

Aspiring to Dew More: Kenneth Morrison uses spoken-word poetry to empower young people and create social change

By BY ELIZABETH DOERR
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Kenneth Morrison steps out in front of the small group. He raises his arms and eyes to the ceiling and, with a preacher's inflection, says, "Scriptures suggest that the return of Jesus was near. But what if Jesus was already here? What if Jesus was a prostitute?" The small audience of MICA graduate students offer mmm-hmmms of affirmation.

Morrison's voice lifts and dips in poetic cadence. "But what if? What if Jesus came back as my mother?" he asks. "What if Jesus' greatest miracle was giving her son everything he ever needed even when she had nothing to give? And if you can worship a god that sacrificed her son to save some sinners then surely you worship a sinner that sacrificed her soul to save her son." With his last line, he opens his hands in a there-you-have-it gesture. At 6-foot-3, he towers over the students, but he draws his power from his words and voice.

Morrison isn't a reverend, he's a poet. And the students aren't parishioners, they're attending a spoken-word poetry workshop. But for Morrison, executive director of Dew More Baltimore, the lines—and the roles he plays—often blur. As an African-American, "same-gender-loving" man, an activist, and an educator, he uses his poetry to channel everything he knows about himself and wants others to think about the world. Through Dew More, an organization that gives voice to young people through the arts, specifically spoken-word poetry, he works to inspire and encourage others to create social change. When Morrison began Dew More in 2012, he wanted to address the apathy he saw around him. "Spoken word is an opportunity for youth to process and find their voice," he says. In April, he saw this happen. "The uprising created opportunities for the youth voices to be heard." Although he and his staff were asked to speak after the events, Morrison felt that he shouldn't "jump in front of the young people to speak for them." So, Dew More's young poets found themselves performing in front of an auditorium at the Johns Hopkins School of Public Health a couple of weeks after the uprisings, headlining right after Congressman Elijah Cummings spoke. They also performed at City Hall and a school-board meeting.

They were bringing audiences of professionals and academics to their feet. They were being heard and Morrison knew from firsthand experience how intoxicating and powerful that could be.

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"I didn't do much in school, but I always enjoyed being in front of the class," he says, explaining that he first realized he was a poet in seventh grade as he watched his Greenspring Middle School's oratory competition. As a girl in his class performed a spoken-word poem, she brought the whole school, including Morrison, to their feet. "That is what I want to do," he vowed at that moment. The next year, after successfully advocating for the return of the oratory competition that the principal had canceled, Morrison stood in front of the

entire school and performed his first poem called 'Questions.' The audience gave him a standing ovation, just as it had the year before with the girl and her captivating poem. And this time, Morrison won the competition.

"It was the first time I existed," he says. "That was the moment I realized I was really good at something. That is the moment I became a poet."

Morrison, now 30, grew up in Park Heights with "all the social ills of the community" with a substance-abusing mother who suffered from mental illness and a drug-dealing father. His grandmother raised him in a loving and giving home during his early years, he says, but after she became sick and moved to Detroit when he was 13, he was back with his parents.

After months of verbal abuse from his father, sharing rooms with prostitutes, and peeling used condoms off his bed after coming home from school, he left his father's home at 13 with a "gentleman's handshake," promising he would never go back to him. Thus began a three-year period of "couch surfing" where Morrison hopped from home to home—a neighbor's, a friend's, then another friend's, and so on. Then a mentor from church unofficially adopted him at 16 (they've decided to make the adoption official this year).

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"It was culture shock," he says, about his new environment in the majority-white, upper-middle-class Bolton Hill neighborhood. "I was suddenly in a world where everyone read The New York Times and had discussions about the world news. I was excited, but, it was also sad because so many people who looked like me weren't exposed to this kind of environment."

He also started to experience subtle and not-so-subtle racism. Police once handcuffed him when he went to turn off his father's car alarm, he says, and one time a neighbor asked him not to bring around his friends because it affected the property value. But, his adoptive father always supported him in any endeavor no matter how trivial it might have seemed. He also made

Morrison promise that someday he'd return to "make a difference for the children of the community he came from."

"The same gentleman's handshake I gave my father at 13," he reflects back, "I gave my [adoptive father] at 16. From that point on, it made me really passionate to go back to my community and do the work so that my community could have the same privileges as people in Bolton Hill."

At 26, a decade after that handshake, he became the director of youth services for Park Heights Renaissance. He enjoyed the work he was doing with teens, helping them find their way as his adoptive father had helped him, but he still felt something was missing. "Every job I had, every boss I had was non-African-American," he says. When he left Park Heights Renaissance in 2012, he decided to look for a job where he could work under leadership that either was from the community or, at the very least, looked like the community. He wanted to combine his passion for youth development and spoken-word poetry, but couldn't find an organization that did that at the time. So, he started one himself.

Morrison had an entrepreneurial spirit. From the time he lobbied for the return of the oratory contest in eighth grade to the year he turned 18 and started a series of support groups in Baltimore City for LGBTQ youth like himself, he knew it was possible.

After a series of conversations with friends and colleagues during which he developed a plan and secured funding, he launched Dew More Baltimore at Northwestern High School on July 1, 2012. Three years later, the organization has four major programs (Social Justice Poetry Clubs, Writers in Schools, Neighborhood Youth Councils, and Youth Poet Laureate), a diverse board of directors, 16 part-time staff members, and a full-time VISTA volunteer slated to start later this fall. He also partners with institutions such as MICA to conduct workshops for educators and social-justice advocates in the city.

"Ultimately, it's about helping to allow this art form to be mainstream," says Morrison, who sees a connection between the spread of spoken word and social change. "That will eventually feed back into the movement."