

## Judith Lee Stronach Prize Project Proposal: Youth Poetry and City Creation in Detroit

Project Background: Detroit has become the poster child for the impact of both deindustrialization and the recent economic collapse on America's inner cities. Once the fourth largest city in the United States, Detroit has lost over one million people (more than half its population) since 1950<sup>i</sup>. There is now space (cumulatively) the size of San Francisco inside Detroit that has reverted to empty prairie land<sup>ii</sup>. In a city that is over 80% African American, the dropout rate among Black students in public schools is nearly 75%<sup>iii</sup>. The unemployment rate has been estimated to be as high as 50%<sup>iv</sup>. The annual murder rate is frequently cited as the highest in the nation<sup>v</sup>. These realities indicate a crisis of urban space and its devastating impact on young people, particularly low-income youth of color<sup>vi</sup>.

In the face of these overwhelming problems, there is a growing movement to rebuild and re-imagine Detroit. In a city that does not have a single chain grocery store, more than 700 community gardens have been created<sup>vii</sup>. This summer the city will host thousands of activists at the second US Social Forum, which will convene social movements from across the country and globally to discuss creating a more just nation and world<sup>viii</sup>. Increasingly, Detroit is being seen not just as a place of despair, but also as a source of inspiration in imagining new possibilities for cities in the twenty-first century. However, whether young people will have a voice in shaping these possibilities will depend on the resources available to them. There is a critical need for programs that recognize the central role of youth in rebuilding Detroit and that give them the tools to make their voices heard.

Project Proposal: My project, "Youth Poetry and City Creation in Detroit" will use workshops on poetry, community organizing, and participatory urban planning to empower youth as leaders in confronting the city's crises. "Youth Poetry and City Creation" will center around workshops for youth between the ages of 13-21, with a focus on high school age youth (but not excluding pre and post high schoolers). These workshops will create a space to build literacy, empowerment, and creativity, and will teach fundamental skills of urban planning, community organizing, and writing and performing poetry. As research has demonstrated, there is a connection between community-based arts programs and youth empowerment<sup>ix</sup>. This novel combination of fields will allow young people to participate in an educational space that values their experiences of the city and their visions of what Detroit could become, while giving them concrete tools to put those ideas into action.

Over the course of two five-month workshop cycles (August-December and January-May) I will facilitate a weekly "Spoken City" workshop once a week in the offices of the Allied Media Project, near the campus of Wayne State University in midtown Detroit. Each workshop will last approximately two hours, and will include 15-20 youth per week. I will outreach to participants through schools, community centers, after school programs, open mics, poetry slams, concerts and community events. To advertise the workshops I will use fliers, in-person announcements, radio segments, and brief internet videos.

In addition to the weekly "Spoken City" workshop, I will facilitate site-specific "Community-Based Poetry" workshops

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with organizations working to rebuild the city. These workshops will teach poetry as a tool to tell the stories of their projects, and to tie those poems to specific locations in the city through a community mapping blog (discussed under outcomes). I will conduct these visits in coordination with the Allied Media Project's "Allied 365" project, which seeks to build on their annual conference by creating year-round collaborations with community-based organizations in Detroit. These visits will target youth, but will also include intergenerational participation. They will occur at each site one to two times per workshop cycle (for a total of 2-4 times over the course of the year). These site-specific workshops will take place at organizations such as Detroit Summer, InsideOut Literary Arts Program, the Matrix Theater Company, Detroit Coalition Against Police Brutality, Detroit Black Food Security Network, Detroit Agricultural Network, Detroit Collaborative Design Center, Citywide Poets, Eastern Michigan Environmental Action Council, Michigan Welfare Rights Organization, the Greening of Detroit, the Boggs Center to Develop Community Leadership, and other organizations affiliated with the Detroit City of Hope network.

