



Birmingham Young Poet Laureate

Birmingham's third **Young Poet Laureate**, recruited by the Libraries and Archive Service to be a young ambassador for poetry and libraries, is winning friends for poetry in his visits to schools. When he's not writing or performing poetry, or training to be a plumber, 17-year-old Matt Windle is a boxer.

"I was nervous about performing at first, but I just told myself that if I can have a fight in front of 400 people I can read a poem in front of 200."

Matt Windle, Birmingham Young Poet Laureate

The effects

For the past three years Birmingham Libraries and Archive Service has appointed a Young Poet Laureate to work alongside the Birmingham Poet Laureate (currently Richard Grant, known as Dreadlockalien) and act as an ambassador for poetry and libraries among young people. The new YPL is announced every National Poetry Day, selected by the previous young laureate, library staff, council heads of services and local journalists. The current YPL is 17-year-old trainee plumber and boxer Matt Windle who has been a huge success in schools. He is an excellent role model, encouraging less engaged young people to consider writing and performing.

The experience

Matt Windle, Birmingham Young Poet Laureate

When I go into schools, kids come up to me and say "Are you the boxer?" I tell them I am a boxer, but I've been invited because I'm a poet. They say something like "we thought you'd have glasses and a big book". Sometimes they say poetry's boring, and when I've done my session I always say, "Does anyone still think poetry's boring then?" They never do.

I like to tell them I'm a boxer, a poet and I'm going to be a plumber. I want to show people that you can have as many different talents as you want, you don't have to stick to a certain type. Writing poetry is not just for a certain type of person and I want to let people know that you can learn from poetry and it can really help you out when things get hard, to express your feelings.

I go to as many schools, libraries and poetry events as I can fit in around my plumbing course at Sandwell College which is three days a week, and I train for boxing five days a week. I give workshops, judge competitions and take every opportunity I can to perform. Birmingham Libraries ask me to perform at a lot of events and I was nervous about it at first, but I just told myself that if I can have a fight in front of 400 people I can read a poem in front of 200. When I was doing GCSE English my teacher wanted me to do a story to go in my coursework folder. I said I'd rather do a poem because it would be easier. I'd been writing song lyrics for a few years. The teacher told me to enter for Birmingham Young Poet Laureate. I didn't win but I got on the shortlist, so I was asked to perform and I did some more events with Dreadlockalien, the Birmingham Poet Laureate. I really enjoyed the experience so I entered again. I like writing poems for special occasions such as Anti-

Bullying Week and a Schools of the Future event. So far, touch wood, I haven't been given a subject that I can't write about. I have time to write my personal poems too. If I can make a living from plumbing and poetry I'll be happy.

Outcomes

Each year about 150 aspiring young poets apply to be the Young Poet Laureate, with many schools encouraging their pupils to participate. Within three years this has grown into a high-profile position which has raised the profile of poetry among young people throughout the city. The requests grow each year for the young laureate to perform their work at local events either alone or with the adult laureate. The young laureate gets the chance to work with the adult laureate, meet other professional poets, develop new work and increase their confidence and skills. Matt Windle, the current laureate, is particularly successful as a role model in schools, especially for less engaged students.

Resources and staffing

- Design and creation of application form by marketing team.
- Administration and postage costs.
- Management costs.
- Judges' time

Partners

- Benjamin Zephaniah
- Shakespeare's Solicitors Birmingham
- Museums, Libraries and Archives Council
- Core Skills Partnership
- Peters Bookselling Services
- BBC Radio WM
- Birmingham Post
- Children's Fund
- Birmingham Poet Laureate (adult)

Challenges

The challenge of 2007/8 is to increase the number of applications from a broad range of young people and communities from across the city. The current laureate's popularity and increased exposure has meant his work has had to be balanced with other demands on his time and a system has been created to give the library service more control over bookings.

The future

Birmingham Libraries will continue to promote the Young Poet Laureate each year.