

FEATURING THE VOICES OF TEEN EMPOWERMENT YOUTH

My Story

by Giovanni Carrasquillo

South End/Lower Roxbury site

Gio gave this speech before 350 youth and adults at the TE-organized "Street Life" event at Roxbury Community College in August. To see a video of the speech, go to YouTube.com and search for "Giovanni Carrasquillo."

I grew up with my mother and younger brother in the Heath Street project. People knew my mother as Mama T because she had open arms for everyone. But when I was seven years old, she came down with AIDS and cancer. At that point, my family got desperate. When I was 10, I saw that a lot of people made money selling drugs so it seemed like a good thing for me to do. When I was 12 years old, because I was dealing, we got evicted. For the next two years, we moved around a lot. During this time my mother became so weak that she couldn't walk.

My mother always told me to go to school, but with her so sick, I had to stay home and help. So at the age of 14, I dropped out. During this time, I got arrested over and over. Each time they got me, I'd plead out, get probation, and go right back to the streets.

When I was 15, my mother died. At first, they sent me to DYS and then I ended up doing time in South Bay. Now, I am working to turn my life around. But there are plenty of things that are making it harder, like the CORI law* that makes it difficult to get a job. And sometimes, I ask myself, what kind of society leaves a seven year old to take care of his family, or allows a good

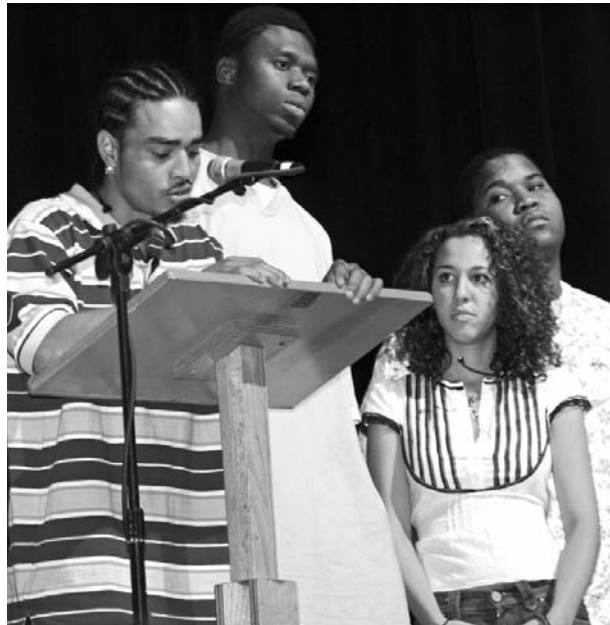


PHOTO: JENNIFER BODNAR

woman like my mother to die without getting the help that she needed?

I know that what happens to me depends on what I do. But, this isn't just about me. The government also needs to make sure that everyone gets the things they need to survive. When that happens, more of us will choose to live positive lives.

* CORI (Criminal Offender Record Information) refers to Massachusetts laws and practices relating to criminal records. It is often a barrier to obtaining jobs, housing, and education. For more information, do an internet search for "Massachusetts Alliance to Reform CORI."

Recent Recognition

Teen Empowerment youth organizers, as a group, have been chosen as community "upstanders" by Facing History and Ourselves. They will be featured in the "Choosing to Participate" exhibition at the Boston Public Library January 20 through May 20, 2008. See www.choosingtoparticipate.org.

The Center for Teen Empowerment, Inc.
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617-536-4266
www.teenempowerment.org

Branching Out

This fall, TE opened a new site serving the Egleston Square area of Roxbury. TE employs a dozen local youth at the site working to engage the larger community of young people and adults in creating a peaceful neighborhood. The Power Rap was written by Egleston Square youth organizers and pre-

sented at the site's grand opening event.

With three community sites in Boston, TE is now better able to reach out to at-risk youth in these neighborhoods and to spread the power of youth as active agents of positive change.

