



Rashawnda Williams

SLAM POET. ACTIVIST. YOUTH WRITING AMBASSADOR.

by Mindy Fried, Ph.D. of Arbor Consulting Partners

**“She was motivated and she had an innate talent.
And she saw writing as an outer expression of herself.”**

Two days before he was about to present at the 2011 National Book Festival in Washington, DC, 826 Co-Founder, Dave Eggers, asked 826DC’s Executive Director, Joe Callahan, to find a student to join him on stage, preferably someone who had participated in 826DC’s recent White House Poetry Workshop. Joe immediately thought of Rashawnda Williams, a 16-year-old student who had been working with 826. “She was motivated and she had an innate talent. And she saw writing as an outer expression of herself.” The plan was that Rashawnda would interview Dave in front of an audience, and then she would read one of her poems. Looking back on this experience, Rashawnda confesses, “I had no idea who Dave was. I was like, ‘Okay’, but who is this guy I’m going to interview? I hadn’t read any of his stuff.” She googled him and “kind of got to know who he was a little bit,” at least enough to prepare a set of questions she would ask him about his first book. She was also reassured by Joe, who told her that Dave was a “big fan” of her work. “It was really dope to hear that somebody who’s been doing this has read my work, or even thought it was good at all.” Still, the event didn’t seem like a big deal to her, and when her mother asked if she should come see her, she told her, “no.”

Then, shortly before the event, Dave changed his mind and decided that instead of being interviewed by Rashawnda, he would interview her. When Joe told her that the tables had turned, “I was kind of laughing because when I’m nervous, I laugh. At first, I was kind of like, ‘Okay, this is cool.’” Then it finally struck her that this was a big deal, and she quickly called her mom. “I told her she should come, and she’s like, ‘What’s going on?’ And I told her, ‘Apparently I’m going to be interviewed. I’m going to be reading one of my poems.’” At that point, her mother had seen very little of Rashawnda’s writing, and she had never seen her read her poetry.

Joe says that he wasn’t surprised that Dave decided to “turn the tables” and interview Rashawnda. One of the things he loves about 826 is that it “provides a platform and audience for our students to be treated like professional writers. Because if we



Rashawnda Williams performs at the 826DC poetry workshop.

treat our young writers in a way that is professionalized—that’s why our books are beautiful, that’s why we take so much care for a project—it really empowers them to be more active in the writing process. And this is just another one of those examples.”

Rashawnda arrived at the Poetry and Prose Pavilion in Washington, DC where the event was taking place and she felt relieved. Her mom was there, as was Joe from 826DC and one of her favorite teachers. It wasn’t until she was about to go on stage that she finally met Dave. “I was super-super nervous. The tent was full and people were literally sitting on the floor.” She remembers thinking, “Wow, people really know who this guy is!” Dave interviewed Rashawnda about her experience as a young writer, and then she read one of her poems, and the audience went wild. “She was really great in answering Dave’s questions,”



said Joe, “and there was a packed tent, so it was really, really wonderful.” Rashawnda will never forget one woman who came up to her afterwards. “She told me that my work made her cry, and I’m like, ‘Okay, wow, this is not really happening.’” This is the first time it struck Rashawnda that her work could have such a powerful impact on people, even someone she had never met. She didn’t expect such a positive response to her writing, she says, “Because I’m just doing it because it’s like therapy to me almost. It’s just the way I figure things out and the way I understand the world and so that was amazing...I look back and I’m like, ‘this did not actually happen in my life. I was 16!’”



On stage with Dave Eggers at the 2011 National Book Festival in Washington, DC.

Discovering poetry

Rashawnda’s journey with 826DC began in Fall of 2010, when she was a sophomore at Duke Ellington School for the Arts, and one of her teachers nominated her to join a four-month poetry workshop run by 826DC. Only twenty high school students would be asked to participate, five from each of the four different high schools around the city. At the time, she was majoring in Visual Arts, and while she had written a few fiction pieces, she had not written any poems. Despite her trepidation, Rashawnda took the plunge and decided to say “yes.” She discovered that her experience as a visual artist could be applied to the spoken word, and she “really got into it.” Writing poetry helped her stop and see the world around her. In a later interview for the National Endowment for the Arts, Rashawnda reflected back on one of her favorite poems written during that workshop, which she wrote while observing the “melting pot” of people at Union Station: “A lot of things people find mundane, I find really extraordinary.” This is the lens that Rashawnda brought to her world as a young artist.

