

PEOPLE

‘Do the Write Thing:’ Middle schoolers write about violence in their communities

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Chicago Tribune

Published: May 12, 2023 at 5:05 pm



Summer Bell of Eberhart Elementary School, is congratulated by her grandmother Connie Bell, left, and mother Autumn Bell at the Do the Write Thing program awards ceremony on May, 9, 2023. (Terrence Antonio James / Chicago Tribune)

Jaylen Trice, 14, is a lyricist. He likes to put his thoughts and feelings on paper.

“Everyday/ I go outside and there’s one thought on my mind/ ‘Will I die today?’” he wrote in his award-winning poem “Eternal Cycle,” that illustrated the patterns of violence that surround him.

In a city beleaguered by gun violence, Jaylen was one of 100 middle school students honored Tuesday for writing about their experiences with violence at the 2023 Do The Write Thing challenge, an event co-chaired by Latham & Watkins and Communities in Schools of Chicago. He was one of two young writers selected to receive an all-expenses paid trip to Washington this summer to represent Chicago in Do The Write Thing’s national student gathering.

The top two essays in every city involved with Do The Write Thing are bound and placed in the Library of Congress. The collection of essays are then studied by various organizations to identify trends in violence.

Jaylen couldn’t stop smiling when he heard his name called from the stage. He stood shyly by the back wall, holding a big glass plaque.

His uncle died from three bullets in the chest, but he said he doesn’t like to talk about it. Instead, he wrote about how dangerous it is around his home. He said he recited the poem in front of his entire school.

“It feels so good to put what you’re experiencing onto something else,” he said. “When I reread it, it’s like ‘Yes, we can get through this.’”

The middle school students were dressed in suits and dresses as they gathered around the stage at the University of Illinois at Chicago student recreation facility Tuesday night. White and silver balloons decorated each table, which were filled with kids and parents.

“It’s so validating,” said Dr. Judith Allen, COO of Communities in Schools. “It’s that someone heard them, listened to them, and then are moving to do something to react to what they’re sharing.”

Eight hundred works were submitted this year by students across Chicago and read by more than 200 volunteer judges. Each essay was given a control number, read a minimum of three times by different judges and passed to an executive panel of about 30 readers ranging from senators to writers and actors.

The scoring is based on their thoughts and ideas rather than punctuation and grammar, said Robin Hulshizer, a partner at Latham & Watkins. Essays touched not only on how violence is affecting youth, but also what can be done.

“I saw a lot of bullying this year. Ten years ago, a lot of essays were about violence in video games,” Hulshizer said.

Students sat at tables and ate macaroni and cheese, chicken and peach cobbler, hoping to make the top 10, announced later in the evening.



Jaylen Trice holds awards he was given at the University of Illinois at Chicago during the Do the Write Thing awards ceremony on May, 9, 2023. (Terrence Antonio James / Chicago Tribune)

Summer Bell, 13, the other winner of the all-expenses paid trip, wrote a personal essay about the types of violence she’s experienced in her life. She wore a polka dot dress with white strap heels and glasses.

She started her essay by describing how she felt as a young girl after she [lost her pregnant teenage cousin, Eva Mae Casara, to gun violence](#) in 2013.

Casara left to meet up with her boyfriend Anthony without permission, and was later found dead in the snow with a gunshot wound to the head, Bell wrote. It was Christmas.

Against all odds, Casara's baby Lailani survived a five-month premature birth. Lailani is now 9 years old, and Bell has taken care of her for as long as she can remember. She wrote about Casara and Lailani in her essay, and said it's been hard to provide constant care to the child due to her disabilities.

Nneka Gunn, principal of Eberhart Elementary School where Bell attends, said she observed Bell to be an outgoing and social kid, who withdrew after Casara's death. Casara was also an Eberhart student, and Gunn said the tragedy touched the entire school.

These writing projects are therapeutic for so many kids, said Gunn.

"They have an opportunity to reflect on what happened to them, whether it was last month or 10 years ago, and talk about how it impacted them," she said. "To have Summer use her gifts to turn that into a touching experience and something that could effect change in our society is a very big deal."

Gunn said the collection of student writing makes gun violence feel more urgent, and brings everyone closer to the tragedy.

The middle schoolers speak from their hearts, she said. They're honest, and they don't sugarcoat anything.

In her essay, Bell talks about other relatives she's lost to gun violence, discrimination she feels, sexual harassment and alcohol abuse. She urges adults to listen to their kids.

"Although it may be difficult to stop this, there is one thing that may help prevent youth violence, and that is just start checking up on your children," she wrote.

Charles Lanfear is the author of a study published Tuesday in the Journal of the American Medical Association that examined the likelihood of being shot, seeing someone shot, or living near firearm violence over the past three decades in Chicago.

Lanfear analyzed data from 1995 to 2021, following kids at different stages of their lives. The kids came of age in different historical conditions, impacting

how each group interacts with violence, he said. When community violence rates are high, kids are likely to bear the brunt, he said.

“For Black and Hispanic males growing up in urban neighborhoods, seeing someone shot or being shot before even reaching age 20 years is pervasive,” Lanfear wrote.

Levels of firearm violence in 2020 and 2021 are higher now than they ever were in the early '90s, which historically had the highest recorded rates of gun violence, said Lanfear. Men are more likely to be shot and shoot people than women, he said, but women are just as likely to bear witness to a shooting as men.

“You can’t help but be kind of shocked by it,” Lanfear told the Tribune. “The levels of exposure today are greater than we would have expected.”

At the event, keynote speaker Kareem “K.W.O.E.” Wells, CEO of FLOW Entertainment, said he has seen violence in Chicago ebb and flow.



At the University of Illinois at Chicago, Archie Sanchez, center, from Eberhart Elementary School, listens during the Do the Write Thing awards ceremony on May, 9, 2023. (Terrence Antonio James / Chicago Tribune)

K.W.O.E. talked to parents and students about what it was like for him to grow up on the West Side with little support. He said he was bullied in school because he had only three pairs of pants, four shirts, and one pair of shoes.

“It was not like what we see today. The violence, was something that remained and got worse,” he said.

Brooklyn Grinage, 12, wore pink Air Force Nikes to match her pink hair. She said she wrote about her godfather who was shot. She said it was painful putting her thoughts onto paper.

“I don’t really know how to explain it. I wasn’t hurt, but I didn’t feel good about it,” she said. “The stuff I was writing, I shouldn’t be this young writing about stuff like that.”

Jaylen’s mother couldn’t attend the awards ceremony, and he said he couldn’t wait to walk through his front door with the trophy.

This will be Jaylen’s first time on an airplane.

An earlier version of this story misstated Dr. Judith Allen’s title and the name Latham & Watkins.

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