Power Rap (an excerpt)

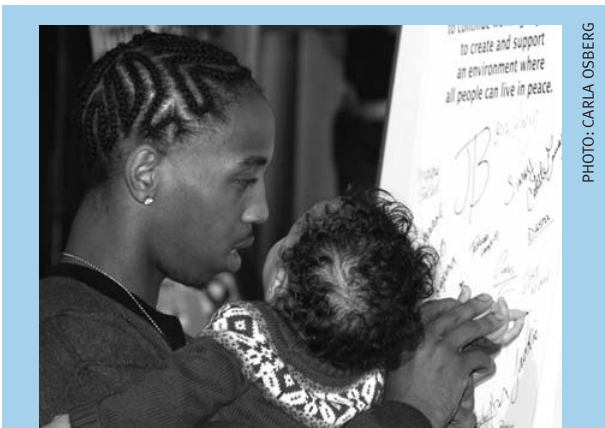


PHOTO: CARLA OSBERG

Marquis Roberts, holding his daughter Aliyah Marie, signs the Pledge for Peace at the 2007 Boston Youth Peace Conference.

by Ronnie Ortiz and Marquis Roberts, performed at the Egleston site's grand opening in October

Yeah I thought I was tough, and yeah I thought I learned enough,
Until the streets got rough, when I got thrown in them cuffs,
I said to myself, enough is enough
It's time to get on track and never look back at the stuff that made me collapse
I gotta keep it cool, gotta get back in school and prove to my daughter, that I ain't no fool
Because I'm doing it just for you and my dudes too, so every time they come around, man
We got something to do
'Cause money is power and power is money
No more days of looking bummy cuz we living real lovely
Change is power and power is change
In order for peace we gotta stop busting them thangs
Knowledge is power and power is knowledge
'Cause what we need is more blacks and Latins in college
Building is power and power is building
'Cause what we need to do is chill and show support for our children

I ain't the type to beef, 'cause thanks to TE, I'm off the streets,
I ain't busting no heats, I'm just another soldier out here fighting for peace

The Effect of Drugs

by Alexis Ramos, performed at the Somerville site's Villeside Café in November

People say you never know what you had until it's gone

But yet those who speak it are still doing wrong
It's time to wake up and realize
That drugs can kill or leave you paralyzed
Take it from me I lost someone to drugs
Now I'm missing my friend and the love in her hugs
Look at the people around you
Don't you know that you're hurting them too?
I guess my friend didn't know about that
Cuz she would be here right now and that's a fact
Was it love that she had for her boyfriend and his bad ways?

Or her peer pressure friends who always paid
Maybe if I showed her how much I really cared
She probably wouldn't have started doing heroin and whatever was dared
Or maybe she did it just to be cool
But if that's true then that was a bad move
I looked up to her as one of my role models, an older figure
But once the drugs kicked in she was no more than a shadow figure

My friend could have gone to college
Doing good with her life and knowledge
The wonders I know she could have did
She helped me and never treated me like a kid
But now I'm older almost all grown up
And she's nowhere to be found now that things are getting rough

I wish I could go back to the days at Foss Park
So I could remind her that she was my light and I'm scared of the dark!

Save the date for The Center for Teen Empowerment's
Celebration of Hope & Caring

Wednesday, March 5, 2008 • 6:00 TO 9:00PM
Westin Copley Place, Boston • 10 Huntington Avenue

To donate an item for our silent auction, or for more information: Stephanie@teenempowerment.org

Fix Our Music, Fix Ourselves

by Eileen Santiago, delivered at the Rochester Youth Conference and Speakout in October

Hello, I'm Eileen. Now I'm in college, but I worked as a youth organizer for Teen Empowerment a couple of years ago and somehow I always seem to find my way back here. I guess it's because there are so many important issues we have to address as youth. For example, there is a lot of violence going on in our community. Every time I pick up the newspaper or turn on the TV, I see that we've lost another life. What are we doing to ourselves?

Now, I know that hip hop music is not the cause. There are deep rooted issues like poverty and hopelessness that we need to deal with. But the music I hear today isn't helping. These issues were around back in the 70s when hip hop started, but back then we used our voices to unite and pull ourselves out of the struggle.

My brother was murdered in January 2001, shot and killed at the age of 19. I know that hip hop didn't kill my brother, but my brother was living an image and a life of destruction that a lot of today's music promotes. When hip hop music focuses its message on promoting greed, violence, and disrespect for women, our children grow up thinking that's the way it is and that's okay.

Well, I don't believe it has to be that way. People think that there is no way to prevent people from acting the way they act. I believe differently. I

believe that my brother's death could have been prevented. He should not have been killed at the age of 19. My family and I should have never gone through what we did. No one can tell me that this is the way life is supposed to be.

