

Messengers of Truth and Health—Young Artists of Color Raise Their Voices to Prevent Diabetes

Dean Schillinger, MD; Natasha Huey

Type 2 diabetes now affects US children at alarming rates.^{1,2} Over the last decade, rates have tripled in American Indian, doubled in African American, and increased 25% to 50% in Asian, Pacific Islander, and Hispanic youth.³ A novel arts and public health campaign is now helping young people of color transform themselves from being targets of metabolic risk to active agents of change, by shifting the conversation about diabetes toward “the bigger picture”: its social and environmental drivers.

Since 2011, the University of California, San Francisco, **Center for Vulnerable Populations** (CVP) Health Communications Program has partnered with **Youth Speaks**, a San Francisco-based youth development and arts education organization to create **The Bigger Picture**, a public health campaign rooted in art-as-social action⁴ that helps young people of color develop original spoken word poetry and hip-hop music videos to call out and confront the root causes of diabetes.

In after-school workshops that run for 2 hours for 5 afternoons, Youth Speaks mentors—culturally fluent spoken word poets from affected communities—collaborate with a CVP primary care physician and a health communications professional to lead group discussions about diabetes, including its causes and complications. The Bigger Picture team teaches young artists that diabetes is not simply a consequence of individual lifestyle choices but of broader, dysfunctional systems that constrain and shape behavior: the forces that reduce costs of obesogenic food, incentivize its marketing to people of color, unequally allocate physical activity opportunities, and perpetuate poverty and stress—all in ways that disproportionately focus diabetes risk within vulnerable communities. This systems frame directs attention to the structural causes of the epidemic, tapping into adolescents’ deeply held values of social justice, resistance to manipulation, desire to protect their families and communities, and drive to have a voice and sense of agency in effecting change.^{5,6}

By the end of the workshop, participants write poems that synthesize their new knowledge with their lived experience, reflecting the underlying tenet of Youth Speaks’ pedagogy: “life as primary text.” Top poems are selected and turned into poetry videos by Jamie DeWolf, a filmmaker and past Youth Speaks coach. The youth poet’s vision for how to tell the story is central to production; the videos feature the poets themselves and often their family members, with their own homes and neighborhoods as backdrops.

To date, the campaign has produced 27 videos emphasizing a broad range of public health messages⁶ (eTable in the **Supplement**). Since its inception, The Bigger Picture has been centered in the Bay Area; in 2016, after training sister spoken word organizations, it expanded to 7 California regions hit hard by diabetes. The year culminated in a poetry showcase held in Berkeley, California. Three poems from this statewide competition and 1 selected from the most recent local workshop were produced as the newest The Bigger Picture videos. Excerpts from these new poems are introduced here and the associated music videos debut at www.thebiggerpicture.org.

Monster



Still frame from "Monster," a music video featuring Liliana Perez (left) and Rose Bergmann (right) performing their poem about the unhealthy role of energy and sugar drinks in their families.

Reproduced with permission from Youth Speaks.

In “**Monster**,” Rose Bergmann (age 17) and Liliana Perez (age 16) describe how the heavily caffeinated and sugar-loaded energy drinks their fathers rely on to power them through endless workdays to support their respective families affect their fathers’ health:

He gets home
Works more
Now drinks Monsters to keep himself awake
52 grams from the can keep his eyes open
Sugar creating their own hands around his throat
When I was little, the monsters that my dad saved me from
Looked more like witches
Now tall tin cans haunt him dressed in black and green

"My inspiration came from seeing the addiction and hurt [that] sugar-prescribing corporations have put my family and friends through, and wanting to change that narrative," said Liliana. Rose explained: "[My father] works really hard to make money to support the 5 of us, but it sometimes comes at the cost of his health. When completing a freelance graphic design job, he often has to stay up late in order to meet the deadline. This leads to him relying on energy drinks that poison him and coffee every morning with too much sugar in it."

Empty Plate



Still frame from "Empty Plate," a music video featuring Anthony "Joker" Orosco performing his poem about his Mexican-origin farming family, whose low wages are not enough to pay for the healthy produce they spend their days harvesting. Reproduced with permission from Youth Speaks.

