

InsideOut

celebrates the poetry, art, and promise in Detroit youth

By Mary Beth Lewis



The boy was “rambunctious, like a pinball, always bothering other kids,” Robert Fanning, ’93, director of InsideOut recalled. One day the youngster wrote about showing his mother a tooth that had fallen out. It was the last time he ever saw her.

“The next week we were doing poems about dreams,” Fanning says, “and he asked if he could write about the dreams of dead people. I told him, ‘Sure, anything.’” In his poem, “In the Dream of Dead People” the boy wrote:

*Dead people are your legal guardians.
They help you if you need it or not...
They are driving
you to school and driving
you back home. Some are
having so much fun,
their bones are falling apart.*

“The more he wrote, the more it seemed to change him,” Fanning says, a statement that goes straight to the heart of the program’s philosophy.

InsideOut’s work—like its name—is about bringing forth emotion for empowerment. Founded in 1995, InsideOut places professional poets and fiction writers in over 20 Detroit elementary, middle and high schools.

From the start, the program has drawn on the

strong support of U-M alumni, students and faculty, and the partnership continues.

A “Day of the Poet” workshop sponsored by U-M’s Institute for the Humanities was one such instance, when a few dozen teenagers, sprung from several Detroit high schools, spent a sunny day in Ann Arbor working on their art.

Typical was this scene when Fanning, a coach of the Citywide Poets, gestured across the oak table in Rackham to Naidra Walls, a bespectacled senior from Cass Technical High School, who had written a new stanza for a group poem called *If I Couldn’t Write*.

“Hit me,” Fanning said.

Naidra’s words were magnetic. *Probably nothing* would happen if she couldn’t write anymore, Naidra recited, because she spent the first years of her life not writing, *and nothing happened then*. She looked at Fanning, who nodded. He’s an award-winning poet who shares his students’ passion for the art form, and he seems to love his job as program director for InsideOut. He turned to Shawntai Brown, also from Cass Tech, and asked, “What have you got?”

Shawntai’s dramatic imagery suggested that whenever she’s not writing *some sad little child/is evaporating into the African soil*.

The group poem was coming together, in time to be

performed at InsideOut’s annual gala fundraiser. Also reading would be some of InsideOut’s 2,000 students from 24 Detroit elementary, middle and high schools. Featured for sale would be the schools’ four-color literary magazines produced on computers by students at InsideOut’s new Literary Magazine Production Center (funded by U-M’s Arts of Citizenship program). It’s located in the InsideOut office on Woodward Avenue, across from Detroit’s new baseball and football stadiums, and just blocks from a new downtown bookstore.

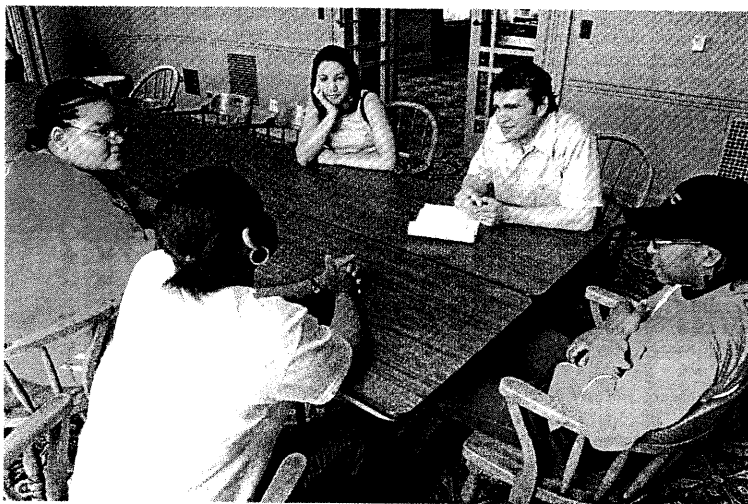
Clearly, InsideOut plays a supporting role in the hoped-for renaissance of Detroit, and U-M alumni and programs are central to the effort. Most recent in the long list of partnership programs is the new U-M Civitas Fellowship that will allow four incoming U-M MFA students to work as InsideOut writers-in-residence in the 2005-06 academic year. English Department creative

writing coordinator Keith Taylor, who helped set up the program with the Provost’s Office, says, “We were trying to find ways to involve some MFA candidates in the InsideOut Detroit project. This seemed like an obvious connection, because these graduate students are focused on imaginative work and many of them are also interested in community projects.”

The connection works in the other direction as well. Angel Hackett joined Citywide Poets as an 11th grader at Martin Luther King Jr. High School. Visiting Ann Arbor with the group



Peter Markus and Robert Fanning.



Robert Fanning, ’93, director of InsideOut meets with InsideOut students.