Being invited to join the 826DC poetry workshop was an honor, the first of many opportunities that opened up new doors of artistic expression for Rashawnda. The event was produced in partnership with the President’s Committee on the Arts and Humanities (PCAH), and students were selected to represent a

“varying demographic” of young writers in the city, says Joe. They met weekly, experimented with different styles and forms of poetry, and at the end of the project, their poems were published in 2011, in a book called *City Blossoms*. Poet Kyle Dargan, one of the workshop leaders, writes in the book’s foreword:

“These poems will introduce you to some young writers striving to grasp their piece of the symbolic face of the nation’s capital broadcasts while simultaneously attempting to interrogate, weather and evade the pitfalls and stigmas associated with where they live in the District or where they travelled from before settling in America.”

This experience reinforced Rashawnda’s sense of herself as a writer and poet, as 826 writing projects do for so many young people. Following the book release, 826DC was invited to further collaborate with the PCAH to launch the White House Poetry Workshop, a first-of-its-kind event to celebrate National Poetry Month. Rashawnda, along with her co-writers from *City Blossoms* and other student poets from around the country, came to the White House to work with well-known traditional and non-traditional poets, including three National Poets Laureate.

Rashawnda had been exposed to the arts as a young child, first with ballet and piano lessons, and then at an afterschool arts program at the DC-based Fillmore Arts Center. She experienced wholehearted support from her loving single mother, and at the same time, struggled with the pain of having a father who didn’t live with them and who was very, very ill. Her mother worked full-time to support the family, and so “she was always trying to find things for me to do,” Rashawnda says. At the Fillmore, Rashawnda got involved with theater. “We literally were acting out *Macbeth!*” she says incredulously. “It’s kind of crazy when I look back. I was in fourth grade. What did I even know about Shakespeare?!” In fifth grade, Rashawnda left her elementary school and was enrolled at DC Prep, a high-performing charter school, where she continued to study different art forms in the school’s afterschool program. “Throughout all this, I found that I really liked to draw. I really liked art.” But for as long as she could remember, she also loved to read, “and I guess at some point during the reading, I started writing.”

Finding the right path

Rashawnda began as a Visual Arts major at Duke Ellington School for the Arts. But one of her former teachers, Koye Oyedeji, or Mr. O as he is known, says that even during her freshman year, Rashawnda would “kind of filter in and out” of Room 18, the central hub for the Literary Media Communications Department. He spent that entire first year trying to get her to share some of her writing, but she resisted. “At that age,” Mr. O reflects, “students can be really quite protective of their words. A lot of their writing is journal writing, so it is very private.”



“[Rashawnda] quickly became one of the leading lights [in the department] . . .

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By her sophomore year, there were some “real conversations about her transitioning to the writing department.” Mr. O recounts how her mother was “all for it,” and even though he had yet to see any of Rashawnda’s writing, he says he had a sense of her—from how she carried herself and how she talked about books and reading—that “there was a writer buried deeply in there.” Rashawnda describes an important piece of advice from one of her teachers: “Find what you burn for, your passion, and you’ll just kind of know what you could do for the rest of your life.” She realized that sitting for hours creating still life paintings “wasn’t my thing.”

Following her initial encounter with Dave Eggers at the 2011 National Book Festival, Rashawnda began sending him her writing for commentary and feedback. “He kind of became my mentor,” she says. Joe comments, “There’s absolutely no other place besides an 826 center where that relationship [with an author like Dave] could have been established.” Rashawnda started to believe that she was a better writer and storyteller than she was a visual artist.

Finally, early in her junior year, more than a year after she became involved with 826DC, Rashawnda was ready to make the switch to the Literary Media Communications Department. Commenting on her decision, Mr. O says, “You have a girl that’s flirting with writing, but it’s through 826DC that she got that initial confidence to join us, to say, ‘Hey writing is something that I can do, that I really want to do.’ She’d come in and visit, but I think it was when she started working with 826DC that she crossed that divide. It was a short hallway, but a huge leap for her. 826DC helped her take that short trip across the hallway from the Visual Arts Department to the Literary Media Communications Department.”

Mr. O says that “she quickly became one of the leading lights [in the department].” At a time when other adolescents are often concerned about how they are perceived by others, “Rashawnda was just herself. She wouldn’t say what was expected of her. She would say how she felt; she would write how she felt. And there was real meaning in that; there was real meaning in her words.”