Over the course of the two workshop cycles I will conduct approximately forty workshops in the weekly "Spoken City" workshop series, working with an estimated 40-60 youth, with what I hope will be a core group of 5-10 youth participants who will become actively involved in coordinating the workshop series. Also, I will conduct 40-60 site-specific "Community-Based Poetry" workshops (2-4 times each at 15-20 organizations), reaching an additional 200-300 participants over the course of the year. One week per month I will take youth participating in the weekly "Spoken City" workshop on a field trip to visit some of the organizations that are participating in the site-specific workshops, connecting the content of the weekly workshop series with the efforts of the larger web of organizations working to rebuild the city. I will also make myself available for one-on-one meetings with participants and organizational leaders. Throughout the year this will amount to a total of 80-100 workshops, with any given week including one "Spoken City" workshop and one to two "Community-Based Poetry" workshops.

Following Jane Jacobs<sup>x</sup> and Y-PLAN<sup>xi</sup>, the weekly "Spoken City" workshop will be organized as a collaborative learning environment that models the participatory processes that we will be studying and that will develop the leadership abilities of participating youth. Drawing from the work of Paulo Freire<sup>xii</sup> and Youth Speaks<sup>xiii</sup>, I will create a curricular model that is replicable, scalable, and sustainable, and that builds in the central role of participants in shaping the direction of the project as the year progresses. The input and leadership of the 5-10 core youth will shape not only the content of lesson plans, but also the outcomes of the project, namely the culminating performances, presentations, and published materials (delineated under outcomes). The workshop series will be structured to teach participants the necessary skills to become facilitators, with later sessions and site visits being facilitated first by me and the youth, and then by the youth themselves. The final portion of the project will connect participating youth from Detroit with youth and adult mentors from across the country who are also

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engaged in work around the arts, social justice organizing, and community development. This will be achieved by hosting a conference track on "Community-Based Art and the Right to the City" at the 12th annual Allied Media Conference, a Detroit-based conference for independent media-makers engaged in social justice work. The youth participants will help to create the conference track and fundraising guides for potential attendees to make participation economically feasible and sustainable.

Statement of Purpose: The "Youth Poetry and City Creation in Detroit" project will create participatory educational spaces that engage youth as primary agents in community-based development by providing participants with tools to express their experiences of the city, and to use those expressions in efforts to create social change. Young people (and particularly young people of color) are often excluded from processes of city planning, city governance, and community development.<sup>xiv</sup> When they are included it is often in ways that are tokenizing or manipulative. However, youth have unique insights into their cities and often have some of the most visionary ideas for what their neighborhoods and communities could become<sup>xv</sup>.

This project will work from the concept of "city creation", which Detroit activist Richard Feldman expressed to me as an alternative framework to "city planning." This statement echoes the participatory planning adage that "everyone is a planner", but pairs it with Ghandi's imperative to "be the change you wish to see in the world." As witnessed in the 2008 Presidential election, young people have the potential to enact significant political change<sup>xvi</sup>, but we are now struggling to see that change sustained beyond a Presidential election, and to see that same political energy harnessed on the local level. Research has shown that basing political organizing in creative cultural spaces and social networks that youth are already involved in can be immensely effective in increasing political participation and voter turnout<sup>xvii</sup>. In "Youth Poetry and City Creation in Detroit", youth will use spoken word poetry, urban planning, and grassroots organizing to engage in transforming their community, and in doing so, will present compelling models for a new form of transformative, coalitional urban politics.

Qualifications and Continuity: Spoken word has been fundamental to my growth as a person, an artist and an activist. I first became involved in the youth spoken word community when I was 13. Since then I have been an active participant in the Brave New Voices National Youth Poetry Slam Festival (BNV). I have interned with SF-based spoken word educational non-profit Youth Speaks and served on their youth advisory board. For the past four years I have been on their school visit team, performing and facilitating workshops at schools throughout the Bay Area. Last year I facilitated an after school workshop at Berkeley High School. Last summer I helped coach the Youth Speaks Bay Area Teen Poetry Slam team, who took third place at that year's BNV in Chicago. My freshman year I was Youth Speaks' Bay Area Teen Poetry Slam Champion, winning the finals in front of over 2,000 at the SF Masonic Theater. That year I was on the Youth Speaks, UC Berkeley, and Berkeley adult poetry slam teams, which went on to perform on the finals stages of that year's youth, collegiate, and adult national poetry slams.

