

PRESS-TELEGRAM

LOCAL NEWS

How a former Long Beach teacher is connecting to students through poetry



Jerome Vincent Carter, a former principal and teacher at LBUUSD now works with students at Jordan High School using his own book to empower students through the use of poetry in Long Beach on Thursday, March 7, 2019. (Photo by Brittany Murray, Press-Telegram/SCNG)

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Jerome Carter will never forget one of the most shocking moments of his 30-something years as an educator.

It was 2001 and he was teaching English at Crenshaw Community Day School, a Los Angeles continuation school for students recently released from juvenile hall.



When one of his students was not paying attention, Carter asked why.

The 16-year-old's response chilled him: there is no point, he said, I won't live to be 18 anyway.

"If a kid is sitting in your class and you're trying to teach math," Carter said. "And this kid doesn't think he's going to live to be 18, I mean what does he care about an algebraic equation? Or positive and negative integers? This kid thinks he won't even be around (to use it)."

Later that week at his Long Beach home – his first-grade son read him a poem for a class project. As Carter listened to his son's uplifting words about the moon and stars, something struck him: What if I did this for my students?

That's how Carter became the author of "Inspiration 52," a [collection of uplifting poems he wrote](#) for his class in 2001, which published in 2003. Since then, he's taken the book to schools statewide and leads poetry workshops for local schools, including Jordan High School in Long Beach.

On Thursday, March 7, Carter worked with a classroom of students in the Female Leadership Academy, who discussed the book's poems and also shared some of their own thoughts.

During the workshop, students read through Carter's poems and shared to the class what it means to them. Some of them also write their own poems, while others added to Carter's.

Some of the quotes students came up with included "I can do a lot with a little bit," "Own who you are," and "Think better, do better."

After each student presented his or her poem, Carter and his class followed by encouraging "snapping."

"They're coming up with their own quotes, presenting to the whole class and being validated," he said. "When there are quotes like this (above), I tell everyone to pause and write it down."

Also a professor at Loyola Marymount University, Carter invites his partnering schools to tour the campus. Jordan counselors Heather Banks and Danita Whitaker, who work with students trying to meet their A-G requirements, organized the field trip last month, where applications to go to the university filed in quicker than they've ever seen.

Banks said her students – some in foster care, others also formerly incarcerated – need the type of motivation Carter's program provides.

"These are kids that are hard to break," Banks said. "When I say hard to break – they're tough; you can tell life has just been a difficult challenge and they've had to be tough. And when they come in, I could tell from the first time they came in to the second time they walked out, you see a little bit of vulnerability. It's refreshing to see them let down their guard."



Poetry as therapy

Carter's first teaching gig was in a Compton elementary school, after graduating from Loyola Marymount University in 1986. He then moved from Los Angeles Unified School District and the Los Angeles County Office, which landed him at his first Long Beach assignment in 1994, working in a special program for struggling students at Millikan High School.

After teaching at several Long Beach schools and becoming an administrator, he eventually went back to LACOE in 2001, where he came Crenshaw in 2001.

The first poem Carter wrote – that would later be published in his book – was the night his son read to him. As Carter sat at his kitchen table, trying to think of words



His goal was to connect with students about making the right decisions, even if they're tough; and finding ways to improve your life.

At school the next day, Carter wrote the poem on the class whiteboard. He asked the students to memorize it and recite it to the class at the end of the week.

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The students, at first, were reluctant.

They told Carter they "didn't do" poetry. But when the teacher said their probation officers would be there to watch, it swayed at least 80 percent of the class to participate.

"They rocked that thing," Carter recalled with a proud smile.

Each week, Carter would write a new poem and repeat the exercise. He also encouraged the students to draft their own poems or art, with similar themes.

After a few weeks, Carter was happily surprised to see the students were asking what the new poem of the week would be.



And they also wrote their own. Many of which are featured in "Inspiration52."

One of the poems is "The Choices I Make," written by 10th grader Jami Butrell; about gettin kicked out of school, drinking and eventually joining a gang. However, it has a happy ending: she's doing well in school, wants to turn her life around and join the Navy.

“I got tired of wasting time and throwing up,” it read. “So I said now is the point in my life where I need to grow up.”

Carter said he saw a cultural change in his classroom as more time went on; and he learned more about his student’s struggles.

If a kid is tired in class and trying to sleep, for example, Carter would learn that they’re the primary caregiver for their younger siblings; or work a night job.

“It helps to validate them and it gives them an opportunity to have a voice and be creative,” he said. “It’s like therapy. Sometimes you’ve got to talk about these things but you have nobody to talk to; sometimes you act out in class.”



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Emily covers education and development for the Long Beach Press-Telegram. A native of Long Beach, Emily is an alumna of the Cal State Long Beach Journalism Department. Prior to joining the Press-Telegram, Emily was city editor of The Capistrano Dispatch in San Juan Capistrano, a contributing writer for the Orange County Register and the news editor for The Edge in Long Beach.