

It all started with a phone call from a friend—an opportunity to go to the Miami Dolphins Training Facility for a meeting about bringing Louder Than A Bomb to Florida. Mike knew how much I loved poetry and that the two-hour drive during rush hour traffic wouldn't bother me at all. It was November of 2014 and I had been writing poetry for a little over a year. I was a single mother of two, working full time and driving to Ft Lauderdale on a weekly basis just to get behind a mic, all while trying to keep an open mic running in a city that knew nothing of spoken word. My plate was full but I still felt empty anytime I wasn't writing or performing. So, with only my knowledge from A Louder Than A Bomb documentary, a year of writing under my belt, and soul yearning to be filled, I got in my car and made the drive down.

Being an athlete and football fanatic since birth, walking into the Miami Dolphins training facility was nothing short of amazing. There were championship rings and banners, life-size photos of hall of famers, and to top it all off we were greeted with a "pre-game" speech by the Dolphins Head coach! As exciting as it was, I felt completely out of place. I was a college dropout in a room full of educators. I was two-hours from home and everyone else seemed to live around the corner. I started doubting myself—thinking it would be impossible to get into the school system and teach poetry when I had no experience and St. Lucie County had no idea what slam even was. I thought back to when I was in high school and how my coaches helped shape me into the woman I became, how they changed my entire outlook on adults, and how if it wasn't for that outlet of sports, I wouldn't have made it through high school. I knew deep down I could coach and I knew that more than basketball, poetry saved my life. I owed it to myself to help save someone else. I was going to do whatever it took to get poetry into my local schools.

To my surprise, the following week my high school basketball coach walked into the restaurant I was working at for a luncheon. She asked what I had been up to since high school and I started going on and on about poetry. She then informed me she was now the principal at a local high school. I jumped at the opportunity and asked if I could please volunteer to coach a poetry team there. I told her that I would put in all the work to get the students involved and only needed her permission. She agreed and the following week I was standing in the middle of a high school courtyard during lunch, spitting poems for anyone who gave me the time of day.

The students loved it and before I knew it, about 10 poets started meeting weekly to learn to write and perform. One school turned to two when I ran into a poet from Fort Pierce Central High School at a local rap competition. At Central, I was given 10 minutes to speak in each English class where I shortly described LTAB and performed a poem, asking the students to show up in the auditorium the following week if they were interested. Over 30 students showed up and we picked a 10 poet team.

By January, both schools had fully functional poetry clubs that met weekly, not only writing poetry together but becoming a family. These poets were changing my life; poetry was changing theirs. I found myself full of energy, always excited for what poems I would hear at the clubs. The poets were opening up and sharing intimate parts of their lives with each other. I was in awe. I only wished I had this opportunity back when I was in school. If only I had learned to express myself in a positive way at such a young age.

When it came time for Louder Than a Bomb Florida in April, we felt as prepared as we could for an adventure we had never been a part of. An amazing staff greeted us and our youth poets were welcomed with open arms by all fellow competitors. Over a period of 2 weeks, I watched hundreds of

poets spill their hearts on stage. Collectively, we laughed and we cried but most of all, we grew. Everyone left a better person than they were when they started.

After making finals stage the first year of competition and witnessing firsthand how it positively affected all of the students and teachers involved, the following year I wanted to do more. Using the Principals to help with contact, a few phone calls were made and I was able to get a meeting set up with the new super-intendent of St Lucie County. I explained the program to him thoroughly, using poems and stories of poets from the previous year as examples. I told him this was something that had to be county wide. I felt strongly that every high school student deserved an opportunity as great as this. I left with no funding but an open invitation to contact every school in the county and his full approval of the program. I called the Jason Taylor Foundation executive director immediately to tell him the wonderful news! To my surprise, the foundation was not only as excited as me, but also offered me a position as a County Coordinator so I could start getting paid for the countless hours I had put in.

Recruiting high school poets is not an easy job. I am usually given 15 minutes to explain what slam poetry is to a room full of high school students who want nothing more than to get back to their cell phones and laptops. I'm a young woman in my 30's, full of tattoos and rockin' a blonde Mohawk, so I get asked on a daily basis what grade I'm in or "are you a rock star?" I laugh along with them, but I can always spot a writer in the room. The way the student's eyes light up at the mention of the word poetry or the smile I get after I finish a poem. I can take being teased of by some in order to reach just one.

I thank Mike Pavlov every chance I get for calling me about the opportunity to get involved with this amazing foundation. He always tells me that it was just an opportunity and I still had to work my butt off to make it happen! It still amazes me that a few years ago the residents of St Lucie County didn't know what slam poetry was and now there are currently 7 high school poetry clubs locally. It is only proof that this can happen in other counties too. All it takes is the passion and perseverance of one person who is unwilling to take no for an answer.

This past August, I became the LTABFLA Recruiting Coordinator for the entire Florida. In 3 years my entire life has changed. I have watched hundreds of poets bless the stage—some becoming family. I am amazed every day as I watch those young high school boys and girls grow into wonderful men and women. A few years ago, my life was saved by a poem and a mic and now I am making a career out of sharing spoken word across the state. I am surrounded by amazing coworkers who are as equally as passionate as me about changing the lives of young people. Together, I feel like we can accomplish anything.