her lines before the microphone in syncopated, scat-style rhythms. In a Pittsburgh school library, students share raw emotions and experiences in performances that echo the legacy of T. S. Eliot or the Beat poets of the 1950s. Navaho teenagers present their work at a national youth poetry competition alongside peers from the streets of New York City.

Such youth poetry slams and “spoken word” performances have gained enormous momentum over the past decade, ever since a movement to democratize poetry first began to bring adult poetic performances and competitions back into the popular domain. Drawing on street rhythms like hip-hop and on the rough truths of daily life, performance poetry has attracted a new generation with little interest in more formal poetic traditions.

“Poetry is a way of taking life by the throat,” Robert Frost said, and youth culture has seized this opportunity to make adolescent voices heard on topics from politics to personal discovery. Whether in after-school workshops or electronic forums, in national competitions or local gathering spots, the youthful impulse to speak aloud the rhythms of truth carries on—as it renews—an art form dating back to ancient times.

Meet three of this movement's premiere programs:

**Poetic License**, first a documentary film on teens making their voices heard, then a set of multimedia materials, now an online meeting place for young writers and their teachers

**The Diary Project**, an international online teen journal

**Youth Speaks**, the San Francisco Bay Area's youth poetry and spoken word dynamo.

## Poetic License

[www.poeticlicense.org](http://www.poeticlicense.org)

**P**oetic License is the outgrowth of David Yanofsky's 1999 award winning documentary film of the same name. Created to spark young people's interest in writing, the film captures dynamic young poets as they perform their work and discuss their influences and inspirations. In the film's wake, a set of multimedia materials have followed including a viewer's guide, a teacher's guide (Heinemann Press, 2001), and a double CD of live performances from the 2000 National Teen Poetry Slam.

In addition to information about the film and multimedia materials, the Poetic License website features **Youth Voice**, a section for youth poetry and discussion, plus an area for educators, **Teacher's Lounge** (see both below).



*"If you are under 20 and would like to share your work, you've come to the right place."*

**Youth Voice** at poeticlicense.org includes an **Online Poetry Journal** and accepts submissions in text, audio, and video. A youth editorial committee selects each month's entries. There's also a discussion area that gives young writers a place to meet, share, and support each other, an e-newsletter, and a directory of youth poetry organizations and upcoming teen poetry events.

### Jars

by Phoenix

Sirens scream like the sight of you  
you got me jarred like a fire fly

but u aint takin prisoners  
I think if you could have me  
without having me  
you would have me all the same  
so i am writing this for you for me  
because if I didn't  
your electricity could haunt me forever  
rain drops like knowledge  
between our silent breaths  
and smiles is conversation  
vicariously vandalizing my soul  
through your eyes  
my bare feet kiss cold concrete  
my fingertips ascertain your lips  
as you sing your line breaks for the last time  
even my tears are poetic  
as lines of poetry stream down your face  
as you turn to your umbrella and walk away  
today I understand feelings  
are too big to be jarred

### **Mom and the Mideast**

by Sarah D

Feb. 20th 2002  
CNN reports of new tragedies every day  
And as a young asian woman talks seriously of  
sad events in the middle east,  
my mom tells me with tears in her eyes that she walked—  
crossed the border into Bethlehem  
after the war of 1967.  
She always thought of Israel as the  
center of civilization and now—  
there are gunmen in the church of  
nativity and suicide bombers in the  
temples and Sharon's tanks rumbling, groaning, rolling  
over dead people in the streets—  
She stayed with a kind arab family  
who never knew she was a jew  
and never asked  
who offered her new shoes  
because she couldn't afford to replace her tattered tennies.  
"Mom, what do you think happened to them?"  
(anna doesn't know when she asks the tough questions)  
mom sighs a distant worried  
sigh,  
and begins picking at her thumb nail  
she knows  
and she knows the past. . . .  
"oh. . . they were just so nice to me. . . ."  
and that country is just tearing itself apart

I look out the window at the beautiful mountains and  
calm white suburban houses  
here in Utah everything is fine  
and we joke about how peace should be brought about,  
and which side should have to live on the moon  
as sunlight streams  
though the window of  
gramah's house  
but it's not that funny and Bush  
won't even try  
to help  
as innocent people die every day for their one true  
religion  
so I wonder  
(as I sit on a floral print couch on a perfect day in Utah):  
a bloody war ravages the night in israel and the streets are stained red and the people  
scream for help but  
there is none  
Whose god is it that lets this happen?  
so I turn my attention to the cool slick pages of my history book  
and read how Roosevelt saved our country in  
the American Pageant  
and mom and dad discuss with frustration what a moron Bush is  
and Gramah teaches anna to crochet  
and I can't sit here and read about how wonderful the US is for my homework so  
I write this poem because a disturbed country tears itself apart  
and we watch it through our televisions  
and joke about what should be done  
and again I gaze out the window at a perfect blue sky and feel  
guilty because of how it makes me happy,  
feeling free.