Like many great leaders in the past, we need to use our voices to create change and to demand the resources necessary to help us build this community back up. Some of us remember the true spirit of hip hop—poor people finding a voice, coming together, speaking out about the struggle, condemning horrible living conditions, bad health care, and poverty. We used to use music, art, and culture to challenge the system and let people know about our issues. What happened? Now the hip hop we see and hear on TV and on the radio doesn't challenge the system or uplift us. Instead, it tears us down.

We need to fix our music. We need to fix ourselves. And, we need to fix our music in order to fix ourselves. Music and words are powerful tools for making positive changes. It's time for us to take hip hop back. It's time to use our talents and our voices to build community, create peace, get better jobs, more fair housing, and better schools. It's time to make music that challenges those in power to listen to us and that demands that they act on our behalf. As youth, we are known for our imagination and creativity. Those are the only tools we need to flip the script and take matters into our own hands.

Best Practices

Teen Empowerment's work with the City of Rochester will be featured in a publication by the US Conference of Mayors, "Best Practices on At-Risk Youth and High School Drop-out Prevention," to be released in January. The article features TE's Youth-Police Unity Project and the new Mayor's Youth Advisory Council, facilitated by TE, as best practices for suggested replication by other US cities. Thanks to Mayor Robert Duffy for his support!

Three Cities, Three Youth Conferences

In 2007, Teen Empowerment organized youth-led conferences in Boston, Somerville, and Rochester. Each of these events featured youth performing original raps and plays, delivering speeches about their thoughts and experiences, facilitating workshops, and speaking about loss, hope, and unity in speakouts and healing ceremonies. Over 130 youth were directly involved in organizing these events, which were attended by more than 1500 people and focused on social change agendas for youth and society.

April 7: 1st annual Somerville Youth Peace Conference

May 19: 15th annual Boston Youth Peace Conference

October 13: 4th annual Rochester Youth Conference & Speakout



Boston: Conference registration—it couldn't be done without our volunteers!



Boston: Devon Brown interrupts his prepared speech to publicly thank his grandmother (right) for her love and caring.

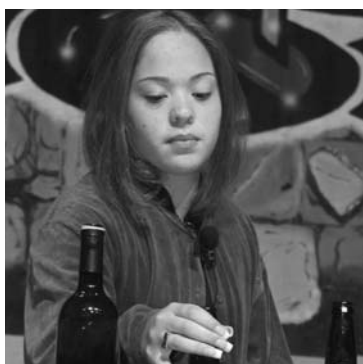


Terrell Walton, assisted by Stella Downie, talks about the street life that led to his paralysis. Terrell spoke at both the Somerville and Boston conferences.



Somerville: A young man in trouble, played by Abdi Mohamed, considers his options.

Stage Presentations



Boston: Jissel Rivas playing a mother who is an alcoholic



Rochester: DazMann Still reads from MLK's *Letters from a Birmingham Jail*.



Rochester: Britny Horton's character listens to her conscience (Charese King) as she struggles with an issue.



Boston: Kwame Horsley facilitating a workshop



Rochester: An Info Fair participant



Somerville: Suzanne Styffe facilitating a workshop

Workshops & Info Fairs



Boston: Workshop participants speak and listen



Rochester: Rosetta Washington facilitating a Connection Session



Somerville: Speaking at the healing ceremony

Speakouts & Healing Ceremonies



Rochester: Peter Velasquez makes his point at the speakout.

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Somerville: John Mahoney reads a tribute to some friends at the healing ceremony

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Teen Empowerment's Sites

Boston

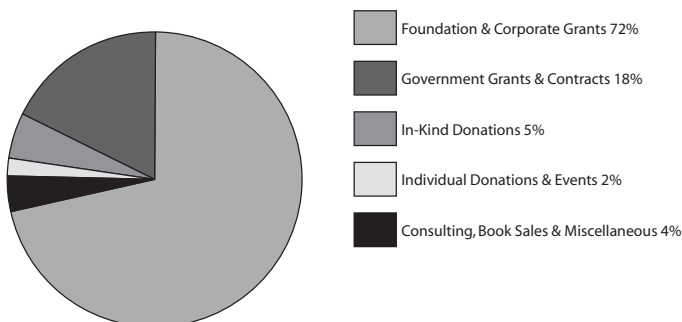
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Egleston Square: 2010 Columbus Avenue, Roxbury, MA 02119
South End/Lower Roxbury: 48 Rutland Street, Boston, MA 02118

