

Los Angeles - Street Poets

[Film: 12 minutes](#)

With the motto of "One Street, One Heartbeat, One Love," LA-based Street Poets teaches young people how to develop their poetic voice and share their feelings about life on the street, in schools, and in juvenile detention facilities. By giving them an artistic outlet for expression, Street Poets empowers Los Angeles County youth to transcend self-destructive lifestyles and creatively transform both lives and communities.

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

Grades 9 – 12

Language Arts, Theater Arts, Health, Civics

Language Arts – Standard 8. Use listening and speaking strategies for different purposes

- Understand influences on language use (e.g., political beliefs, positions of social power, culture)

Theater - Standard 5. Understand how informal and formal theatre, film, television, and electronic media productions create and communicate meaning

- Know how social meanings (aural, oral, and visual symbols with personal and/or social significance) communicated in informal productions, formal productions, and personal performances of different cultures and historical periods can relate to current personal, national, and international issues

Health - Standard 4. Know how to maintain mental and emotional health

- Know strategies for coping with and overcoming feelings of rejection, social isolation, and other forms of stress

Civics - Standard 27. Understand how certain character traits enhance citizens' ability to fulfill personal and civic responsibilities

- Understand the importance of dispositions that foster respect for individual worth and human dignity such as compassion and respect for the rights and choices of individuals

Resource - [McREL Content Knowledge – Standards & Benchmarks](#)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ☞ *"I'm trying to rebuild the community in which someday I will die. My 'hood is your 'hood, and your 'hood is mine". What does this poetry line mean to you? Explain the things in your community that belong to everyone. Whose responsibility is it to maintain or rebuild these things?*
- ☞ *How does performing poetry out loud help these people? In other words, would just writing the poems in a journal have the same effect? Do you consider the performance of this poetry to be brave? Why or why not? What is the risk?*

- 🗣️ Describe poetry as a means of self-expression. How is it different than just writing a story or autobiography about you?
- 🗣️ Explain this poetry line. "It's OK to feel strong. It's not OK to hurt people." How do people exhibit strength without hurting someone else?
- 🗣️ Belonging to a gang is often compared to being in a family. What is meant by that? What do gang members get from each other? What is your experience with gangs?
- 🗣️ How do you feel about this statement? "I don't want to give up on anybody. People can change." Do you agree? Can you think of someone who has this positive attitude? What impact does it have on other people when someone has faith that they can change, for the better? Can you give some examples?
- 🗣️ "Ritual is being uncomfortable." How does the Ritual in the Sweat Lodge help these people? How is it a metaphor for life?
- 🗣️ "I did it for my little brothers. It was for them that made me want to do something better in my life." How does being connected to people you love make you want to do the right thing?

ACTIVITY

Create and perform a poem

Write a poem that reflects your life and your views. It can be about something personal or your views on a social, cultural or political issue. Perform the poem in front of another person or a group. Following the performance, have a discussion about how it felt to share your poetry and your personal thoughts out loud.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Excerpts from interview at [explore.org](https://www.explore.org)

Chris Henrikson is a writer who, after leading a poetry writing workshop in a juvenile detention camp in 1995, was inspired to start a nonprofit organization that helps at-risk youth channel their feelings and creative energy into performance poetry.



What is the mission statement of your organization?

[Street Poets](#) is a non-profit poetry-based violence intervention and community-building organization. Our mission is threefold:

- TO INSPIRE at-risk youth in the juvenile detention facilities, schools and streets of Los Angeles to discover and develop their voices as writers, artists and human beings.
- TO EMPOWER these young people to use the skills and increased self-awareness engendered through the arts to transcend self-destructive lifestyles.
- TO CREATE a healing community that unites different racial, ethnic and socioeconomic segments of our city around the transformational power of the creative process.

When was it created, by whom, and why?

I started facilitating a poetry writing workshop in a Los Angeles juvenile detention camp for boys back in 1995 as a volunteer through the Writers Guild of America. What I witnessed and experienced in that workshop radically altered my life. I saw boys, gang kids mostly, facing fears, shedding tears and giving voice to deep childhood

Created by Julie Beckman

wounds. It was as if they had been waiting for someone to come sit and listen to their stories with an open heart. So that's what I did for the first couple of years. I listened deeply to the rage, the fear, the confusion and the sadness as it surfaced through all those layers of protection they'd built up over the years. In the process, I learned how to ask good questions – the kind that open doors in people. I gave my students pencils and empty notebooks, and encouraged them to write from their hearts. I challenged them to be as real as they could be – and they just kept rising to that challenge. So I, in turn, felt challenged to create some kind of healing community beyond the barbed wire fence to which they could stay connected when they got released. In the early years (starting in 1997), we partnered with a great New York City-based arts education organization called DreamYard. Then, as we evolved, it made more sense for us to separate and establish our own independent non-profit out here in California.