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VOICES

STUDENTS AT DES MOINES' HARDING MIDDLE SCHOOL INSPIRE, CHALLENGE AND CONFRONT THEIR GENERATION THROUGH POETRY

OF CHANGE

By Ann Hinga Klein
Special to the Register

Walking the short distance from his home to Harding Middle School on Des Moines' northeast side in 2010, Duncan Vivanh felt a chill every time he spotted a police car parked on the street near the building's entrance. A sixth-grader then, Duncan was known as a good kid — someone who shouldn't have feared the law. But he did.

"We'd had only one little incident in the morning, and all of a sudden policemen were patrolling us every morning," Duncan, now 13, recalled. "They would just be sitting there, watching us. I felt like we had no room to be free to do anything, even just mess around. It just seemed really scary to us."

Duncan didn't like some of the things he had seen in school, either — bullying and name calling when teachers weren't around. And he felt that a spate of news stories only highlighted the school's flaws.

"I felt like no one had faith in us. Every other middle school I've heard of — they're afraid of Harding," he said. "I wanted to change it, but I had no clue how to change anything."

He was about to get his chance. Vice Principal Jake Troja had already begun the mission he was hired to spearhead the year before: reconstruct the school's behavioral system. A former principal at Woodward Academy in Dallas County, he adapted an approach in which staff develops trusting relationships with student leaders, teaching them to serve as role models and problem-solvers within their own social groups.

Evidence that it's working is reflected not only in the significant drop in disruptive incidents like fights and class walkouts, but also in the voices of a creative writing group, Movement 515, in which Duncan and other students have been empowered to speak out to their school and community. The program was the brainchild of two young teachers — Emily Lang, 29, and Kristopher Rollins, 30 — who have grabbed their right-place, right-time opportunity to build on a shared dream: empowering minority students to lead change within their community.

Rollins is focused and directive, an instructor of civics and literacy who taught with Troja in Woodward before taking a position with a private school in Florida. Troja brought him back to



Davonte Binion, 13, performs during the Share the Mic spoken word and poetry slam held Oct. 26 in the chapel at Fort Des Moines Museum. BRYON HOULGRAVE/REGISTER PHOTOS



Members of Movement 515 gather prior to the word and poetry slam Oct. 26 in the chapel at Fort Des Moines Museum. Twenty-five selected poets performed at the Share the Mic event.

Iowa to serve on the new staff. Lang, a speech and drama instructor, is warm and expressive.

In addition to Movement 515, which meets weekly at North High School, they have developed Minorities on the Move, a summer course that examines racial stereotypes, and Hip-Hop: Rhetoric and Rhyme, a popular elective that's part history lesson, part contemporary literature review, part creative writing course and fast track to public

speaking.

They've also created Share the Mic, a tri-annual slam-style spoken word poetry performance, in which students stand alone on stage to perform original pieces, without notes, on topics ranging from bullying to sexual abuse to calls for social change.

"We pick up a lot of (the kids) to go to workshops," Lang said. "Plenty of parents are working long hours to put food on the ta-

ble, and we don't want to deny our kids opportunities because they don't have transportation. And to really, truly build relationships, kids have to see that you're willing to spend time outside the classroom with them. That's when they trust you.

"And when they trust you, you can push them to do the hard work that's going to benefit them."

That commitment was clear this fall as 25 selected poets pre-

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PHOTOS: See a few dozen photos from spoken word practices and the Oct. 26 event. **VIDEO:** Watch a video of performances from the event. **MORE INFO:** To learn about events by Movement 515, or to make a donation, go to www.rundsm.org.

pared for a Share the Mic performance at Fort Des Moines Museum on the city's south side. Writing and memorization began months before, and practices ramped up in the weeks leading up to the Oct. 26 event.

A call for community

Duncan — now a "friendly giant" of an eighth-grader at 5-foot-9 — stood on a chair at the front of Harding's Room 130 on a Thursday afternoon in mid-October. He held no notes.

On the wall behind him, letters Rollins cut from construction paper spelled out lyrics by rapper Mos Def: "Speech is my hammer; bang the world into shape." In the desks before him, a handful of students formed his audience. They were just one of three groups practicing in the empty after-school classrooms with Rollins, Lang and Larry Moore II, a special education associate and local spoken-word poet.