Somerville: 236A Pearl Street, Somerville, MA 02145
Rochester: 105 Liberty Pole Way, Rochester, NY 14604

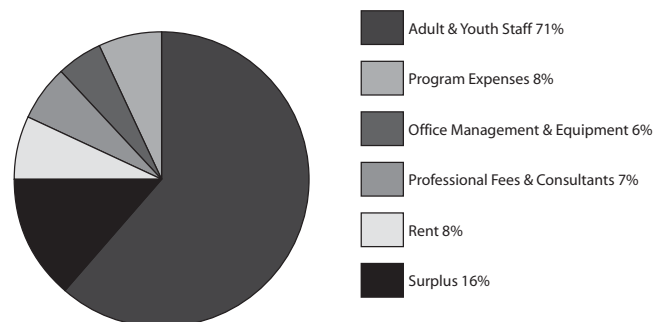


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Working through Hate

by Josh Santiago, delivered at the South End/Lower Roxbury site's P.M. Café in November

As a young child, I grew up knowing too much about the idea of hate, because of the experiences that I had with my family. My mother had an addiction to drugs that kept her in and out of rehab, so my grandmother had to raise me.

I constantly disrespected and argued with my grandmother and I got into fights in school. My grandmother could not handle the anger and she asked me to leave. My behavior led me to decisions and actions that left me with nothing. It kept me away from my life and my family.

I was put into DSS; I went from program to program. I had to get help so that my family and I could work together. Like most young people in DSS, I did not like it at first because I did not feel that I could trust them. They never gave clear answers and we never knew what was going on. I

think if they told the youth more information and allowed us to be in meetings we would trust DSS more. We may be young, but we understand a lot.

But in the end DSS did help me through. They taught me how to respect and to change my actions, and they showed me discipline. My grandmother has also really pushed me to find my path so that I can be a better person. For this I thank her. I also thank my mother. She taught me how to be a strong person. Even though people judge her for her drug addiction, she did her best to be the best mother she could. Maybe if she had more support and a better rehab program she could have gotten better.

I know that there are still things that I have to work on, but I have a dream to become a hero in my family and go back home for good. Don't let go of your dreams even when life does get rough. We have the ability to make the changes that we want.

Superhero

by Marvin Viega, delivered at the Dorchester site's event in November featuring a dialogue session, performances, and an open mike.

My parents came here with three kids from Cape Verde. My younger brother and I were born here and grew up in Dorchester. When I was 2 years old, my father started drinking and eventually ended up in jail. My brother and sister were taken from our family and placed in foster care. This put me on a negative cycle of hating my father, judges, lawyers, police, and anyone who seemed to have power over my life and used it to hurt me.

When I was in elementary school, I wasn't able to focus and started getting in trouble, not doing my work and fighting. My mom was there for me as much as she could, but she had no support from my father. I didn't have a hero to look up to and get direction from. I was cool with the people who were in the same shoes as me. We formed gangs and started robbing and jumping kids.

Instead of adults in the school system trying to find out why I was acting the way I was, I was labeled a troublemaker – a hood kid. That didn't encourage a need or desire to try. I was kicked out of two elementary schools and three middle schools. No one asked me why I was being kicked out or why I was so troubled, they just moved me around.

I somehow made it to the eighth grade barely

knowing how to read or write. I was 16 years old and had multiple charges on my record. At 17, I was locked up with murderers and rapists and people that did every type of crime. Jail didn't prepare me to go back into my community to be a productive member. After I got out of jail, I still had that block mentality. I was stabbed twice and shot once. When I was alone in a hospital bed with wounds from the streets, I realized I had to take charge of my life and change it.

My mom was there to tell me not to give up and she pushed me to try to get out of the cycle and get a job. I applied to many places, but they all did CORI checks on me, judged me by my past, and wouldn't give me a chance. I wanted to give up so many times and go back to street life, but my mother kept pushing me not to.

I know that there are many people out there who have no hope and who do give up. I believe if there were more superheroes who showed they care and motivated troubled youth, these youth would find their way out of the cycle.

I found out that Teen Empowerment was hiring and I applied and got the job. They gave me a chance to change my life around. Although the system failed me, I now realize that I am a superhero. I have the power within myself to at least make a decision to change.