

EXCERPTS FROM WKCD'S INTERVIEWS WITH FULFILL THE DREAM ALUMNI

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DAVID ROJAS is currently a senior at Connecticut College, majoring in Hispanic Studies with a double minor in Sociology and Gender and Women's Studies. He joined Fulfill the Dream when he was a high school sophomore. Rojas was recently awarded the David Project for Peace grant to assist with the development of the ACT UP summer program, which exposes youth to the concepts of community organization, higher education, and non-violent resolutions. At Good Life, he's opening up a department of "apparel and scholarship," working on a clothing line whose profits will go into a scholarship program. He hopes to join Teach for America next year and return to Chicago to teach after graduation.

I like this life

Growing up I didn't have much. I hardly saw my father just because he was out there trying to get the money for us to even be able to afford the school uniforms and have a meal and all these things. And now it's like he doesn't have to do that because I'm finding ways for myself. I'm finding ways to get grants, to get scholarships. I'm out there. I've been able to pretty much step out of my comfort zone and get comfortable that I feel very uncomfortable in. And I remember this -- Roberto talked about the...I think it was Plato's Allegory of the Cave. You're taken out of this cave, which metaphorically is my neighborhood 'cuz you're not exposed to downtown. I remember Roberto took me downtown for my graduation. He took me downtown for the first time. I'm 18 years old. I've never been downtown. 18 years of my life and I've never been downtown Chicago. You know? And for me to experience that on my graduation day and, you know, walk around downtown and just see all the city lights and go, "I like this life."

Not only do I like this life, I want to bring as many people with me to see the lights, to be able to walk down Chicago Avenue, to walk down Michigan Avenue. And I think that goes to show not just the power of mentors like Roberto, but a curriculum that values critical consciousness, confidence building, self-reflection, and just being you. The whole process of finding yourself is what's guided me this far.

Fulfill the Dream and The Good Life Organization have made me a lot more critical. They've given me a global perspective on things. They've kept me intellectually curious about how to help, how to meet kids halfway, and also to be culturally sensitive to a lot of the issues that I might not necessarily understand, but I need to understand. That's what keeps me in the game. I want to gather as much knowledge as I can and bring it back to the next generation, like Roberto does, not just because it's good, but because it makes me feel good.

I have the power to create change

... I didn't graduate from high school academically book smart. But I came out with skills that many don't really have. Like my senior year of high school, myself and a couple of my friends, we

organized protests where we had thousands of students come out to city hall and protest against the budget cuts, against the firing of teachers, pretty much the elimination of after school programs. Our school was built out of a hunger strike and we knew had to carry on the legacy and leave something behind.

Like it's name, Social Justice High School was all social justice. Roberto's coming in was a multiplier for me: tapping into the whole hip hop world, which I'd grown up on, and finding ways to listen to music and write a counter-narrative about who we are as residents of Little Village. He showed us how to academically intertwine your personal beliefs with the "academy." I was taking an African-American and Latino studies course at the same time that I met Roberto. I was able to interconnect the learning in Fulfill the Dream to movements in Latin America or in Africa and see how the history of hip hop resonated.

I've carried those connections all through college. I have been able to do multiple research papers on the African Diaspora and its links to hip hop, the movement in different parts of the world, just tapping into the core five elements of hip hop. The Fulfill the Dream curriculum in itself gave me a whole different perspective on how capitalism works, on how as individuals we have the ultimate power to decide our fate as people.

. . . Before the curriculum Roberto assembled in our school, I never really paid attention to how I really wanted the world to be. I didn't understand the deeper values that as people we really have to take in. Money, fancy clothes, the things we think make us who we are superficial in the end, it's what you are deep down inside. The curriculum allowed me to see how I wanted to really live and what my purpose in life really was and is.

It was really powerful for me to realize that I have power to create change. Once I realized that, I was a rebel and...but I definitely changed my whole way of living. I became way more family-oriented. I began to write a lot more. I began to tap into my brain a lot more. I was able to stand alone and not be afraid to stand alone and believe in what I believe in even if people didn't believe in the same thing.



YAHTZENI GONZALES organizes Chicago-based events for The Good Life Organization. She joined Fulfill the Dream her freshman year in high school, learned to teach the curriculum her sophomore year, and by senior year earned a stipend as an instructor. Gonzales started writing poetry when she was in 4th grade and began performing publicly during her freshman year of high school. She is currently in her second year of community college, with her sights set on a four-year degree; she continues to be a strong activist for her community.

I blame Fulfill the Dream for making me want to stay in school

I got involved my freshman year when we used to do these things called colloquiums. Every Wednesday we would have a half a day and that half a day actually we didn't have any classes. One of the programs was Fulfill the Dream. Because I took tagging and graffiti and stuff, I was like, "Hey, I enjoy it. I like it, so I'm gonna check it out!" The first day, the hip hop music is blasting and you see this like weird guy smiling, saying hi to everybody like he knows you for a long time. And I was like,

“Huh. Okay.”

A couple of week later, I was like, “Nah. I'ma get out Fulfill the Dream. It's too much information for me. This dude wants me to go all personal on him. I don't even know him.” I was like, “Nah. I'm good.” So I tried getting out, but my mom knew I was doing Fulfill the Dream and she's a big Hip Hop person, so she was like, “No! What are you doing? What do you mean you're gonna get out of it? No, no, no, no, no. Give it some more time. You're gonna like it!” So I ended up following her word and I just stayed on it, you know? Every semester you could switch. I stayed with it.

