

## Kelly Miller School Poetry Club Does the Write Thing

ARTICLE AND PHOTOS BY CHARNICE A. MILTON

At 4:45 p.m. on a Wednesday afternoon a group of Kelly Miller Middle School students chatted away in their seats as Braxton Dunnmore, an assistant educator, told them they had 10 minutes to work out their nervous energy before Marion Ingram, their teacher, arrived. "What are we doing today?" they asked. "We're doing free-verse," said Dunnmore. While some students continued their conversations, many already had pencils and paper ready to write. This was a typical start to Kelly Miller's poetry club, one of many programs offered through Do the Write Thing of DC Inc. (DTWT), which Ingram serves as executive director.

### Do the Write Thing of DC Inc.

DTWT was founded by Ward 5 teacher Gerald Nordè Jr. and licensed as a nonprofit on September 14, 2011. "He worked with children in middle and elementary school for over 10



Marion Ingram gives pointers to a student after her spoken-word performance.

years," said Ingram, who currently serves as DTWT's executive director. "He had a dream that he wanted to do something that would involve STEM [science, technology, engineering, and math] enrichment and literary arts." Nordè initially served as executive director before promot-

ing Ingram, then DTWT's program director, to the post last year. Nordè currently sits on the DTWT board as a founding member. The organization runs a gifted and talented program at H.D. Woodson High School (with plans to expand to Cardozo Education Campus this summer),

Kelly Miller's poetry club, and a Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP) host site for media arts.

While DTWT bears a similar name to the Do the Write Thing Challenge from the National Campaign to Stop Violence, In-



Marion Ingram (third from the left) with the Kelly Miller Middle School Poetry Club. In its first year the club has performed at monthly Busboys and Poets' Youth Open Mic nights and will release a book of poetry at the end of this month.

## Kelly Miller Poetry Club (continued)

gram explained that the two are different entities. "We're all-inclusive, where we do more than one facet of literary arts. We're focused on book publishing, whereas their 'Do the Write Thing' is more a national non-violence campaign, structured more around peace in communities," said Ingram. "We do the same, however it is not the only facet we are involved in. We do media, publishing, video workshops, and songwriting workshops, where our youth has the opportunity to write, sing, and make movies about peace."

### Kelly Miller's Poetry Club

The poetry club at Kelly Miller began this school year. Ingram admits that it had a slow start. "Initially we had short attendance, it was inconsistent attendance," he explained. "A lot of times I would have special guests come and perform to entice them to write." However, as the year progressed Ingram did not need the special guests once the students began to perform their own material.

The students are more animated during the meeting's "glow and grow" portion, when the teachers and students critique performances. "The glow and grow segment of the live performance has inspired them to do better," Ingram explained. "Now that they're being critiqued by their peers they want to be the best they can be and eliminate the opportunity or possibility to have 'grows.'" That was evident at today's meeting, where a girl named Brianna read her poem, "The Unknown." "It's not always easy to get this one to come up here, and she's going second!" Ingram announced to the class, leading a round of applause. After a quick read-through her classmates raised their hands to give their opinions. "You should speak louder and your pace moves too fast," said one student. Ingram agreed, saying "I felt it was a very good piece, but a lot of people may not have com-

prehended the whole concept or rhythm." He gave Brianna another chance to improve her performance, offering her pointers along the way. This time she slowed her pace, her voice was clearer, and the feedback was more positive.

### For the Love of Performance

In-class performances help the students practice for the Youth Open Mic at Busboys and Poets, held every third Friday of the month. The restaurant, along with the DC Youth Slam Team and Split This Rock, hosts the event at its 5th and K Street location. Kelly Miller's poetry club has been performing since September. "For them, it's like Showtime at the Apollo," said Ingram. "A lot of kids never get the opportunity to leave this neighborhood. A lot of them couldn't even tell me how to get downtown to 5th and K Street. A lot of the parents would not take them to 5th and K Street when I had the invites to other programs. It's really important to give them the opportunity for exposure and to display their talents."

As they continued practicing, Ingram noticed a change in his students. "I've seen them come from being timid about writing on paper and no one wanting to stand up in the front to read, to now fighting to see who would stand up to read first," he said. In the beginning, he noted, about 75 percent of students felt awkward and shy when performing. Now he thought the number had fallen to about 15 percent. "I've seen a dramatic turnaround in their self-confidence, self-esteem, and their ability to perform and write," he said.

### Getting Published

While performance is a popular aspect of the club, there is another side that is important in DTWT. "I wanted to provide them with the opportunity to become paid authors at a young age," said Ingram. During the DTWT SYEP and "Book-in-a-Week" workshops participants write, edit, and publish poetry books, then organize book signings and other promotions. Some of

their works include "Our Planets, Ourselves: Solar Cycle Poems by Do the Write Thing Youth," "Black Flames: Catch the Fire through Poems by Youth in DTWT of DC's Summer Program," and "Poetry in Motion: The Birth of Success."

By the end of the month the poetry club will release a collection of its work, tentatively known as "Kelly Miller: Poems and Spoken Words" (the club will pick a name at a later time). To promote it they will hold book signings at Eastern Market and area churches during the summer, as well as at the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation's Legislative Conference in the fall. This will give the students a chance to learn entrepreneurial skills as they sell their books to their communities and online through Amazon.

### Providing an Outlet

One of the goals Ingram set for the poetry club was "to provide a safe outlet for everyone to feel comfortable to share, out of their heart, soul, and mind, things perhaps that would otherwise fester in open society." He believes he has done that. Ingram added with a laugh, "We have a very young group, but they've got some wisdom and words to share!" For instance, he described a student whose earlier poetry had dark themes that reflected what she saw in her neighborhood. "You never know what these children are exposed to in their own environment," he said. "Just seeing her grow and providing an outlet for her so she could see that there are better things outside of what she's witnessing at home, it feels like my job is done every time I'm with her." He continued: "As long as we can provide outlets for the youth where they can continue to share their hope and desire for ambitions and escape, then as an educator and as an artist I'm doing my job because I'm providing that platform."

*To learn more about Do the Write Thing of DC Inc. visit [www.dothewritethinginc.org](http://www.dothewritethinginc.org) or contact them at 202-239-8293 or [info@dothewritethinginc.org](mailto:info@dothewritethinginc.org).* ♦