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Words to live by

A couple has created a project where violence-affected and underprivileged youths use writing as a tool for conflict resolution.

By [Lorraine Gennaro](#)

February 21, 2008

A spoken-word artist who has performed all over the city for the last decade, Kenyetta Overton was asked by St. Peter's in 2004 to host its poetry workshop at the Society Hill elementary school. Familiar with Overton's performance poetry and her then-12-year-old son Nile, a sixth-grader at the Catholic school, administrators extended the invite.



Kenyetta, left, and Jamil Overton's Murals of the Mind — a conflict-resolution program — is hoping to find new outlets in the community. Staff photo by John Taggart

During the month-long, 90-minute, once-a-week sessions, Overton asked children to write about their lives. "By doing this workshop, I was able to tie in what they were learning in school with reality. I could see the relationship with the two. It provided a chance to validate who they were," she said.

Struck with that workshop's potential, the 43-year-old developed a literacy project for underprivileged and adjudicated males and females ages 5 to 21.

Dubbed Murals of the Mind (MOM), the project focuses on writing as a tool to aid in conflict resolution, as well as combating youth violence and feelings of disenfranchisement. In '07, Overton and husband Jamil, from the 1300 block of Carlisle Street, began conducting volunteer MOM workshops in community-based organizations around town. Kenyetta, who grew up in West Philly, has an associate's degree in business marketing from the University of Phoenix and is working toward her bachelor's in that field from the same institution, while Jamil, 59, who was raised in South, West and North Philly, is a business development consultant who attended Temple and Cheyney universities, studying communications at the former and education at the latter.

In June, the couple held a workshop at Diversified Community Services Life Skills Center, 1228 S. Broad St., which has since moved to Dixon House at 1920 S. 19th St. A couple more were held in other parts of the city since then.

The Overtons approached Renaya Furtick Wheelan, Ph.D.,

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director of Children and Youth Services at Dixon House who oversees a number of youth programs there, including the city-run Adolescent Violence Reduction Partnership (AVRP). "It was a perfect opportunity for our youth. One of the things that attracted me was her approach was similar to when I was a recreation therapist. She was going to give kids an avenue to really express themselves," Wheelan, who has a background in group therapy and social work, told the Review.

The then-Diversified Communities' employee arranged for the Overtons to conduct a two-hour workshop for AVRP kids ages 11 to 15 who live in South Philly. "Giving them an avenue to express themselves in a non-threatening way — that is something I'm always big on," the doctor said.

The Overtons led the session the way they always do, each participant gets a packet with writing tools and a thesaurus; the latter is so they can expand their vocabulary.

Youths were asked to create a poem or short story on any subject. Afterwards, they'd read it before the group with a discussion to follow. "Did they like it? How did it make them feel? And if they didn't feel anything, why?" Jamil said about the discussion.

Kenyetta added, "That's part of the confidence and team building. Doing it in a group environment allows them to speak to other people and be civil."

The writers receive a keepsake anthology of works from all of the workshops the Overtons have conducted. "It validates what they do for them and their families and provides proof they did it. It speaks to their potential and greatness," Kenyetta said.

About 10 boys and girls attended the Diversified session and one in particular stood out to Wheelan. The 14-year-old did not commit his creation to paper, but told Overton he memorized it. Titled "You ain't no real thug," the author, Omar, got up in front of his peers and recited one line: "You think you're a thug, you ain't no real thug."

"It was the way he delivered it that had impact," the doctor said.

In another work from a St. Peter's pupil, 9-year-old Jessie wrote "Dog Breath" about her pet: "Ralphie is the dog I love. He has a lovely smile. But beware of his kisses or you may pass out for a while. His breath stinks! It's foul and rotten like some food long forgotten. The odor is really bad. I wish Tic Tac is what he had. Don't get me wrong, I still love him so. But that bad breath of his has got to go."

The catalyst to develop MOM was an April 13 tragedy on the Overtons' block. The 111th homicide of '07 was a man shot dead in front of his two young nieces. The 56-year-old was babysitting his sister's children at his house when he came outside to say goodbye as they got into their mom's car. He was shot in the face by a teen gunning for another as he leaned into the vehicle while talking to his sibling, police said. Shaken by the violence, Jamil suggested to his wife they revive the project, focusing on inner-city at-risk youths. "These are the kids that need it," Kenyetta said. "These kids are [shooting] because they don't know how to express

themselves. They are turning to guns to resolve their issues. Jamil had a good feeling [my poetry workshop] could translate to these kids. If they learned how writing creatively could help them with conflict resolution, self-esteem, it might curb violence."

Jamil's goal was to offer hope and alternatives to young people. "My purpose was to, one, get kids to be more comfortable that mainstream language works better than slang. Secondly, it was to have kids realize things are not beyond them," he said of achieving goals and succeeding in life.

The couple met with Philadelphia School District officials last year to bring MOM to schools in high-crime areas, but the idea didn't take hold. "In the end, they just didn't respond," Jamil said of the district.

Convinced of MOM's potential, the couple is looking to take the workshops to social-service agencies for a fee. Currently, they are negotiating with The Consortium, 3801 Market St., a mental-health agency that serves West and Southwest Philly. "We are in the early stages of talks. We designed the program for underprivileged and adjudicated youths, but now we are tweaking it to include children with mental-health concerns," Jamil said.

"We are looking at how our creative writing workshop can fit in their business matrix," Kenyetta said, adding, "This program has a lot of potential."

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