

Best of Young DETROIT

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Brave and Bold: Powerful young Detroit voices are heard through InsideOut Project



When our youth speak their minds, even the White House listens



By Scott Talley
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As a community entering a new year, it is only natural that we point toward those people and initiatives that can give us hope for a brighter future in the weeks, months and even years ahead.

With that said, the "Best of Young Detroit" invites our community to turn its attention to the InsideOut Literary Arts Project. Known by an acronym, which is unique in appearance, the daily outcomes that have been produced by iO are equally unique and impactful.

Conceived and founded by a former Detroit Public Schools teacher, Dr. Terry Blackhawk, iO has led more than 50,000 Detroit youth on adventures using poetry as their guide to becoming better students and more engaged citizens since 1995.

More than 20 years since its creation, the importance of iO continues to grow, as Devin Samuels explained to the "Best of Young Detroit."

"iO provides a platform for students to tell their own stories, and these students are writing Detroit's new narrative and the next narrative," said Samuels, a Future Corps fellow at iO.

Among the young artists that are writing the next and new narrative for Detroit is

LeAndra Gregory, a senior at Detroit School of Arts, and a member of the 2015 Detroit Youth Poetry Slam Team.

"Poetry provides a way for kids to express themselves in a way that they can't normally do," said Ms. Gregory, who was a part of a team that represented Detroit at the Brave New Voices International Youth Poetry Slam Festival in Atlanta. "It's also a way for kids to reach out and seek the help that they may need, or point out issues that people need to turn their eyes to."

Like Ms. Gregory, Sakila Islam is a living testimony of poetry's special ability to liberate powerful young minds for the betterment of all.



"I'm not that artistically talented in terms of drawing and painting, so the only way I can share is through my words and voice," said Ms. Islam, a sophomore at the University of Michigan and graduate of the Detroit International Academy for Young Women. "Poetry has given me a platform—a megaphone—to share my voice. This is my contribution to the many voices of my generation."

A member of the 2015 and 2016 Detroit Youth Poetry Slam Team, which competed at the Brave New Voices International Youth Poetry Slam Festival in Atlanta and Washington DC respectively, Ms. Islam recently even had her voice heard at the White House during a program on Generational Experiences of Asian Americans, where she delivered a poignant tribute to her father, who brought her family to America from Bangladesh and has maintained his enormous pride regardless of any hostilities he has faced.

"As a young person you always hear: 'The future is yours; the future is yours,' said Ms. Islam, while explaining her social consciousness. "But if we don't start to make the future ours right now by the time it's handed to us it won't be in the proper state that it should be."

Ms. Islam's comment speaks to the real beauty of iO. While only a very tiny few of our youth can run a 4.4 forty-yard dash or dunk a basketball, all of our youth have the potential to develop their minds, which poetry and writing greatly contributes to, and once this is done the world can be moved, as iO participants have discovered.

By immersing students in the joy and power of poetry and literary self-expression, iO inspires them to think broadly, create bravely and share their voices with the wider world. This journey is guided by professional writers and celebrated by publications and performances.

The "Best of Young Detroit" salutes iO for helping Detroit youth learn that their stories and ideas matter and that their thoughts and written and spoken words can launch them into extraordinary lives. The "Best of Young Detroit" looks forward to reporting on more iO writers and events during 2017. In closing, the "Best of Young Detroit" would like to share the thoughts of another dynamic young person and mind who has been enriched by iO. It is our hope that his message will encourage other young people to write their own poetry and stories in 2017, as we continue to move forward as a community.

Hajjar Baban, student, University of Wisconsin:
"When I discovered iO, I not only found a place where I could write and better my poetry, it also sparked a passion in me for performance poetry. Most importantly it gave me a space to talk about all the things I felt unsafe to discuss in my own community. The friends I made in iO allowed me to grow and always talk about things that may be affecting us outside of our small worlds...I'm currently attending the University of Wisconsin - Madison, and I'm here on a full-tuition scholarship, First Wave, because I was able to create personal meaning in every iO and CWP (Citywide Poets) event that helped my art. Beyond the privileged position I am in because of iO and the resources they provided me, I hold the necessary critical thinking traits that will push me into creating more meaning after college."

To learn more about the InsideOut Literary Arts Project, please visit insideoutdetroit.org.



Detroit youth must be heard: The InsideOut Literary Arts Project has given Detroit students an opportunity to realize their immense power through written and spoken words.

Happy New Year!

The Best of Young Detroit would like to wish our entire community a prosperous and peaceful 2017. Your support continues to be deeply appreciated and we look forward to reporting on all things positive regarding young people in and from the great city of Detroit. Let's keep the positive conversation flowing!

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