

RIPPLES OF THE FOURTH WAVE: NEW YORK'S VIBEPOETRY

By Dana Edell

How do we prepare the girls of today to become the women of tomorrow? What is the nature of the tools? How do we measure the progress? Where will our future community arts leaders come from? Born in 1975, I come from a generation that learned by first watching, then participating, absorbing history and finally, challenging structure. These days we have no easy paradigm for effective activism, unlike the generation that came of age in the '60s and '70s that had the battles of the civil-rights and antiwar movements and first-, second- and third-wave feminism. But those moments now feel like textbook history, dusty and dated. With new technologies erupting every minute, we must acknowledge that this generation is able to think fast, move fast and get bored fast. In order for them to witness social change on their level, they must be the initiators. If the current generation is to take on the moniker of community-arts leadership, we must begin with the end-point of the cycles of the past. We need to allow our youth to revolt against our systems *first*. They must be the leaders. Now.

This article signposts a journey that is being danced as I type. My organization, viBe Theater Experience, has set the stage for three exceptional teenage girls who are voicing their vision for their future through creativity and performance.

viBe Theater Experience is a performing-arts/education organization self-described as “a safe, creative space for underserved young women to share their stories and use their voices to build and transform themselves and their communities,” <http://www.viBeTheater.org>. viBe empowers teenage girls by engaging and inspiring them to create, rehearse, design, publish and perform personal and truthful collaborative theater pieces.

As a co-founder and the current executive director of viBe, I have witnessed first-hand how our programs counteract the low self-esteem, lack of confidence, poor body image and the disenfranchisement of young, “unlistened-to” women. viBe uses the healing and transformative powers of theater to ignite an audience to reflect upon their own lives, speak up for what they believe and to advocate for change.

New York City has few models for youth leadership and there are rare circumstances where young people are trusted as leaders. Many community-based arts education programs are created by professional artists, educators and community activists. This model prevails as a pedagogical structure of incorporating an “expert” to guide young, novice artists through the creative process. Adults have years of experience as productive art makers, as members of society and as teachers. The wealth of knowledge that we bring to the youth community is indisputable. What is lacking from this model, though, is a trust and faith in the next generation's ability to provide the tools for themselves and to launch their own paths through the murky waters of social change. We have dedicated our energy to providing guidance and mentorship to beginners and to creating a nurturing, cushioned space where they are free and uninhibited to explore as artists.

As I became more deeply engaged in this mission, I realized that I had committed to working with the young artists as their “director.” I would design the curriculum with my fellow co-director, provide writing “prompts” to facilitate the girls' creation of text, lead games and exercises that encouraged creative, physical theater and dance explorations and I would, in the end, direct the performances. As community-based performance scholar and artist, Jan Cohen-Cruz writes in “Local Acts: Community-Based Performance in the United States”: “Community-based performance relies on artists guiding the creation of original work or material adapted to, and with, people with a primary relationship to the content, not necessarily to the craft.” I would “guide” them to create text and performance that challenged and embraced the experience of being an urban teenage girl in New York City. The young viBe artists are mostly of African and Latin descent

and live in low-income households. As a 30-year-old, white, female doctoral student, I am a distant whisper from this experience. So how do I, as a responsible community artist/activist, truly empower young people to not only write and perform their experiences, but to conceive future collaborations, direct themselves and become autonomous? How do we “guide” the next generation to become leaders in community-based performance?

viBeGirlsInCharge

This very opportunity struck. In September 2005, Unique, Tinaya and Brittney, three of our “viBeAlumnae” (girls who have participated in our programs) approached me and asked if I would start a poetry program where they could express themselves through performed poetry. I told the girls that if they were interested in poetry, they shouldn’t assume that viBe would automatically provide the structure and resources for them. Their passionate and persistent interest in this as-yet-unformed poetry project provoked me to reconsider my nascent theories about youth leadership. I began to construct a new program called viBeGirlsInCharge. This potential poetry project would be the pilot round for this different leadership model.

I drafted a set of guidelines and challenged the interested girls to articulate a mission statement for the project, define their roles, devise a week-to-week curriculum, draft a budget and conceive a fundraising strategy. I guided their thinking by drawing a basic sketch, though they were responsible for filling it in and making it sparkle. I also wanted to encourage them to understand how important it is to plan in advance. This was a point where our ideologies clashed and I felt the generation gap that really can be filled only through experience: They were resistant to plan too far ahead. They wanted to just do it, dive in, get wet and play. They had wanted to start that week! I struggled to respect their spontaneity and their energy and hunger to begin immediately, but I could see a bit further into the future and wanted to make sure that they had a plan before they got in too deep. By creating structures and timelines to take them step-by-step along their process, I attempted to impress upon them the importance for leaders to plot their vision and to think long-term.