In "Empty Plate," Anthony "Joker" Orosco (age 20), addresses the legacy of poverty that afflicts migrant families and the fact that farmers who harvest the fresh produce arranged into pyramids of health at Whole Foods or other markets do not earn enough to afford the food themselves:

Abuelas y abuelos, tias, tios, primos y carnales
Who picked processed and packed produce
Their pockets couldn't afford to begin with.
Backs breaking, bones aching
Harvesting healthy fruits and veggies
Acre by acre,
The bounty of California's breadbasket
That almost never blessed the tables of farmero families,

He calls out the parallel reality of food deserts and fast food playgrounds endemic to the south side of Stockton, California:

Today it's practically multiple choice,
Being murdered or choosing death by diet,
A decision between
8 spots 3 blocks apart

Anthony's inspiration was "to be able to show the world the mistreatment [my folks] endured working and fighting their damnedest in the hopes of giving their families a bet-

ter life. [They endured] the absolute worst this country has to offer to give the next generation of beautiful, brown kids a better foundation to grow from. That story needs to be told, and I felt I should be the one to tell it."

Big Boy



Still frame from "Big Boy," a music video featuring Edgar Tumbokon performing his poem about the role of sugar-sweetened beverages in the assimilation of immigrant communities and the emotional legacy of gestational diabetes. Reproduced with permission from Youth Speaks.

In "Big Boy," Edgar Tumbokon (age 18) depicts the subversive and harmful role that sugar-sweetened beverages play in the assimilation process of immigrant communities and the legacy of gestational diabetes:

And, for as long as I can remember,
I have always been a big boy
Never known what skinny felt like
Never known what it was like to not look in the mirror and see
dead weight
To not hold my mother down
· · · · ·
To know that my nativity wasn't only
Stretch marks and sleepless nights
It was Coca-Cola cravings and chocolate sundaes
It was the prenatal check up
Turned diabetes diagnostic meeting
That there was a time where there were no
Pricked fingers
Or high sugar level dizzy
No insulin shots
Or fear of phantom limbs
That before me
My mother could sleep easy
Knowing nothing of her own creation
Would make a glucose flood out of her body

Edgar says "I couldn't help but focus my piece on something that hits close to home: my mother. Diagnosed with diabetes when pregnant with me, my lived understanding of this condition is through her, and to write about anything else would feel disingenuous. Thus, I wrote about our story and what it means to be diabetic going through prenatal care [as] a low-income person of color."

The Longest Mile



Still frame from "The Longest Mile," a music video featuring Tassiana Willis performing her poem about the challenges of living healthier in a family where moments of joy center around unhealthy food. Reproduced with permission from Youth Speaks.

In "The Longest Mile," Tassiana Willis (age 24) tackles the challenge of overcoming physical inactivity when faced with obesity-related stigma, and a conflict common among low-income families like hers—navigating moments of joy that center around unhealthy food:

This about how I starve myself before blood work
 Praying it doesn't pick up the candy from my last time of the month
 This is me praying I don't forget diabetes knocked
 2 uncles off their feet
 And one is barely standing
 This is my battle between diet and dialysis
 About being stuck between two Burger Kings
 And never having it your way....

What Tassiana wants the audience to take away from the piece is an understanding of the "tragic traditions" low-income families are often forced to practice when some of the most marketed and accessible sources of joy are unhealthy foods. Tassiana says, "For me, writing this piece came from looking at my relationships to food and how that was related to my relationships to my family. So much of our habits around eating are built from family culture, which is influenced by what's available."

The Bigger Picture videos have been presented in assemblies to more than 5000 Bay Area public high school students and have been viewed on YouTube more than 1.5 million times. Local organizations (American Heart Association, Boys and Girls Clubs of America, and 3 county health departments) have adopted much of the program's messaging. The Bigger Picture has consulted with a consumer advocacy group in Mexico, *El Poder del Consumidor* (Power of the Consumer), helping catalyze the parallel youth-generated campaign *Destapa La Verdad* (Open Truth) that merges music (rock, pop, and folk) and public health in live performances, a music CD, and accompanying films (*Dulce Veneno*).

