

After 9 hard months, students' book is published

On Wings of Hope



Excerpt from Karissa Anderson's "The Pen Will Never Judge Me" • "Through my writing I hope that those asleep will awaken. • Think thoughts, follow with actions, and be free. • Be themselves...like I can be me in ink. • The shadows of my words stick to those who are consumed by them. • Taking them to another life, another day, like a dream."

By David Hunn
ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

The story starts like a movie cliché: White lady walks into a classroom of black students.

Students roll their eyes, talk on cell phones and ignore the woman. She asks everyone to sit on the floor, then tells them they're going to write a book.

The room goes silent.

"I just didn't believe it," recalled Dejá White, one of the students.

They see plenty of people come and go at Clyde C. Miller Career Academy High in St. Louis, Dejá said.

"Another happy white lady?" thought Brianna Barnes, remembering that moment in September. "Who is she?"

But now, after nine months of weekends, \$12,000 in donations and countless wadded-up paper balls, their work will hit local bookstore shelves this week.

It's titled **"StudioStL: Self-portraits written by the students of College Bound, Number 1."**

In total, 38 teens from two schools – Clyde C. Miller Career Academy and University City High – wrote more than 40 essays, poems and short stories. When taken together, they offer an unabashed look into the lives of the student writers. They talk of adoptions, foster care, drive-by shootings and playing cards on the playground. They bemoan lost friends, absent mothers, missing fathers, dying grandmothers.

The essays dig deep into the authors' secrets, showing, at times, how the writing affects them and how they hope it affects others:

"The ink will not lie to me, will not let me down," writes Karissa Anderson, a senior at Miller Career Academy.

"The shadows of my words stick to those who are consumed by them," Anderson continues. "Taking them to another life, another day, like a dream."

Beth Ketcher, the woman who started the project from her home in Webster Groves, bubbles when she talks about these students. She gets so excited, she often doesn't finish her sentences.

For Ketcher, 47, and the dozen people who helped her, this is the end of a year of work and inspiration.

Two years ago, Ketcher quit her job as a lawyer. She hoped to spend more time with her family.

Then she read an article on a blossoming young-writers lab in San Francisco called 826 Valencia, started by Dave Eggers, author of the bestselling "A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius."

"It was everything I believed in," Ketcher said. Ketcher talked about starting a similar program here. She talked about it a lot. And word got out.

Last summer, Ketcher met Debbie Greenberg, counselor with a before- and after-school college preparation program called College Bound, already operating at U. City High and Miller Career Academy.

After much discussion, the two groups agreed to partner. Ketcher and her organization, StudioStL, gathered writers from across the region.

That fall, they began meeting at the two high schools to work with the College Bound students. They had three goals for the teens:

- **Improve their writing.**
- **Give them a published work to show college admissions counselors.**
- **Get them to "look inside just a little tiny bit and know themselves just a little more," Ketcher said.**

The group didn't really have a plan, Ketcher said.

The writers and their mentors – local teachers, professional, graduate students and writers – had a hard time at first.

For months the two groups produced more thrown-out paper than solid drafts.

College Bound was created to provide promising high school students from under-resourced backgrounds with the academic enrichment, life skills and social supports needed to succeed in four-year colleges.

It is the only program in the St. Louis region with a year-round curriculum that includes career exposure, community engagement, test preparation and academic enrichment so that students not only get to college, they succeed in college.

College Bound fulfills its mission through the application of “The Three P’s” (Preparation, Placement & Persistence) beginning with rising sophomores and continuing with graduating seniors.



Student author Alexis Maxine Marie Jamerison (center) talks with other writing students Tuesday. The student authors attend Clyde C. Miller Career Academy and University City High School, where they met for writing and editing sessions with the StudioStL volunteer writing staff.



Excerpt from Alexis Maxine Marie Jamerison's "I Am My Own Competition":
“The girl in the next lane is a mirror image of me. She is my greatest competition. We look exactly the same, but we’re different. That person is the person other people see in me, but I don’t see in myself. This person is the person I want to be. People say to her, ‘Oh, you are so smart. You’re gonna make it.’ But the person I see is going to fail.”

Excerpt from Mike Jone's "Granny":
“Remembering how she used to come and light up da room, Yeah, wit dat smile about as bright as da moon. Hopin’ one day maybe I could see her again, Go on Saturday runs like we did on da weekends. Wishing at least she could’ve even seen me grow up. Or at least she could’ve seen da cap and gown I threw up.”



“It was exhausting,” said Leslie Evans, a recent Washington University grad and one of the mentors.

The writing was hard, they said. But so was the focus. Students wanted to relax and talk more than write.

“I did not want to write,” said Dejá, 16. “It was another assignment.”

By December, Ketcher had had enough. Commit to the project, she said, or quit.

Ketcher knew the book teetered on the edge of failure.

Then, one by one, students started to reply.

“I will write something,” Ayriel Hadley, 16, remembers telling her University City High mentor. “Just don’t pressure me.”

“Could I write a whole bunch of pieces?” said Alexis Jamerison, 17, from U. City, too.

“How long is it going to take?” asked De-wain Meeks of his mentor at Miller Career Academy.

The rest of the process was not easy, leaders agree. Students needed help throughout. But now the book is done.

It is the first of what StudioStL expects will be a yearly project. Ketcher hopes this year’s sales of the self-published book will fund next year’s project.

Few of the students think they’ll end up professional writers. But the experience, many say, transcended the writing. The project forged a community – a bond between the teens and their mentors that has little to do with race.

“We don’t even use colors anymore,” said student Devon Small, 17. “We just use names.”

Two weeks ago, StudioStL and College Bound hosted a party at the Contemporary Art Museum on Washington Boulevard. Parents politely ate hors d’oeuvres and waited for the books to be presented.

Upstairs, about 40 students unwrapped the book packages. They laughed and shrieked. They held copies up for friends to see and asked classmates to sign inside covers.

“This is success for us,” Dejá said. “We published a book.”

To purchase a copy of this book for \$20.95, please visit www.collegeboundstl.org/BookPurchase.aspx

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