"All right, let 'em know," coached Rollins. Duncan smiled as he began to speak:

"It's time to put the unity in your community! It took awhile for this to get through to me but now all I'm trying to do is get you to see, it's time for this generation to make something of themselves. No more YOLOs and no more swag — I mean hot damn! I think it's about time to turn OUR community into a safe haven. Don't you think this generation is worth the saving?"

Students snapped their fingers in a show of support as Duncan pointed his index finger toward the floor, punctuating his message.

"Now forget the pride — I'm feeling sick inside! Don't you see what's going on? No more jump rope or hopscotch; now it's all clips stacked and POP POP! This is not true hip-hop!"

Like the others that day, he paused at times to recall words. "Go back a line," Rollins suggested. "You've got it." Duncan, also a

See **POETS**, Page 4E

Opportunities abound to help the needy

Here's a list of area groups looking for volunteers and more this holiday season

Iowans looking for ways to reach out and help those who need it most can volunteer their time, donate gifts and supplies, or do things like cook food for area organizations that have specific needs this time of year.

Through United Way of Central Iowa's Holiday Helping Hand initiative, the organizations are seeking help in 10 areas:

1. Adopt a family
2. Put together food baskets
3. Volunteer to drive
4. Visit the elderly

5. Provide a Thanksgiving or holiday feast
6. Donate canned food
7. Donate clothes
8. Donate toys
9. Donate other gifts
10. Help with holiday projects and parties.

Beacon of Life. The residential shelter for women needs donations of canned food and other gifts, and provided feasts. Contact Linda Pallwitz, 515-244-4713, ext. 2, beaconadmin@qwestoffice.net.

Bidwell Riverside Center. The child care center, food pantry and clothing provider needs help with adopt a family, food baskets, canned food donations, new clothes, new toys and other gifts. Contact Jessica Ireland, 515-244-6251, ext. 215, jireland@bidwellriverside.org.

Big Brothers Big Sisters of Central Iowa. Needs include: adopt a family, and donations of new clothes, new toys and other gifts. Contact Lisa Majors-Schissel, 515-288-9025, ext. 229, lmajors@bbsia.org.

Boys & Girls Clubs of Central Iowa. The group seeks help with adopt a family, food baskets, provided feasts and donations of canned food, new clothes, new toys and other gifts. Becky Seabrooke, 515-262-5695, bseabrooke@bgcci.org.

Central Iowa Shelter & Services. Its needs include provided feasts; donated canned food, new clothes; and holiday parties. Amy Olson, 515-284-5719, aolson@centraliowashelter.org.

See **HELP**, Page 5E



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Kristopher Rollins, 30, instructor of civics and literacy. "We don't have time to waste when minority students are considering dropping out of school in record numbers. We have to remix the system, think outside the box."



Emily Lang, 29, instructor of speech and drama. "The talent and ability of these kids is underestimated. They know they have to try harder to be successful and fight harder to have their voices heard."



Poet-mentor Larry Moore II, 25, special education science associate. "The way you succeed in life is by building the skills that are going to carry you through each phase. I expect our poets to act like they have sense and I expect them to get their work done."

A FEW STUDENT LEADERS



Leah Waughtal, 16, a junior at North High School. "She challenged our group to become better due to her rich words, leading them to another level of what they believed our group could be," Rollins said.



Dezejane Hall, 14, a freshman at East High School. "There is too much negative influence out there. This group is about influence in a positive way." Rollins described her as a strong leader who, after college, could continue to mentor minority students through Movement 515.



Julio Delgado, 13, an eighth-grader at Harding. "He has the ability to be cool and do the right thing, and he's our comedic poet. He inspires us to laugh and entertain," Rollins said.



Brianna Lam, 13, an eighth-grader at Harding. "When she ran for our student government's highest position, her speech was the piece she performed at Share the Mic — 'Young, Fresh & Educated.' The student body exploded, interrupting with applause throughout."

"I have basically found myself. People struggle to find their own groups, so they end up becoming things they are not, end up following fads, whatever they think is cool."