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Last summer I attended the Young Planners Network conference and since I have become involved in the intersection of spoken word and participatory urban planning as applied to empowering low-income youth of color. Currently I mentor in the Y-PLAN course through the Center for Cities and Schools, teaching urban planning to high school students in Richmond. I am double majoring in Ethnic Studies and Interdisciplinary Studies (with a concentration in Hip Hop, Globalization, and Urban Space), and a minor in Global Poverty and Practice. I am currently writing a senior thesis for my ISF major on hip-hop communities in Detroit, Palestine, and Rio de Janeiro, and the relationship of hip-hop culture to the cities that it exists in.

I have extensive event organizing experience through my work with Youth Speaks and Cal Slam (the campus spoken word collective). I have been a lead organizer for numerous poetry slams, open mics, and concerts, including Poetry After the Storm (a benefit for New Orleans post-Katrina), Peace Not Prejudice Week (events combating islamophobia), and Pink Ribbon Poetry (a benefit for breast cancer research). My sophomore year I founded Activism Right There (ART), a festival that celebrates the history of student activism at UC Berkeley. In its first year, ART filled Zellerbach Hall with over 2,000 students and community members to listen to a panel of former student activists and performances from progressive hip-hop and spoken word artists from across the nation. I have volunteered at and helped to organize numerous conferences, including UC Berkeley's 1st annual Hip Hop Studies Conference in 2009, and Brave New Voices 2008 in Washington, D.C.

Over the past four years I have had significant political organizing experience. I am a coordinator with CalSERVE, a progressive student political coalition. The past three years I have participated in electoral campaigns for student government, the past two years running as a candidate (first for ASUC senate, then for Academic VP). My freshman year I was an organizer in the campaign that won a living wage for UC custodial staff. My sophomore year I was the undergraduate representative on the board of the Berkeley Consortium for the Arts, the last year before it was closed due to budget cuts. Last year, as program director in the ASUC Academic VP office I helped coordinate a campaign against the unilateral restructuring of the IAS department. This year I have been extensively involved in efforts against the UC fee increase and the budget cuts to the UC and to California public education as a whole. As a member of the Solidarity Alliance, I helped organize the September walkout, the November protests at the UCLA regents meeting, and the upcoming March 4th day of action for public education. This campaign has attracted national attention to the issue of state support for public education. Over the course of the year's mobilizations I have been quoted by outlets including Time Magazine,<sup>xviii</sup> the New York Times,<sup>xix</sup> the New Yorker,<sup>xx</sup> and NPR.<sup>xxi</sup>

I have filming, video editing, audio recording, graphic design, and web design experience through my work with Youth Speaks and CalSERVE, and my volunteer experience with KALX (the Cal student radio station) and KZFR, a community radio station in my hometown. I also help manage the websites [calserve.org](http://calserve.org) and [berkeleycuts.org](http://berkeleycuts.org).

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My connection to Detroit is also a personal one. My dad was born in Detroit, and my extended family still lives there. I have been spending time in the city since I was a small child, hearing stories about my uncles and grandparents' involvement in political activism through the civil rights movement, anti-war movements from Vietnam to Iraq, the labor movement, and movements to reform the educational system. Before he became a lawyer for the UAW, my uncle Fred worked with James and Grace Lee Boggs, two pioneering Detroit activists and thinkers at the heart of efforts to rebuild the city.