The following year, when she was a senior, Rashawnda needed an internship, so she approached Joe to see if they could work something out. Instead of an internship, 826DC created the first Young Writer-in-Residence position for her. “I wanted her to be a Youth Writing Ambassador, and she got to write blog posts for our website and help with kids,” says Joe. Says Rashawnda, “I loved seeing the kids come and being tutored and some coming up to me when I’m on my computer typing. It was just really fun.”

That year, she also got to present her poems to hundreds of people at 826DC’s annual fundraiser, “Do the Write Thing.” The event featured a presentation by Dr. Jill Biden, a reading by Rashawnda, and remarks by Ethiopian-American writer, Maaza Mengiste. Then Dave interviewed Maaza and Rashawnda, making it the second time she was interviewed by Dave, but by this time, she was far more experienced and not caught off-guard. “That was another amazing event,” she reminisces.



Rashawnda and Dr. Jill Biden at 826DC’s annual fundraiser, “Do the Write Thing.”

First nonfiction piece

During her senior year, with encouragement from Mr. O, Rashawnda decided to write her first nonfiction story, called “Larynx,” a painful reflection on growing up with her very ill father. She begins:

“The cancer has grown back,” he croaks through the phone. “This time it’s on the left side of my throat.” He wheezes. “There isn’t much the doctors can do.” His body won’t take the radiation. This isn’t the first time the cancer has come back. It has come and gone like an unwelcomed friend. I take deep breaths. I don’t know what to feel. My throat burns, and my eyes glaze over. I feel like crying, but the tears won’t come. Maybe I don’t have any more left to shed. I hang up the phone.

Over the years, her father’s cancer “has come and gone like an unwelcomed friend,” she writes. She has never been able to do simple things with her father like other kids, and she describes how having a seriously ill father “stole my childhood.” Rashawnda believes that 826 helped her “grow as a person and grow as a writer.” While the inception of “Larynx” started in the classroom



at Duke Ellington School for the Arts, it was at 826 that she got the most support with the piece.

"I feel like 'Larynx' was probably the best thing I ever wrote, and who helped me with that the most was Joe actually." One thing that Rashawnda learned from this process is that "it's okay to edit your work; actually, you need to edit your work." At first, she says she would typically just write out a feeling or emotion, "but what makes it better and what makes it great is going back and editing it, and taking that emotion and honing it in and making it more, not necessarily structured, but just making it flow a lot more. And I think I learned how to get my flow better from being at 826."

Mr. O says, "Rashawnda really struggled with the piece at first. She had talked about her father before," but he says, "I felt like this was the beginning of her really getting it. But that took a lot of work. At first she wasn't willing to write about it. But it was a watershed moment for her. It kind of represented a coming out, like, 'This is me, this is who I am.' I think that that piece was probably the birth of Rashawnda Williams, the writer."

My understanding and perception of cancer is always changing. Cancer isn't a noun, but a verb. Cancer is alive. It grows and festers; when your heart beats, it beats with it. It is as much a physical state as a mental one. It changes a person. It can kill both body and soul.

"Larynx" was published by 826DC in *The Weight of the Day Surrounds My Body* and Rashawnda read it publicly for the first time at the book's release party at 826. It was the first time her mother was hearing the piece, and that was very difficult. "Her mom was just sobbing," says Joe. "It's just really powerful, and it turned out really great."

Cancer stole the father that could have been. The one that my mom would still be in love with, skin dark as the night sky. Sometimes I imagine that I know the once tall strong robust man she fell for, eating medium rare steaks and burnt pork chops oblivious to the poison growing inside his body. He would hold his head up and his teeth would gleam white and sparkle. The charming smile that all the ladies fell for, the way it contrasted against his ebony skin.

The piece ends with this insightful passage:

To release pain I have to forgive. Forgive myself, forgive my dad, and forgive the cancer. I can't be mad at him and I can't be mad at the cancer because all it wants is to be alive, just like the rest of us.



826DC's annual fundraiser, "Do the Write Thing" (left to right): Maaza Mengiste, Dave Eggers, Dr. Jill Biden, Rashawnda Williams, 826 National CEO Gerald Richards, and 826DC Executive Director Joe Callahan.

