

Speak Up!

Don White

In April of 2008, I started the Speak Up Spoken Word Open Mike in Lynn, Massachusetts. I designed it specifically to attract, nurture and unleash the voices in the community that were hardest to reach – high-risk youth, people with mental health issues and people for whom English is a second language. My expectations were high but I could not have possibly imagined the institution it has become or the number of lives that have been permanently uplifted simply by creating a space within which all voices are respected equally.

Lynn is a working class community of 90,000 with a lot of problems: Poverty, heroin, and a violent crime rate that is more than double the national average. I am in the middle of five generations in this city. It can be a hard place but it can also be an amazing place.

I believe that human beings need two things - to belong and to contribute. The Speak Up structure is a fully developed system for attracting, nurturing, and creating community for those on the fringes of society.

Over the years I have been approached by teachers, clergy, and social workers involved in various outreach programs. It has been a great joy for me to teach them the things we have done that have helped make our Wednesday night gatherings the place where accomplished writers, nose ringed teens, immigrants, people with mental health issues, the bullied, the battered, the broken, poets, storytellers, musicians, teachers, students and virtually anyone who can open their mouth and emit language is not only welcomed, but embraced, encouraged, nurtured, and invited into the fold.

In eight years I have seen dozens of extremely high-risk teens find a home at Speak Up. These kids are sometimes descended from generations of drug abusers and have essentially raised themselves. They are street smart and wary. They sit and watch. After they see that everyone is free to say what they want with whatever language they choose these kids will sign up and read for us. Then, with a piece of paper visibly shaking in their hand they, perhaps for the first time, tell the world how they feel and all those present are witness to the birth of a new voice. We applaud them. Our fantastic host gets them a second round of applause encouraging them to bring their thoughts and words to us again.

The metamorphosis is obvious and immediate. That teenager is never the same again. When a person finds his or her voice and a community within which that voice is respected and is encouraged to grow that person is changed. The next time he or she reads for us the paper doesn't shake as much. Two months later a voice that can speak truth is fully formed. Then that teen will be the first to embrace, encourage and welcome the next tattered spirit that walks warily into our world.

Speak Up is a self-sustaining system for attracting and nurturing the unreachable in our community. We have created a place where the people on the fringes of our world can belong, grow, and contribute. In return, they bless us with a view of the world that can only be seen from their unique edge of society.

I am very proud of what we've done here. If you are interested in learning more about what it takes to create a Speak Up in your community contact my agent David Tamulevich david@tamulevich.com and I will speak to your group. I can do a short overview that lays out the basics of what it takes to make this work or I can put together a program that is detail oriented and interactive.

Either way I will teach you what I have learned about what works, what doesn't and why. Here's a sample of what we will discuss:

- Picking a venue.
- Choosing a host.
- Educating the audience.
- Educating the staff (if your venue is a restaurant)
- Commanding respect.
- Freedom of speech.
- Featured performers.
- Local outreach.
- Expanded outreach.
- Managing challenging personalities.
- Motivating accomplished speakers.
- Nurturing new speakers.

Don White is an accomplished singer songwriter, storyteller, comedian and community activist. His career spans twenty five years and has produced ten CDs, three DVDs and a book of short stories. He has been touring North American in a co bill with Christine Lavin called "The Funny Side of the Street" since 2008.

In 2011, Don was one of only 3 people in the 150-year history of his home town of Lynn, Massachusetts to receive the key to the city for his work in the community.

In 2012, He was awarded the Jerry Christen Memorial Award for service to the folk community From the Boston Area Coffee House Association.

Here is a link to an article on his work in the community:

<http://lynnhappens.com/2013/01/03/lynns-don-white-honored-for-dedication-to-community/>