

Living in “constant chaos” on Chicago’s South Side; teens try to manage through poetry

The school bell at Julian High School sounds more like a fire alarm.

It floods the air with sound, drowning out the bustle of students as they file out of class, laughing, talking and slamming their locker doors.

Inside Julian’s creative writing class, a dozen students are staying late, rehearsing their poetry lines and scribbling on notebooks in relative quiet.

Shouts from the hallway draw their eyes to the door. Voices rise quickly with the sound of a scuffle and shoving against lockers.

“You’re not gonna go look,” says poetry coach Daphne Whittington, seating a curious student.

The brawl dissipates quickly.

That’s not an unusual occurrence in this Roseland neighborhood school on Chicago’s South Side. Last fall, Whittington says, 41 fights broke out at Julian in one day.

A couple years ago, Christina Fedrick might have been at the center of one of those fights. Fedrick, 16, spent much of her childhood bouncing around in foster care, and by her teen years, had trouble keeping her temper in check. “I was mentally abused,” Fedrick said. “Every time I tried to say something, they’d say something that would bring me down.”

“So I was just kind of a quiet kid most of my childhood,” she said. “Kept it bottled up.”

But last year, Fedrick was introduced to Louder than a Bomb, a city-wide poetry competition that encourages teens from across Chicago to express themselves through spoken word. At first, she just watched others write and perform, rarely participating. But this year, Fedrick is letting go and letting out some of the tension that had plagued her.

“It’s basically been helping me remain calm,” she said. “Instead of picking up a weapon, I pick up a pen and paper.”

Working with Whittington also helped change her, she said. “When she came into my life, she helped me tremendously,” she said. “Whenever I needed to talk, she’d be there.”

*(Fedrick dedicated her poem “Fight Worth Fighting For” to Whittington. Watch the video to see her perform and listen to the audio to hear her talk about the inspiration behind it.)*

In this environment, Whittington said, where violence and gang activity are daily realities, staying out of trouble is a feat.

“It takes so much strength to even do what other people take for granted,” she said. “If you have money and you live on the North Side, you’re white, it all is so much easier. But then when kids slip up, we blame them, rather than blame the fact that we put them in these situations.”

Lately, Fedrick has had a hard time focusing in class. She’s failing some of her classes, and had just talked her way out of suspension when she showed up for writing class. Trouble at home is distracting her, she said. Her foster mother is sick, and she is also having health problems that she suspects were triggered by stress.

“I’ve been trying to balance it,” she said. “But I feel like it’s burying me now.”

Fedrick writes about that feeling of drowning in the poem she’ll perform for Louder than a Bomb. She said she was inspired to write it when she came to Whittington on the verge of giving up.

“She was the voice,” she said. “She told me I should keep fighting because I was a fight worth fighting for.”

“So I’ll fight,” she writes in her poem. “But not with a gun, or with my fist, I will fight.”

“I will put pen to paper and make beauty. I will write the right of passage.”