Finding her voice as an activist and slam poet

Joe also helped Rashawnda write a personal statement for her college application that year. She was excited when she was accepted with a full scholarship at Skidmore College, and she went into her freshman year thinking that she would be an English major. But then she took a Sociology course that blew her away. She decided to major in Sociology and Anthropology and minor in Intergroup Relations, which is "basically like a racial justice program." Rashawnda says she now looks at the world through a sociological lens. "It impacts my writing because I pick up on daily experiences, places where people are excluded, or places where people are oppressed. And in my work, what I write about lately is a combination of truth, current events and just giving voice to those who don't have one, giving a voice to people you don't hear from, in a society that is really, really oppressed. And that's what I think makes my work powerful."

Rashawnda has found a support network of students through the Higher Education Opportunity Program (HEOP), which serves students with strong academic and personal potential who may have been "excluded from higher education due to circumstances of academic and economic disadvantage." But she says that students of color who are not in the program are "kind of spread out and not necessarily connected." So she co-founded the "People of Color Union" on campus, which aims to create a more cohesive support network for students of color.

Rashawnda arrived at Skidmore a poet, but fairly soon, she began to view herself as a slam poet, frequently performing her poetry at different club events and fundraisers, as well as doing open mics. "I didn't know much about slam poetry and I wasn't interested in it initially, but now I've kind of taken on that bigger identity as a slam poet, because I feel like it's easier to combine performance, and I also really like theater." She continues to use her writing to express herself, but in addition to writing for the page, she also writes for the stage.



Reflecting on her class and racial background, Rashawnda says, “I grew up mostly around Black people and then going to Skidmore, that was completely flip-flopped and now I’m around very wealthy, upper class white students. It’s just a different experience and a different framework, and sometimes I experience things at Skidmore that are just pretty off-putting, and the only place I can speak about that is through my poetry and through my writing.”

While sometimes Rashawnda questions whether she is “that great of a writer,” she is touched by other students’ responses to her work. “My friends come to me [and say], ‘You made me tear up because those are the things that I experience’ and they just tell me they’re so glad I’m doing it.” She realizes that “not everybody is going to like your work and not everybody’s going to agree or feel comfortable with it,” but she likes the uncomfortable tension that she creates with her work because it gets people thinking.

Last summer, she and a South African friend from college, Lebo Mokoena, traveled to South Africa where her friend performed a play they had co-written, called *The Coconut Suitcase*. The experience changed her “completely,” she says. “I feel like every once in a while my world view shifts and it only gets better, and working on that one-woman show, *The Coconut Suitcase*, was one of those times.”

Over the years, Rashawnda has continued to share her writing with Dave, and this has had a powerful influence on her. While she has been very busy this year with academics, writing and performing, and organizing, she says she owes him “a very long letter,” and plans on writing him by the end of the summer. “It is pretty cool to know that I have somebody that I can talk to about all [of my] experiences, and someone who’s also there to help me with my work.” She is also struck by the people she meets who “actually love [Dave] as a writer,” and while she does, too, she says she also loves him “as a person.” Inspired by Dave’s life trajectory, Rashawnda adds, “Sometimes you have favorite writers but you don’t know who they are as a person, because you don’t know them. But to know that [Dave] is such a great person and has such a great personality and is a great writer—[that’s] something I hope to be someday. To be someone who is a great writer but a great person, too.”

PROJECT CREDITS

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Arbor Consulting Partners was formed in 2002, and its senior social scientists have over twenty years of experience consulting to governments, businesses, universities, and foundations as well as to community-based organizations. They offer superior analytical expertise combined with a firm knowledge base in six principal areas: Community Development, Environment, Public Health, Human Resources, Early Care and Education, and Arts and Arts Education.

826DC

826DC opened in October 2010, and serves students all over the District of Columbia. The center is based in the Columbia Heights neighborhood, one of the most densely populated neighborhoods in the city. 826DC served more than 4,000 students in the 2014-15 school year.

826 National & The 826 National Network

826 National’s seven chapters (located in San Francisco, Ann Arbor/Detroit, Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, New York City, and Washington, DC) offer a variety of inventive programs that provide under-resourced students, ages 6-18, with opportunities to explore their creativity and improve their writing skills. They also aim to help teachers get their classes excited about writing. Their mission is based on the understanding that great leaps in learning can happen with one-on-one attention, and that strong writing skills are fundamental to future success. The 826 National office serves the growing educational network by providing strategic leadership, administration, and other resources to ensure the success of the 826 network.

826 National contracted Mindy Fried, Ph.D. from Arbor Consulting Partners, to compose the 826 National Network Stories. The goal of the series is to illuminate narratives of a few inspirational, key players across the 826 network who contribute to our mission in different ways.