Although the larger objective is to foster structural and social change⁶ (eFigure in the [Supplement](#)), the team also

hopes to assess if The Bigger Picture leads to shorter-term improvements in health through a longitudinal school-based program in 2018-2020. Outcomes include changes in health behaviors and social norms, as well as indicators of diabetes-related civic engagement.

The 4 new poetry and hip-hop music videos created by these artists are an outcome of scaling The Bigger Picture from a regional to a statewide effort, and point to a time when The Bigger Picture might evolve to become a platform for a broader youth movement to eliminate diabetes in young people. Such a movement has the potential to alter environments in ways that could also benefit the broader public.

1. The SEARCH Study. National Diabetes Fact Sheet 2011. http://www.cdc.gov/diabetes/pubs/pdf/ndfs_2011.pdf. Accessed February 1, 2018.
2. Dabelea D, Mayer-Davis EJ, Saydah S, et al. Prevalence of type 1 and type 2 diabetes among children and adolescents from 2001 to 2009. *JAMA*. 2014;311(17):1778-1786.
3. Mayer-Davis EJ, Lawrence JM, Dabelea D, et al. Incidence trends of type 1 and type 2 diabetes among youths, 2002-2012. *N Engl J Med*. 2017;376(15):1419-1429.
4. Boal A. *The Aesthetics of the Oppressed*. New York, NY: Routledge Press; 2006.
5. Rogers E, Handley M, Fine S, Davis H, Schillinger D. Development and early implementation of The Bigger Picture, a youth-targeted public health literacy campaign to prevent type 2 diabetes. *J Health Comm*. 2014;19(52):144-160.
6. Schillinger D, Ling P, Fine S, et al. Reducing cancer and cancer disparities: lessons from a youth-generated diabetes prevention campaign. *Am J Prev Med*. 2017;53(351):S103-S113.

Author Affiliations: Division of General Internal Medicine and Center for Vulnerable Populations, Zuckerberg San Francisco General Hospital, University of California, San Francisco (Schillinger); Youth Speaks, San Francisco, California (Huey).

Corresponding Author: Dean Schillinger, MD, Division of General Internal Medicine, University of California, San Francisco, PO Box 1364, San Francisco, CA 94110 (dean.schillinger@ucsf.edu).

Published Online: February 14, 2018. doi:10.1001/jama.2018.0986

Conflict of Interest Disclosures: All authors have completed and submitted the ICMJE Form for Disclosure of Potential Conflicts of Interest. Dr Schillinger reported grant funding from National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities, National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases, the Metta Fund, and the James Irvine Foundation. Ms Huey reported grant funding from the California Endowment, the Metta Fund, and the James Irvine Foundation.

Additional Information: Rose Bergmann and Liliana Perez are young poets from Pomona, California, who have grown as writers and performers through their participation in Say Word, their local youth poetry organization. Liliana and Rose were both members of the team representing Say Word at the 2017 Brave New Voices international youth poetry slam festival. Anthony "Joker" Orosco is a Chicano poet born and raised in Stockton, California. He was 14 years old when he started writing and has been writing and performing with With Our Words for about 5 years. Edgar Tumbokon was born in Makati, Philippines, and grew up in Los Angeles, California, where he began writing and performing with the Get Lit Players in 2015. Since then, he has performed in venues ranging from Dodger Stadium to Warped Tour to the Kennedy Center and has represented Los Angeles at the Brave New Voices international youth poetry slam festival for the past 2 years. Tassiana Willis is a poet, singer, and actor from San Francisco, California. Tassiana has been writing and performing since she can remember, first performing at a Youth Speaks open mic at age 12. Since then, Tassiana has performed at venues ranging from the Herbst Theater to the Golden State Warriors halftime show at the Oakland-Alameda Coliseum. Tassiana's work with The Bigger Picture has led to writing opportunities for other health campaigns, such as editing health system scenarios for the Reos Partners health equity project in Canada.

Submissions: The Arts and Medicine editors welcome proposals for features in the section. Submit yours at artsandmedicine@jamanetwork.com.