From inception, the program design, recruitment, hiring teaching artists, planning fieldtrips, developing a curriculum, securing a performance venue, budgeting and fundraising, these three young women have created their own youth-arts program. At 16 and 17 years old, they are quickly becoming leaders and building my hope for the future of community arts. “Young people’s emotional development is dramatically influenced by the knowledge and power that they can ‘change the world.’ Creating an environment for transformation allows young people to make modest yet meaningful changes to the physical space around them which results in feelings of possibility and effectiveness,” (Ingalls) As Susan Ingalls declares, we need to provide opportunities for youth to learn not only how to make art, but how *making art* can transform them, their peers and their community. Our greatest disservice to young people is our mistrust in their ability to truly make change.

Though far from being “victims,” these three teens have all faced challenges growing up in low-income, New York City communities with limited resources and opportunities. Psychologist L.J. Crockett observes in her article “Contexts of Adolescence,” in “Health Risks and Developmental Transitions During Adolescence”: “The inconsistent expectations for behavior confronting inner-city ... youth may have implications for their identity formation and psychological well-being. Inconsistent messages about what constitutes appropriate behavior and future goals may impede the process of developing a coherent sense of self.” (Crockett). All three of them have teenage friends who are either pregnant or are already mothers. Unique comes from the Bronx county which has the highest teenage pregnancy rate in the country. The large public high school in Harlem that Brittney and Tinaya attend is at over 150 percent capacity. Five percent of its student body has served time as juveniles in prison. According to a Harris Interactive and Girls Inc. study, 62 percent of girls said they experience stereotypes that limit their right to accept and appreciate their own bodies. Less than 50 percent of girls in New York City graduate high school in four years. It is a great testament to the courage and ambition of these three girls that they have not only avoided destructive behavior, but have committed themselves to educating and empowering their female peers to use the arts to overcome obstacles and release the stress and tension in their lives.

Unique, Tinaya and Brittney: viBePoetry Co-directors

Tinaya and Brittney are both high school seniors. They have been close friends since the ninth grade and behave like sisters. They “got each others’ backs.” They have been involved with viBe consistently for nearly three years.

Brittney is a highly intelligent, compassionate, and popular girl who seems to get along with everyone, though she has a core of strength and will fight for what she deserves. As senior class president, she is charismatic, a natural leader. She was raised in Harlem by a single mother. Shortly after the 2004 presidential election, Brittney expressed her political views in her performance writing:

The beauty of this country is that we have choice. If you don’t like something, your voice can change it. But Blacks and Hispanics, we think it’s stupid to vote because there never is or was a change. How can you request change and don’t vote?

Tinaya is a loud, boisterous, witty drama queen full of energy and exuberance with a gigantic heart, and a beautiful spirit. She survived a difficult and tumultuous childhood in Brooklyn. She’s a fierce poet with a bold voice and is a powerful, unstoppable performer. One of her recent poems that illuminates her strong sense of self:

Me. M. E.
Is all that I can be
From the brownness of my skin
To my deep soul within
From the thickness of my thighs
To the blindness of my four eyes
Me. M. E.
Is all that I can be.

When asked why she wanted to start viBePoetry, Tinaya pontificated, “writing a ten-line poem can be your therapy for ten months of pain.”

Unique is a junior at a progressive and energetic public school on the Lower East Side. She has a glowing energy and such a generous spirit that it’s surprising that she characterizes her personality as blunt. She writes songs that make your toenails tingle and sings like a 50-year-old blues diva. She’s never shy to ask questions and to say whatever she is feeling. Unique has been involved with viBe since she was a high-school freshman. She explained to me,

Poetry has affected my life a lot. I noticed that I could be crying and feeling so upset about something and all I need is to get that pen and paper and my words start forming a poem and I just feel so much better because I’ve gotten everything out of my system. All the negativity is now on paper, in the poem.

According to these three teenage co-directors, the goals of the viBePoetry project are to teach a selected group of seven girls to express themselves through poetry and then to collaboratively create and perform their original show in a theater for a public audience. Brittney describes the birthing process:

All three of us had to get together and say what we wanted and what we thought this program would be about and we had to write down our ideas and create the show in our mind and let Dana know that we’re serious about this and this is what we’re gonna do and we’re also going to bring something new to viBe. Dana and Chandra [Thomas, viBe’s co-founder and current director of programming] have known us since freshman year and they basically helped shape who we are now. They’ve helped us with the process of growing up as teenagers and they see what type of young women we’ve grown up to be and now we’re more mature and we’re ready to give something back to other girls.

Tinaya tells me it will be “the best damn show of your life. Something different. Something raw. Seven girls being themselves.” Brittney adds, “We want the audience to understand what a teenage girl goes through.” “But in a poetic way!” Unique busts in.

They have encountered challenges in creating a structure for their triumvirate leadership. They decided that they would rotate as sole leaders in the rehearsal studio. Every three weeks a different girl would be in charge so that they would each get different chances to create and implement curriculum and gain teaching and directing experience. Brittney describes, “We each contribute to how the rehearsals are going to be run. We’re all sharing the power.” This model is idealistic and assumes that each girl is bringing very similar things to the room. I feel that they should assume more specific and separate roles. But since they have never done any of this before, they need to each explore what those potential roles could be.