Actually Roberto's the person who brought out my poetic side, because the curriculum has a space where you can let yourself go, depending on the chapter. For me, this became a space for writing poetry. I've always read poetry, but I'd never, you know, written that much. Then a chance came to do spoken word. “Yo, Berto, you need to come. Like I've never performed in my life and like you're always performing for us. I need you to be there for me.” And he was like, “Yeah! Yeah! For sure I'ma be there.” It was my first performance ever. He sparked that. And ever since I've written poetry and made subway my stage.

I blame Fulfill the Dream for making me want to stay in school. Freshman year, I would find any excuse to leave school early. With Fulfill the Dream, I wouldn't get home until 8 or 9 o'clock 'cuz I was in school doing all these extracurricular activities or just being with my teachers. And that's because Roberto taught me to enjoy my teachers, not just look at them as teachers, but also look at them as people and friends and someone you can trust.

. . . . So after that I just loved it. And we created the Hip Hop Revival, too. But the Hip Hop Revival wasn't gonna be a Hip Hop revival. It was that we wanted a party after the curriculum was almost over. Everybody was like, “So what do you guys want?” And we were like, “We want a rave! We want a party!” And this and that. And Roberto was like, “What if we have something that has the Hip Hop?” So we were like, “Oh, what if we do a Hip Hop..?” Like we started to bring with ideas and then we came up with the Hip Hop Revival. And the point to the Hip Hop Revival was to bring both Lawndale and Little Village together. The first day, we had an emcee battle. We had a graffiti battle. We had performances. The second day, we had a breakdancing battle that went from morning to night. Oh my god, so many groups! And, you know, it was all thanks to Roberto and Fulfill the Dream and Pastor Phil. It was just great people who taught us we can do something, we can make a difference.

We should do a book

We started the book my junior year. We were like, “What do we wanna do? We wanna keep the curriculum going, but we want something to represent it.” I still have the notes of that day where we came up with the idea of a book. We wanted it to tell about everything we've done from the Fulfill the Dream curriculum to the Hip Hop Revival to open mics and other events. any other events. We ask Roberto, “Is there any way we can do a book?” And he says, “Yeah! I know people. It's gonna take us a while, but we can do it.” That's when I looked at him and I was like, “Yo, Berto, don't you have...like isn't Fulfill the Dream in other cities? Are there other schools? It'd be dope if we had all those kids from all those Fulfill the Dream to put their stuff in the book.”

And he was like, “What?! Yeah! That's amazing!” So actually our first book, which is called *Youth*

Voice Nation: Taking Kids' Voice Off Mute was published April 15th of 2011. It had poetry, pictures, drawings, graffiti from kids in seven cities—from Chicago, L.A., the Bronx, Cincinnati, Connecticut. The list goes on and on. The book has poems, amazing poems, which really touch you. We have drawings, cartoons, and graffiti that will make you laugh or cry. It all came from the positive energy of youth believing in their voices.

Right now we are working on a new book, an update. In neighborhoods like Little Village, in neighborhoods where you can have 50 shootings in a weekend, there's so many smart kids that just need a voice. A lot them, oh my god! They have amazing artwork, really good poetry, they know how to write. We need to show the youth that it's okay to let stuff out through poetry, through rap, anything but violence.

So our point to the book this year is "Stop whatever you're doing, write, and send us your stuff. Tell us what you want to tell the world. We got you, we understand what you're going through. The hood ain't somewhere you want to be in. And write it. Do some poetry on it. What's happening in your neighborhood? What are you doing?" By putting the youth's voice out there, we tell them, "It's okay. We understand what you're going through. You don't have to resort to violence. You don't."



EMMA JACKSON is currently in her third year studying Sociology, Spanish, and Integrative Approaches to Health and Wellness at Ohio State University. She hopes to use her education as a means for social change and action, particularly with a focus on education reform and juvenile delinquency, with a holistic perspective. A talented writer—a gift she found and developed through The Good Life Organization—Jackson now produces a monthly newsletter called "Living the Good Life."

Putting your emotions into it, that's what learning is really about

My experiences throughout my life have taught me to really value social justice, to value reaching out to other people. You need platforms where people from all different perspectives can build awareness and educate each other. And The Good Life Organization has taught me that sharing and creating music and art together is a really progressive way to view education, because it recognizes the key role emotions play. When you have an emotional connection to what you are learning, you remember so much more. Using your body in creative expression, putting your emotions into it, that's what learning really is. And then when you realize this, you see how the classroom isn't the only place to learn and it's not the best. There's so much more you can learn when you're not just in a classroom.

Networks are key

Once you are accepted at Ohio state, you can apply to be part of a "Scholars Program," and one of those scholars programs is the Mount Leadership Society. I decided to apply, and it's probably one of the best decisions I made. It's a two-year program, and once you get accepted, you live with the other members of the society and become part of a scholars network dedicated to leadership and service. With the Mount Leadership Society, you build leadership skills by relating with local leaders, there are retreats on topics like diversity and leaving a legacy. You volunteer monthly in food banks, mentoring young kids, and at a ton of community sites. You create your own service projects and

organize your own events. And you make leadership connections throughout the university, with faculty, staff, alumni. I pretty much already knew that networks were good, but this program showed me that networks are key, especially if you believe in social justice.

Technically, I've "graduated" from Mount Leadership Society, but I carry it with me. It's given me such an advantage: a huge network of people that count on me and that I can count on. And as I continue to spread the Good Life work, even though they aren't part of the organization, they support me. I got a lot of feedback, which is so helpful.