**Teacher's Lounge** includes a cutting-edge online program, Poet-to-Poet, which matches two classes together (anywhere in the country) and allows students to share and critique each other's poetry. The program is free and open to any 6th-12thgrade classes. Included, as well, are extensive resources for the classroom and a list of youth literary groups nationwide. A discussion area allows teachers to share both their challenges and their successes as they open the world of poetry to teens.

**1/10/02**

I showed Poetic License to my students and now they won't leave me alone until we organize our own slam. One of my students who used to sleep all day in class because he skateboarded all night was known as Skater Dude. He's got a new name now. It's Poetry Dude. This is exciting. Thanks, Robert

**04/10/02**

An update: After weeks of preparation and practice, my students, 7th graders, formed five teams of six students each.

We had the slam yesterday and there were 180 other students in the audience. A couple of the popular students got high scores but also getting top scores were a couple of hard core introverts. Juanita, who is deathly afraid to speak in class (she's had counseling because of this), volunteered to participate in the slam and she did fine.

A couple of my students who are failing my class for turning in zero homework for the entire year decided to participate and they were great.

My students are in a frenzy. Not some, all 150 of them. Those students who didn't pay attention to my lectures still don't pay attention to my lectures but now they're drawing on their binders "Poetry Rocks."

This is a revolution with a mind of its own. In 26 years teaching, I've never seen anything like it. Robert

**09/20/02**

Poetic License just kicked off our poetry unit in my ninth grade English classes and it is a hit!! My students, who are predominantly white, middle-to-working class kids live in a very sheltered community and had never heard of a poetry slam before Tuesday. Well, they know about them now! And their enthusiasm is overwhelming. Many applauded at the end of the film. Today, I had two girls show me the first poems they've ever written.

I am really excited, too. The viewer's guide that came with the film is such a valuable tool. We started brainstorming for the "I am" poem today in class and tonight, the kids are going to talk to their parents/grandparents/older relatives about their family history. Seeing your film has turned kids who were "poemaphobes" into aspiring spoken word artists. They had no idea that poetry could be so "cool." Or that it could be so "expressive," "alive" and "intense." They want to plan a slam of their own.

And the young poets in the film have become celebrities among my ninth graders. Jeremy from Michigan is a huge hit. The kids nearly memorized the "Big Pants" poem, and Biko was the poet with whom most of the boys identified. Kassy nearly caused a sensation. (None of my students know any teenager who is openly gay. Nor do any of my

race but white). The kids' discussion today involved how amazed and inspired they were by young people who "stood up for what they thought" and "used poems to talk about the problems and stuff they experienced."

Your film and the young poets you feature have opened the eyes and minds of a bunch of kids this week. [Anonymous]

## The Diary Project

[www.diaryproject.com](http://www.diaryproject.com)

**I**nspired by the young Bosnian diarist, Zlata Filipovic, whose book described growing up in war-torn Sarajevo, The Diary Project encourages teens to write online journal entries about their day-to-day experiences. And by offering the opportunity for response, the nonprofit aims to stimulate communication among teens of all cultures and backgrounds and to provide peer-to-peer feedback and support. Traffic on the site is heavy; since its launch in 1995, more than 60,000 diary entries have been posted.

### spiderwebs

by morphine dreams, 17, female

January 15, 2003

when i was five  
i would read under the covers  
with a flashlight  
because i couldn't put a book down

and i would stay up all night  
and try on clothes  
and put on roles  
and dream about what the future held  
for me

my mind kept turning  
cranking it's wheels  
and i wonder what i thought it was  
that i was doing

then when i was seven  
jessica looked up my dress  
and i knew i wasn't supposed to like it  
but i did  
and that sunday afternoon  
my dreams changed  
and for the ten years following  
it's been one letdown



Muse

by Kristin Malloy

after another  
and i feel cheated  
and i feel lied to

cause  
people tell you to dream and never stop believing  
then turn around and blow your dreams to pieces

and people tell you to be yourself  
then tell you what yourself should be

so tell me now  
before i take another step  
which is it?  
do i listen to you  
or listen to me?