Photos: Martin Elwert, U-M Photo Services

emboldened her to apply to Michigan.

"We did so much — poetry slams, editing and artwork for poetry books, stage work. It was a great opportunity," Hackett, now a U-M senior, recalls. "And it showed me how to express myself, to not be afraid of talking in front of people."

InsideOut master writer Peter Markus, '89, a 10-year veteran of InsideOut, believes artists-in-residence "change the power equation" when they enter classrooms. "We can come in and down around once a week, and it's easier for the students to be forthcoming. They start to believe their voice can be made public and that people will listen." He remembers his first session at Henry Ford High when he suddenly realized that "this is who I was born to be: a teaching writer working in the city where my grandparents first settled." He says English Prof. Ralph Williams was his most inspiring U-M professor, someone "who had contagious energy" and "knew deeply and loved what he was teaching."



Foundation of an Institution

InsideOut traces its roots to U-M alum Robert Shaye '60, founder of New Line Cinema (and profiled in the June 1993, *Michigan Today—Ed.*). Following a premiere of his 1991 movie, *Book of Love*, Shaye revisited his high school where he met English teacher Terry Blackhawk, who convinced him that a literary magazine could foster creativity. Shaye went on to fund magazines at several Detroit schools, an effort that later expanded to include the residencies, the Citywide Poets troupe, and an extension of the Washington, DC-based PEN/Faulkner program that brings authors into classrooms.

Dozens of donors have joined Shaye in supporting InsideOut, including the National Education Association, Michigan Council for the Arts, DaimlerChrysler, Ford Motor Co., Marshall Field, and Detroit banks. Still on the program's advisory board, Shaye credits InsideOut's success to Blackhawk, "a teacher by training and saint by personality."

Now retired from teaching, Blackhawk writes poetry and continues to oversee InsideOut. "It costs about \$13,000 a year to put a writer or artist in a school for three classes a week, of which the school pays \$4,000. This is a good deal for cash-strapped schools that have eliminated enrichment programs.

"Teachers tell us our programs show them a side of kids they wouldn't see otherwise," Blackhawk says. "And it's not always the most obedient students who are the best writers. For the hour we're there, the classroom becomes a community, with no mocking or put-downs."

And if everything goes right, Blackhawk adds, "Children learn to be honest, and they learn they're deeper than they thought." **MT**

Mary Beth Lewis contributes to various publications on cultural topics and is the web editor at the University of Michigan School of Public Health.

Written Word

by Shawntai Brown

I am the new wing
the century
rhetoric of society
story of humanity
I am the written word
in corners my ideas splatter
onto pages with no direction
or carved path
made by the thousands who have traveled
down this same route before
born unique
conceived in courage every time
by a bashful hand
afraid to shout
but under the skin
strong enough to wet the page with fluids
identical to its own

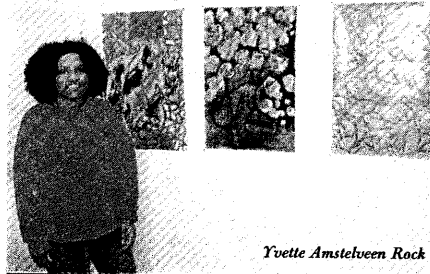
I am the new wing
the century
rhetoric of society
story of humanity
I am the written word

you cannot silence what isn't said
this type of art
crawls under the skin
leaching onto the heart
beating into it a pulse
its very own pulse
it survives off of those who try to kill it
It is the source of every empire's success
and bloody fall
it is heavily involved in every religion
it is the chains that keep poverty imprisoned
because when you read you see
but when you write you become the glasses of the world
all this power packed into a voice so small that life has ignored it
as something that merely breathes
a tree
beaten by the wind
that stitches into the air

I am the new wing
the century
rhetoric of society
story of humanity
I am the written word

They knew it all along
teach them to read and write
pop goes the world
use it boy in the corner
use it girl with no tongue
pen
pencil
keyboard
section the page off into a war zone
clone your brain and soul
and draw it with the letters on the page
and then let them chant
let them work their magic into some
fantastic fantasia
where centuries of classics fall into the pallet of
today's artist
I want to see you plant a seed in the paper
and watch it grow
then chant to the beat of the enemy's heart

I am the new wing
the century
rhetoric of society
story of humanity
I am the written word



Yvette Amstelveen Rock

Yvette Amstelveen Rock

U-M alumni who have held key positions with InsideOut agree that teaching—and being well taught—influence their artwork and their lives.

Former InsideOut artistic director Yvette Amstelveen Rock, MFA '99 recalls the transforming experience of painting a large mural with students at Crosman High. "Even teachers would walk by and say, 'You're never going to finish.' Personally, I wanted to persevere, and we did."