

**Name: Reed Bobroff**  
**Essay Title: Reservation Poetry**

*“Hope:  
reaching for something not there  
praying and wishing,*

*begging,  
believing,  
grasping*

*whatever is left”.* (Namingha, 48)

Kayenta, Arizona is one of the more urban rural towns on the Diné (Navajo) reservation. It comes complete with two motels, a pizza parlor, Chinese restaurant, diner, grocery store, two gas stations, and lots of government housing. Alcoholism runs through the community like blood. Meth is a silver snake circling the high school. Domestic violence hides in dented trailers. This pain and these hardships are contained within the red cliffs and purple mountains that rise more like secrets than prayers. There is poetry here.

In March, 2012, Marsha Whitehair, a teacher from Kayenta Unified School District asked me to teach her 7th graders to write poetry (I’ve been a performance poet for six years). In my workshop, I asked the students to write poems about where they were from and who they were as Native people. At first, the students were intimidated. They asked for a format or guidelines more strict than just “go for it”. One student asked how to “get an ‘A’ ” on her poem. I struggled to teach that art has no rules. “There’s no wrong way to write a poem,” I told them. I write poetry and use it to understand my emotions and to internalize what I experience. After a few sample poems, and some more goading, they were all writing. At the end of class, some *voluntarily* performed their writing. They tackled bullying, family, young love, and growing up on the rez. I left the students with advice from a mentor of mine, “It’s not about writing what no one else has written, it’s about writing what only you could have written” (Nam Le, July, 2011).

A few weeks later, Ms. Whitehair told me she was seeing her students grow in ways she never had before. “I can’t get them to stop writing poems!” she said. “They come up to me at lunch, before class, before the bus leaves and they all ask to read me their poems!” (Marsha Whitehair, May, 2012). She decided to showcase her students’ poems in a community presentation and so posted a sign-up, expecting ten or so students to read. At the end of the day, 160 teenagers had volunteered to read their work. The hour-long showcase was extended to two hours. Only sixty-seven students were able to share their poems before they had to run to catch their buses. Their subjects ranged from abandonment to the trials of friendship. One boy in particular, who reads at a fourth grade level and rarely speaks in class, enthusiastically performed a love poem for mutton. Two girls composed a well-crafted, multi-voice poem completely of their own accord, something that usually takes a performance coach and significant experience.

Ms. Whitehair's students and stories showed me that Indians need poetry. Not only does it provide an outlet for expression of our emotions, but, as descendants of storytelling cultures, Indigenous youth need to continue to add to the oral history of our ancestors.

Despite efforts by the government and others to promote expression among young Native Americans, little progress has been made. In *Arrows Four*, an anthology of American Indian youth writing, T.D. Allen describes such efforts: “[i]n the fall of 1968, ... funds were designated ... to provide American Indian high school students with extra opportunities and encouragement to express themselves on paper ... to help students discover themselves as persons with something to say” (Allen, 11). And yet here we are, forty-four years later, and Native American students still need help in expressing who we are.

My goal is to promote American Indian Arts education through oral tradition. Through the Native American Cultural Center at Yale University, I hope to establish a spoken word collective of young Native writers to tour reservations and schools with high Indigenous populations to teach workshops and perform our own original writings. By activating their creative talents, Native youth can explore their identities, heal, and push themselves to succeed in the larger world and their own communities.

**Works Cited:**

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Le, Nam. Jul. 17, 2012.

Namingha, Kathleen. "Hope:." *Hope:.* Ed. T.D. Allen. New York: Washington Square Press, 1974. 48.

Whitehair, Marsha. May 6, 2012.