**aromatherapy**  
**by morphine dreams, 17, female**

January 16, 2003

those nights  
with the gas tank well fed  
and the stars in full force  
when i have to keep my foot in check  
'cause i just wanna peel down the highway

no destination  
just keeping the cds playing  
just keeping my eyes on the road  
my fingers on the wheel

those nights  
that let worries fade away  
let my imagination be free  
i could drive 'til the sun comes up  
and see it spoil the solitude  
and not care a bit

evading the exits  
...it's not my turn to settle down...  
ignoring responsibilities  
...it's my turn to let someone down...

those nights  
those teasing tastes of freedom  
adolescence never smelled so good

**he drinks...**  
**by griswold the ghoulish, 18, male**

January 20, 2003

he drinks his coffee wet

wrinkles  
fill his face  
and gran doesn't  
hide her disgrace at  
the laughs she hears  
in her ears  
inside her head  
she thinks its rude  
the way he sleeps  
at the table  
and falls off his chair  
#####es on the toilet seat  
and doesn't really care  
probably doesn't even see  
definatly doesn't hear  
but he still laughs  
when u fall over  
and calls u a bloody fool  
he laughs  
cos he doesn't remember  
if he's had dinner  
let alone if it was  
good/bad/cold or warm  
he calls my gran 'mum'  
a relic of the past  
a habit  
he finds cosy  
like his coffee  
already at least an hour old  
and he insists  
its the way he likes it  
coffe drunk cold

**Fitting Together**  
**by jjmaymay, 17, female**

January 19, 2003

He is the comfort of chlorine  
He is tenacious top ten lists  
He is dark chuckles and soft whispers.  
He is mumbling, when he finds the right words at the right time  
He is easy silence followed by unexplained laughter



Whirl

by Kristin Malloy

He is three jr. bacon cheeseburgers  
He is wishing you could complete just one more push up.  
He is cult movies  
He is present  
He is sweatshirts and baggy khaki pants,  
He is twitching,  
He is longing to be a football player  
He is telling you to shut up  
He is granola bars and fruit leather  
He is trying to understanding why you think so much.  
He is painfully slow handwriting  
He is amusing moody doodles  
He is writing a paper two hours before it is due  
He is happiness

**Untitled A**  
**by Kmak, 17, female**

January 19, 2003

I belong in a time of taffeta and ginger ale  
When men pinned you  
in the back seat of a Chevy during The Blob.  
I belong in a time when burgers and milkshakes were novel  
and everyone smoked with their martinis.  
I belong in a time of cardigan sweaters  
and knee length skirts that hid hips.  
Curves were swell and boys didn't sag their pants.  
I belong in a time when the whole family  
sat down to watch TV together,  
and Ed Sullivan hosted the Beetles.  
I belong in a time of black and white photos,  
chivalry, corsages, and conscious kindness.

## Youth Speaks

[www.youthspeaks.org](http://www.youthspeaks.org)

*As these young writers are around each other more and more, the level keeps getting higher and higher because they're pushing each other, working with each other, supporting each other. It's a true collaborative community dynamic that is in fact raising everybody's writing level and their performance level.*



—Documenter filmmaker **David Yanofsky** in an interview with the *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, March 28, 2001

**F**ounded in San Francisco in 1996, Youth Speaks is one of the premiere youth poetry, spoken word, and creative writing programs in the country. Its dedicated Teen Poetry Slam, Brave New Voices, and Bringing the Noise Reading Series have blazed trails for Bay Area youth. Its multigenerational arm, The Living Word Project, hosts the largest local ongoing slam in the country, packing more than 400 people each month.

In and outside school, Youth Speaks reaches out to local youth and their teachers to strengthen writing and poetry programs. Monday — Saturday, it offers teenagers in San Francisco, Oakland, and Berkeley free creative writing workshops where they can share their work, hear from others, “and write write write.” Youth can also drop by the Youth Speaks Writer’s Center at any time to use the computers, sit and read a book, watch a video, or burn a CD.

See below for:

[Finding Inspiration at the Kitchen](#), a teen reporter’s review of a Youth Speak’s New York City poetry slam (courtesy of *Play by Play*)

[The Origins of Youth Poetry Slams](#), an overview of the movement.

## Finding Inspiration at The Kitchen

by **Stephanie**

10th grade, JFK H.S.

When I was given the opportunity to attend the Teen Poetry Shout Out, I was extremely excited. I love poetry and I had never been to a slam before. It was held at The Kitchen. Though the theatre was small, the action inside was much greater.

Each person was given pen and paper to jot down notes. I was in the middle of a circle filled with people of all different nationalities. There were poet freaks, ghetto thugs, casual preps, liberal artists, inspired writers, village people; everyone you can possibly think of! I felt very comfortable and I didn’t have to worry about being judged for my dress code. Any outfit you wore was perfect because everyone was individually different. I was so close to the action that I felt that I was on the stage. They even had two large screens so that the action was more up close.

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"There were poet  
freaks, ghetto thugs, casual  
preps, liberal artists, inspired  
writers, village people;  
everyone you can possibly  
think of!"

They started out with workshops on writing poetry and on how to get comfortable with the microphone; everyone in the audience took part. After the workshops, professional poets presented the teen poets. Not only did they read some of their own work, but they also gave their opinions on how to improve the poems the performers were reading, and they gave the audience numerous ideas on how to write poetry without limiting themselves. All of these great ideas truly inspired me to write some poetry of my own.

