

English 180, Second Place; Professor, Dr. Rebekah Buchanan

Welcome to Poetry Club

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Walking into the classroom after the final school bell on that Friday, I wasn't really sure what I was expecting from that day in Poetry Club. I saw some people I knew from my clique and of course I sat with them. Who else would I be willing to be seen with? Ms. Stackle, our English teacher, entered the class with excitement on her face as she announced that we had permission to participate in Louder Than A Bomb. LTAB is Chicago's youth poetry contest for high school students all across Chicagoland. A school creates a team with 8 members: four members perform individually and four members perform in a group piece. After each poem is done, five scores are given with only the middle three averaged and added to the total team score. Four teams battle each other in each round and the highest scoring team moves on to the next round. Of course I jumped at the chance to do this. Finally, I would have the ability to truly express how I feel about life.....school....love....hell, anything I wanted. This was the time I could express my opinions and it didn't matter what anyone thought. I could finally be honest.

Attending a high school with an environment like mine was anything but about being an individual. Khaki bottoms, polo shirts, and leather-like shoes filled the hallways every morning and made everyone look the same. The personal freedom that we had outside these halls to wear and do as we wished was taken away. We didn't look like individuals at all in that building. Everyone looked the same. The only true form of expression was through your colorful socks, headbands, earrings, and the ties males were allowed to wear: and sometimes even this was challenged. Poetry Club was the one place we go on Fridays to gain back our individuality that was robbed from us. It allowed us to have a stage where we could stand out in a positive way.

The school had closely monitored ways of standing out through the honor roll assembly, the musical, athletics, Student Council, etc.; but the thing about Poetry Club was that the events that happened weren't approved ahead of time. We could choose to do whatever we wanted. Poetry Club was a place where our voices couldn't be controlled by anyone or anything and they could fill the empty school hallways freely. I guess when I think about the writing that happened there I just have to say that it was a little bit dangerous. All of the students there had the ability to write as they wished-being as personal and unique as possible.

There were no guidelines at the time: only to make sure that the audience could connect to what you are trying to say. The whole poetry club possessed individual pieces that were as unique as each person in the room. Every single person had the freedom to express themselves without boundaries. Topics from gun violence and popular girls to personal experiences and family members poured from the poems as they were shared in a single classroom circle. Once the mini poetry slam was complete, the full potential of the group was realized and it was time to write the group piece. This was the hardest part of preparing for LTAB because everyone needed a part in the poem and each one needed to possess strength. Another thing was that half of the points from the group poem appeared in the team score. Therefore, it was essential to get this just right and perfect it as soon as possible. All of us decided to talk about how some girls use social media to fill the insecurities they have on the inside. By working on this group piece, we were contributing to our school community with a beautiful work of art. Students from my high school would be able to see that weren't followers or 'floaters': we had a purpose to express what other people could not. Each of us had a line that showed the different ways we wrote poetry, but connected together into something that was unison. Everything was looking up for us... until she walked in.

She was known as the ‘devil in disguise’ with her 60’s loafers and too short pants. When she walked anywhere, students would scurry away like roaches hit with a light. She was the Dean of Students of my private school and she made all the students shiver. “Now, now, now students you know those poems have to run past me? They have to follow the standards in the academic handbook. We want our school to be represented at the highest level possible. Anything that is considered inappropriate must be removed or you will be unable to participate in the contest. Now could you pass all of your poems to the front?” My heart died a little: why is she judging our pieces for things like ‘What is acceptable?’ and ‘Does this follow the school code?’ The judges at the poetry contest don’t know anything about what the school’s mission is or what the guidelines are: they want raw and honest poetry. I was being challenged because I might offend people with what I have to say...honestly who cares? I finally have the chance to truly express myself and what do I have to show for it? A poem that isn’t necessarily what I had in my mind when I wrote it. I officially didn’t want to hear anyone else’s opinions about my poem except the judges at LTAB, my family, and my close friends... that is it. More importantly, my own opinion was at the top of the list... not HERS.

The next meeting was one I would never forget. It was the one time I wished I went to a public high school. The Dean walked in and sat down in the front of the class. It was clear she meant 100% business. She spoke to each writer one by one and when she called my name, I did an internal eye roll. She asked me about one line in the poem about my life. ‘In this line, are you talking about rape?’ The line was ‘I survived when a thief arrived /And took part of my innocence and fled laughing in the night’ ‘Yes it is. I am not ashamed of what happened to me. It is a part of me.’ ‘Well you have to edit that line. The school code prohibits those types of topics from being discussed that bluntly. It is also offensive.’ ‘Okay. I will edit it and give you the

revision later next week.' I swear as soon as I walked away I wanted to cry. How dare you try to censor the experiences in my life that are in my poetry? All of this just because of what backlash the school could face? I thought the school would stand with its students through anything. I guess I thought wrong. This school wasn't about being an individual: it was about fitting into their mold and acting as a spokesperson so they could gain donations. It had nothing to do with poetry.

After meeting with her, I had an unpleasant taste in my mouth. It had nothing to do with the fact that I was telling a story that needed to be told. It wasn't about trying to discuss things that the Black community doesn't like to know about. The only reason I had to change what I was saying was simply because 'it could offend some people'; that it could possibly make someone uneasy. All of the issues the group discussed were controversial: girls with low self-esteem issues, gun violence, rape, a divorce, etc. How can you censor real life? Why was my school putting up these roadblocks for this group? Is it because poetry doesn't have a clear right or wrong? It is because poetry isn't some controlled habit where there is a clear right and wrong? Then, something 'clicked' in my brain: I realized that the success of my school was only because they could control everyone and everything so that it teaches discipline (discipline= success). As soon as the Poetry Club tried to push the boundaries, the school staff had to swoop in and control it. (I expected nothing less.)

After I submitted my revision, I was able to participate in the contest. However, my view on my personal freedom was changed. I was used to being able to say as I wish without anything holding me back. I was used to making remarks and comments without worrying about someone telling me to change them. Now, I saw that my school took away individuality to provide me with 'success academically and strong leadership skills'. I saw that being an American citizen

was about contributing to society with my views and ideas. But in that type of controlled atmosphere, it was necessary to give up some of personal freedom in doing so; I wasn't able to describe my individual life my own way.