

# DEAR WOOLLYVERSE,

The Spit Dat / Woolly Mammoth Connectivity crew are no strangers to prison. After our inaugural Spit Dat Academy class had their glorious poetic graduation performances at **THEARC** in Southeast in 2021, the 2022 iterations of the Academy took place in DC Jail. The men of cellblocks D3B and SE-1 regaled us with their lyrical legends, culminating in collective performances in the jail with an audience of impressed guests from “out in the world.” Our rapport with the fellas was almost instantaneous, with them looking forward to us coming weekly and asking about us when it was over.



The current Spit Dat Academy, in partnership with **Maya Angelou Academy/See Forever Foundation**, presents its own unique set of challenges. Our campus is the Youth Services Center on Mt. Olivet Road NE where, since October, we’ve spent most Fridays sharing the joys of poetry and drama with 7 units of incarcerated teens. My bad; did I say “drama”? I meant “theatre” (when I say “drama” to these younglings, they think I’m talking about fighting). And my bad; did I say “7 units”? I meant 6, now that one unit has been denied our programming block due to drama (as in fighting). And my bad; did I say sharing the joys of poetry? I meant trying to.

*“What y’all here for?”*

*“Poetry.”*

*“Oh, I used to have to do poetry for school. I hate poetry.”*

*“Well, what do you like?”*

*“We like making people leave.”*

This was our Day 1 Welcoming Committee.

"What are those?" queried one student, gesturing to my thrift store Pumas with all of his meme-gleaned mischievous malice.

"Why, these are shoes" I replied with all of my practiced outer affability and inner indignation (I said they were from the thrift store, but I ain't say they weren't fly. And how he gon' go in on my kicks when he rocking Crocs?).

*Hard core like a rock  
In jail rocking Crocs  
Sometimes I wear them with no socks  
I'm a rapper but don't eat Rap Snacks  
Rack up on PR cart, get all my snacks back  
Tell the homie send me over  
I need some snacks, Jack.*

—HB



"PR" stands for "**Participation**" and "**Respect**". It's an incentive program that Maya Angelou Academy uses with the students for classes and programming. Per session, the teacher assigns each student 5 points, 3 points, or 0 points in either category based on their exhibition of said traits. As the above poem attests, the students can use PR points to buy snacks like Flamin' Hot Cheetos and Hostess Zebra Cakes from the PR cart—a veritable Valhalla, a salty and sugary smorgasbord which ironically never fails to siphon away much of the Participation and Respect when it makes its grand arrival during a session.

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I find Participation to be a relative concept (as I find most concepts to be). For instance, if you taught a lesson about metaphors and similes then gave a young man a piece of paper and pencil and asked him to express himself, and he drew a Glock 30S, detailed down to the gritty texture of the black rubber pistol grip tape, how many PR points would you give him?

Looking back, I realize I could have made a lesson out of that Glock 30S. I could have had that student write a poem from the gun's perspective a la Nas' 1996 song "I Gave You Power," with the words forming the shape of the gun. I guess I was just caught off guard. Just as I was caught off guard when I showed the students a YouTube video of me spoofing a Kanye West song from the perspective of North Pole pioneer Matthew Henson and they asked me:

*“How many views you got? Where is your success?”*

I have to say there’s something uniquely humbling about having your success questioned by incarcerated kids. Really makes you think about your life.

When the students first saw that we had a laptop with internet and the ability to project, some requested that we show *Shottas*, a 2002 Jamaican crime film which I still haven’t watched. We denied said request, but we do allow them to choose what music we play while they write. Most frequently requested are Rod Wave and NBA Youngboy, and they ask if I personally know the latter when they find out I’m from Louisiana (as it happens, I don’t). Speaking of Louisiana rappers, I did seem to garner their interest when I showed them the *Daily Show* interview of Mac Phipps who served 21 years in prison for a murder he did not commit. He served some of that time with C-Murder, his No Limit Records labelmate and Master P’s brother, also accused of murder.

*“Master P got money. His brother supposed to have been out,”* asserted a student.

**I cannot blame the younglings for equating fame with success, or money with invincibility. It is what their world has taught them. All that I can teach them is poetry.**

My writing prompts that day were: “Describe a time when your truth got you in trouble, either because you told it or because you couldn’t” and “Describe a situation where you got in trouble for something you didn’t do.” They shared stories ranging from having to admit that they cheated on a girlfriend to taking the punishment for something their twin did. But most memorable was this poetic rendition:

*They say to tell the truth  
But I stopped trying  
Because every time I try to tell the truth  
They say I’m lying.*

—MD

My not-so-secret weapon with the younglings is “Brush ‘Em”, a silly spoof I wrote of “Cut It” by rappers O.T. Genasis and the late Young Dolph. The song is about bad breath, and it has become so popular amongst the students that they request it from time to time. I’m pretty sure the Connectivity team knows the words by now. I once performed it in a unit while using a makeshift hair brush made out of four tied-together toothbrushes as a prop. The students were dying laughing (unfortunately, that is a unit that we no longer get to see, but I’m happy that we at least had that experience together).



We tend to get the most consistently positive reception from the girls' units. The girls are usually intently engaged in our sessions and share the most vulnerable poetry, going as deep as their family issues. One of my favorite memories from this Academy is from a day when half the girls had to remain in their cells while the other half were in the common area, apparently due to some in-fighting. Even with this physical restriction, the girls in their cells were jumping up and down with me when I performed my anti-bullying Cardi B spoof "Bodak Bully," and asked me to slide copies of my poetry under their cell doors so they could remix it. In that same session, a student named "T" volunteered to rap for us and showed levels of "spit-acular" skill, dynamic delivery, confidence and crafts(wo)manship that downright astounded me. I told her that she was a natural rapper, and that I hoped she would be willing to show off those talents in our closing showcase, not to mention when she gets back out into the world.

**My students and I come from very different worlds. But I've found that when we sing and dance, sweating and smiling together, we are reminded of each other's humanity. As the music plays, we are more alike than we are different. In those moments, we get to be free together.**



Out here in the world, at the last Spit Dat event of 2023, we got a surprise visit from Borden Barrows and Chaz "Teflon". A man of humongous heart and a lifelong Grateful Deadhead, Borden was our invaluable guide into DC Jail when we did Spit Dat Academy there, and the immensely talented and charismatic Chaz was a crowd favorite at our cellblock D3B Academy showcase. With his time on the inside completed, it was a true joy to see Chaz at Woolly Mammoth. I asked him if he wanted to get on the open mic list, and he said that he was taking some time to feel the scene out and see where he fit in

first (how's that for Participation and Respect?). We look forward to featuring Chaz at Spit Dat when his transition is complete and he no longer has a curfew, just as we look forward to seeing our current students on "the other side". Hopefully by then we will have learned much more from each other than just how to draw a Glock 30S. Hopefully by then we can truly be free...together.

Truly,  
Drew Anderson

*The Spit Dat Academy end-of-semester showcase at the Youth Services Center recently took place on Friday, February 16th. It was a celebratory affair where Drew, Spit Dat Feature Queen Cain, Woolly Company Member Erika Rose, and Academy graduate Chaz performed the students' words for them, and then invited them on stage to perform themselves. A highlight was a rousing rendition of Maya Angelou's "Phenomenal Woman" performed by several of the girls, with their own original choreography, including step! We look forward to returning to Maya Angelou Academy next semester. **Ready to support Connectivity at Woolly? Take action and support our programs with a gift today! [Click here to donate.](#)***