DUNCAN VIVANH, Harding Middle School student

POETS

Continued from Page 1E

break dancer who likes the spotlight, recovered quickly: "Is this how we want our community to remain? It's time for the people to experience our change. We are Movement 515! And we are here to stay!"

A breakthrough and a message

A week later, the 25 student poets — who had gathered for their final run-through — cheered from the laminated wooden seats in the Harding auditorium as 13-year-old Davonte Binion sprinted up the stairs and across the stage in tan jeans and a dark gray sweatshirt bearing a school logo, approved attire within the school's dress code.

"Don't be nice!" a girl called out. "Get free!" yelled another.

"OK, step up to the mic a little bit," Rollins coached. "Get free."

"You got this," Lang added.

Davonte began like a preacher, pointing skyward:

"Why do we follow rappers that talk about drugs, money and hoes, and how they're going to kill those that call them out? Well, here I go with your name out of my mouth: Lil Wayne, Chief Keef, Ricky Ross 'the boss.'"

Students cheered as Davonte formed air quotation marks, his voice turning sarcastic. He continued, pantomiming imagery in his next lines:

"Just a few who claim to click-clack at you to impress. I could go on but fear a bullet hole in my chest. These are the rappers to most likely influence you and the way you think. But the way you and they think is simply not OK. There is nobody telling you not to think in these ways."

"And you're probably just like me — no real positive influence because daddy left under the influence."

The group erupted as Davonte later finished and left the stage, and Rollins stood and wrapped his arms around him, rocking him back and forth. He later recalled the promise he had seen in the soft-spoken student from Minorities on the Move the summer before.

"Emily and I both wanted him to perform, but he just wasn't confident or ready," Rollins said, "so we gave him a mini biography of Jack Trice to read from a note card at the show, and he killed it. His expression was spot on and he read it with such conviction that we began to challenge him on performing for real once he entered our hip-hop class."

Davonte had struggled to get his thoughts on paper early in the course, shut-



Julio Delgado practices his poem at Harding Middle School last month. BRYON HOULGRAVE/REGISTER PHOTOS



Austin Harrell performs during the spoken word and poetry slam.

ting down until Rollins and Lang provided strategies such as using hip-hop lines and quotes as inspiration. "I actually wrote several drafts of that same poem," Davonte said. "My mom didn't like the first one. She said it didn't have enough of me in it."

A song by hip-hop artist Kendrick Lamar finally opened up the emotion that gave his poem its depth and power. "It was something I'd done everything to avoid," Davonte said.

A voice for a generation

Hatte Kelley, a North High School 10th-grader who studies advanced algebra, history, chemistry and literature at Central Academy, is among Rollins and Lang's early poets who have stuck with Movement 515 since moving onto high school.

She was also one of six local students who traveled, via a United Way grant, to San Francisco recently for a festival hosted by the group Brave New Voices, which showcased talented student poets worldwide. The trip inspired Kelley to develop her skills to call for justice — a practice honed over years of issues-based discussions with her dad in her family's home near Oak Park.

"Going to Harding and North, I see the problems and struggles the kids go through," she said.

In the standing-room-only crowd at Fort Des Moines Museum's 200-seat chapel on Oct. 26, Kelley danced in the side aisle with her friends and cheered for the up-and-coming poets who have pushed for change at the Harding she knew in its roughest days. One after another, they stepped to the

mic, each wielding a unique message: Sarahi Peralta, quietly asking the audience to walk in the shoes of Hispanic families struggling for a better life; Mikalen Sellers, charging men to respect a woman's figure; Lang, speaking angrily to Sen. Todd Akin on behalf of a child "wishing herself away the way you said it would happen."

When it was her turn, Kelley — dressed casually in a bright pink T-shirt, jeans and black Converse-style shoes with colorful grommets — bounded up to the stage. "Got somethin' to say?" a girl called out from the audience. Smiling, Kelley joined the booming response: "Say something!"

The audience quieted as she started her poem, written for policymakers who draw quick conclusions about students from low-income neighborhoods:

"How dare you call my generation illiterate! Do you know each and every one of us? Do you know how many kids these kids have to feed when they get home from school? Do you know why that boy insists on acting like a fool?"

"No matter how many marks you mark under 'not proficient' for each and every school in America, that will never amount to the figures we could never add up — the figures adding up in the weight of these children's hearts."