As a team, they collaborated on the overarching curriculum and decided to include many of the rituals that they had become accustomed to in their previous viBe rehearsals. For example, they will begin every rehearsal with a round of “Roses and Thorns,” a “check-in” opening ritual that involves recounting for the group a “rose” (positive event that has occurred since the last meeting) and a “thorn” (challenging thing that they are dealing with in their lives.)

As the director of the larger organization, working with these girls as they create viBePoetry, I am learning more than I ever imagined from them. By witnessing the choices that they make about to how they want to run their project, I am seeing my work through their eyes. This adjustment is absolutely crucial for everyone working with young people in their community. We often ask our constituents what they want, what they need, what they like; but in this context, they are always screening their answers on some level based on what they think we adult leaders want to hear. By being asked to conceive of their own project, for the first time they look deeply into how they believe a performing-arts process should be.

Asked to voyage beyond the conceptual and creative, the girls are also responsible for the nuts-and-bolts of running a performing-arts program within a nonprofit organization. They need to create a budget, raise money, secure rehearsal and performance space, make marketing materials, write press releases, recruit participants and organize administrative needs. They will learn by doing and build skills that will help them when they enter the adult workforce. Prior to this experience, their previously held occupational positions as a summer camp counselor, a McDonald’s’ cashier, and an office assistant. Within their first week “on the job” as co-directors of viBePoetry, they amassed experience in organizing, multitasking, advertising, mentoring, collaborating, designing and writing.

Why Is Teen Leadership Important?

When asked why it is important that viBePoetry be led by teenagers, Unique explained,

When I’m working with a peer I feel like this person can relate, like, she’s 16 just like me so she knows what it’s like to be heartbroken. She knows what it’s like because she’s probably going through the same thing. Right now. It might make them feel like they can talk about anything because it’s easier to connect with your peers.

Brittney chimed in with, “We’re all teenagers and only we know what it’s like to be a young adult in this day and age. With an adult running the program, it would be too many rules. There’s not as much structure with a child running it. You know it’s like go with the flow.” I started to explain to her that structure was important and necessary for a creative process. As I noticed her big, dark eyes cloud into that teenager’s “uh-oh-I’m-about-to-get-a-lecture” glaze, I shut my mouth and swallowed my years of experience, letting a wisp of hope curl my lips into a faint smile. She would learn. The only way for a 16-year-old girl to really understand that structure breeds creativity, is to go through the process herself. She will have to take a risk, trust herself, flounder, fail and succeed all on her own. Already the young leaders have had to deal with such issues as lateness, absences and unfinished assignments from their participants. They have been challenged to rethink the scope of their production due to circumstances such as availability of performance space and limited budget. They have learned to adapt and, like water, they swirl with strength through the bends and cracks of their original vision. As their mentor, I provide resources and advice when asked, though I’m careful not to offer too much and I preface everything with, “Based on *my* experiences,…” But their experiences will yield different answers and different outcomes. And someday (I hope) they will sit in my seat and offer gently broad guidance to other novice leaders.

Regardless of the outcomes, these three girls will succeed because they have experienced firsthand the healing power of the arts in their lives. Because they have faced obstacles and hurdles at every corner they turn, they wear velvet-lined armor: hard as cold steel on the outside but flush with warmth and heart inside. They are inspired to share the tools they have developed through working with viBe. These girls have proved that in order to *learn* responsibility, one must be *given* responsibilities. Tinaya explained, “for Dana to trust us is (pause) something.” It is so necessary for adult leaders to take this risk and trust the youth in our community. It is not enough anymore to just provide space and tools for them to express themselves. We cannot expect young people to start behaving like adults until we can start *treating* them like adults. If we have any hope for the future, we need to expect them to outlive us creatively as well as chronologically.

I asked the girls what advice they would give to other teenagers around the country who might want to launch an arts program or make a play. Brittney’s face immediately lit up as she burst out with, “Just do it! There’s not enough teenagers being leaders in their community. If you feel you can help out, if you have an idea and you have a supportive team behind you, then go for it because viBe has really helped and if there were more programs like this I think it wouldn’t be so frustrating to be a teenager.” Tinaya had more cautious wisdom. “We’re mature. We’re artistic. We’re opinionated. We have been through viBe so we all know the hard work it takes to be successful and we know what to do. Make sure you’re ready for it. Make sure you’re a listener and not just a talker. When a lot of teenagers lead, they want to just be in charge and tell people what to do and being a good leader means more than just talking. You have to be a listener.”

Are we listening?

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Notes

All the poetry excerpts are from “HOTFiRE! Finally Someone Hears Us!” a “totally original CD” written, performed and recorded by viBeGirls! To order a CD, e-mailsongs@viBeTheater.org. To see more about viBeGirls, visit their Web site, <http://www.vibetheater.org/>

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