Each poet who came up to read went through different emotions during the slam. Some felt comfortable with the microphone, whereas others were nervous. Each poet slowly became more comfortable with the microphone, and the audience cheered with excitement when each poem was finished. Ronald was the first brave poet to come onstage and perform. His poem,

“Grandma,” spoke about the inner fears of old women and how they go through each agonizing day not knowing if it will be their last. I really hope to see him again at The Kitchen.

A ghetto thug, who didn't even have his glasses and had written his poem on the subway, was fantastic. His poem was based on the lost ones in the ghetto who use crack to escape the harsh reality of the world.

Alexia read her poem about love that presented vivid descriptions of all the things love could be-for a lover, for a friend and most importantly, for yourself.

Ronald performed his inspiring poem about a dream he once had.

Cultural Harmony, a group of students from different schools in the city, performed their poem mixed with hip hop. They created their own catchy beats without the use of instruments. Their poem was about 9/11, which was a popular topic at the event.

Mia spoke of shattered hearts and painful breakups.

William created a poem from a class assignment by taking lines from newspapers and turning them into poems.



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"A ghetto thug, who didn't even have his glasses and had written his poem on the subway, was fantastic."

Many other teens wrote poems that truly touched my soul and spoke to my heart. The group that really caught my eye was *CBT—Can't Be Touch*. A trio of guys who rap with familiar beats, they will surely get a contract and be seen on MTV.

*Keepin' It Real* showed me a world filled with talented teens with voices ready to be heard. It also showed me the world of poetry. Poetry can be created in so many ways—from lines of movies, words cut out of newspapers, everyday feelings, those sweet feelings of love and anything you can possibly think of. All you need is a pen, paper and your thoughts. Write for five minutes and you can create a masterpiece.

This Teen Shout Out deeply inspired me. Not only will I be attending poetry slams in the future; I might even start performing. I hope I see you at the next poetry slam so you can be as inspired as I was.

## The Origins of Youth Poetry Slams



*The following is excerpted from "Spoken Word" and "Poetry Slams: The Voice of Youth Today" by David Yanofsky, Barry Van Driel & James Kass, European Journal of Intercultural Studies, 1999*

In 1987, Marc Smith, a blue-collar construction worker in Chicago, decided that he had had enough of what he perceived as poetic snobbery. He embarked on a personal mission to recapture the "true essence" of poetry and reclaim it from the exclusive world of academic

ivory towers and sedate coffee house readings. He wanted to “democratize” poetry and its viewing, make readings more exciting, and open up the limited world of who chose what is accepted as poetry by bringing it “to the people”. The goal was to “lift the poetry from the page” and convert poetry readings into true presentations, with an ample degree of drama. Thus, the idea of a poetry slam was born.

The first slam contests took place in Chicago’s Green Mill Tavern in 1987, and the performance styles borrowed heavily from the New York and Chicago punk rock and poetry scenes. Far more than in traditional poetry, the sounds and rhythms of the poems in slams have been those of the streets and the inner city. Hence, the appeal for members of minority group communities to participate. Whereas most poetry readings will have primarily white audiences and white participants, poetry slams tend to draw a cross-section of the community.

In a slam, poets perform their poetry to an audience, which then scores the poems (reminiscent of an Olympic event). Five judges are chosen at random from the audience, scores are given (between 0 and 10) and there are winners and losers, although organizers always stress that it is hard to judge art and that it is poetry that wins in such slams. Judges are instructed to leave any biases at home and that their score should be 50% content (how good is the poem), and 50% presentational style.

According to one poet and youth slam coordinator...the presentational style counts for 90% in the actual judging. Adult slams are now organized in more than 100 US cities, as well as in Sweden, Israel, England and Germany.

### **Reaching out to youth**

In the mid-1990s, organizations such as Youth Speaks in San Francisco came to the realization that this form of spoken word could be an excellent tool to use with contemporary youth. In some ways, it has quickly grown into a new youth subcultural phenomenon. The entry point for today’s youth has been hip-hop music. Using the rhythm of this musical style, youth have been encouraged to start writing and performing poetry. This is a relatively short jump for many teenagers, who have grown up on hip hop, but a huge leap from what they have thought poetry was limited to. Through poetry and spoken word, teens have been encouraged to view their daily lives as an inspiration and material for their work. They have also begun to realize that throughout history, poetry has been expressed in many ways, not just the ways with which they have become familiar through the poetry presented to them in school. This new cultural phenomenon among teenagers, helped by the success of the feature film Slam, has attempted to give a voice to young people who have found much of the literature and the poetry they encounter, especially in school, to be irrelevant to their lives...