Her voice lowered, shaking with emotion as she continued:

"Tell me how many bedtime stories were missed, how many kisses on the forehead that needed to be kissed, how many nights Daddy was missed."

She went on with the relaxed energy of a seasoned performer and the wisdom that comes with having seen a lot by 15.

When finished, she

Harding: A diverse community

About the school: Warren G. Harding Middle School, at 203 E. Euclid Ave., serves a diverse area that includes portions of the Highland and Union Park neighborhoods on Des Moines' northeast side. Last year, 534 students were enrolled in grades 6-8.

	Minority students	Eligibility for free or reduced lunch
Harding	68%	88.5%
Des Moines Public Schools	52%	68%
Statewide	19%	39%

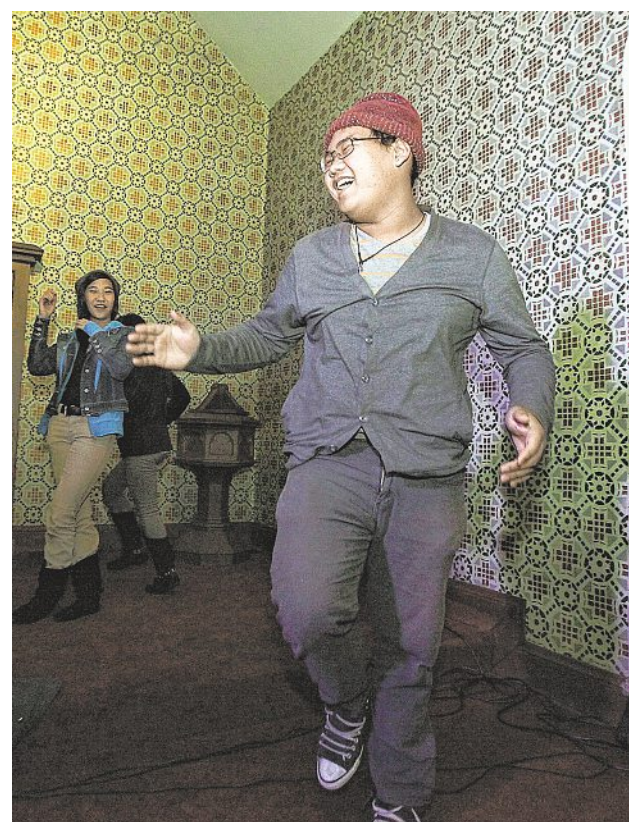
Sources: 2011-12 school year; Des Moines Public Schools and Iowa Department of Education

Student-based impact

Harding Vice Principal Jake Troja credits Behavior First — an approach he and Harding staff developed to offer positive activities and teach student leaders to manage behavior within their social groups — for a dramatic reduction in incidents that disrupt learning.

School year	Days of suspension	Physical fights
2009-10	739.7	130
2010-11	943.7	88
2011-12	278	48

Source: Harding Middle School, Oct. 29, 2012
THE REGISTER



Duncan Vivanh busts out a dance following the spoken word and poetry slam held in the chapel at Fort Des Moines Museum.

stepped off the stage as students across the front row offered high-fives. As the student-run house music boomed, she and her friends resumed their dancing.

"That was a good poem, Hatte, that was a solid poem," Moore told her as he took his place at the mic. She looked up, smiling as she mouthed the words "thank you" over the heads of the dancing, singing crowd.

A changed culture

The staff and students at Harding say they're seeing fewer police cars outside the building this year. A more likely sight: Rollins heading to his Hyundai Elantra, with a group of kids calling out "shotgun!" for prime seating on the

ride over to North for the Movement 515 weekly workshop.

Duncan might be in that bunch, or he might be off break-dancing with a performance crew he and a group of friends have started. At 13, he feels lucky.

"I have basically found myself," he said. "People struggle to find their own groups, so they end up becoming things they are not, end up following fads, whatever they think is cool."

"The whole purpose of my poem is — we don't want that any more. Each of us has our own unique way to tell our own story, but our message is the same: We want a better community. In Movement 515, we're using our voices to give a voice to the voiceless. That's how we bring about change."

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