This past week, as I was preparing my proposal for submission, my grandfather Sidney passed away. At 91, he had lived in Detroit since he was a small child, and felt an immense attachment to his city. I love my grandpa dearly and had a close relationship with him, however, over the past year, when I would talk with him about the idea of moving to Detroit, he would respond with great ambivalence. It was clear that he did not see anything there for me. Over the course of his life, my grandpa saw Detroit go through changes that are unimaginable to me. He lived through the great depression, the war effort, the riots; deindustrialization and collapse. His life ran parallel to that of the city. I feel that the best way to honor his memory is to make my contribution to the rebuilding of Detroit. While it is clear that the city cannot go back to what it was, what it will become is in the hands and minds of its youth. Who knows what they will see in their lifetime, and what stories they will tell.

## Timeline:

July-September	Set up office space. Plan curriculum for 1st workshop cycle. Design and print fliers and internet video/radio segments to advertise workshops. Schedule and confirm site-specific workshops. Attend Brave New Voices 2010 & National Youth Spoken Word Coalition summit in LA. and outreach for 2011 AMC conference track. Publicize weekly workshop and site-specific workshops (outreaches at schools, orgs, community centers, poetry/art/music events, etc.). Workshops begin in August: Weekly "Spoken City" workshop. Site-specific "Community-Based Poetry" workshops one to two times per week. Monthly stakeholder meetings.
October-December	Weekly "Spoken City" workshop. Site-specific "Community-Based Poetry" workshops one to two times per week. Monthly stakeholder meetings. Begin brainstorming with youth for the conference/culminating projects (anthology, curriculum, mid-year and end of year events). Hold mid-year event. 2 week vacation.
January-March	Plan curriculum for 2nd workshop cycle. Weekly "Spoken City" workshop. Site-specific "Community-Based Poetry" workshops one to two times per week. Monthly stakeholder meetings. Meet separately with youth interested in coordinating conference/culminating projects. Archive materials from 1st workshop cycle. Compile material for anthology/curriculum. Release conference track information and fundraising materials. Contact/confirm speakers/presenters for conference track.
April-June	Weekly "Spoken City" workshop. Site-specific "Community-Based Poetry" workshops one to two times per week. Monthly stakeholder meetings. Publish and distribute anthology/curriculum. Final performances and presentations. Publicize and host AMC conference track. Release viral video. Prepare for fall tour. Archive 2nd materials from 2nd workshop cycle.

## Outcomes:

- \*Publish book that contains a replicable curriculum based on the workshop cycles and an anthology of writings/performances created through the workshop cycles (the curriculum/anthology will include a book and a DVD/CD)
- \*Community mapping blog with videos, photo-journals, and poems from the ongoing workshop and the site-specific workshops, integrated into community map(s) via google maps "My Maps" feature
- \*Short Viral Video (3-5 minutes) on project
- \*Culminating public performance events for the community
- \*Culminating youth-led presentations/recommendations to community leaders, stakeholder organizations, and local planners and government officials.
- \*Host conference track on Art & the Right to the City at Allied Media Conference 2011
- \*Prepare for post-project tour (Midwest, East Coast) for fall 2011, in run-up to November election.

## End Notes

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- <sup>vii</sup> Boggs, Grace L. "Detroit's 'Quiet Revolution'" *The Nation* 2 Sept. 2009.
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- <sup>xi</sup> Bernard, Sara. "Mapping Their Futures: Kids Foster School-Community Connections." *Edutopia* Oct. 2008.
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- <sup>xiii</sup> Weiss, Jen, and Scott Herndon. *Brave New Voices: The YOUTH SPEAKS Guide to Teaching Spoken Word Poetry*. Heinemann, 2001.
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- <sup>xv</sup> McKoy, Deborah L., and Jeffrey M. Vincent. "Engaging Schools in Urban Revitalization: The Y-PLAN (Youth—Plan, Learn, Act, Now!)." *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 2007.26: 389-403.
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- <sup>xvii</sup> Connery, Michael. *Youth to Power: How Today's Young Voters Are Building Tomorrow's Progressive Majority*. Ig, 2008
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