

Poem given at Class of 2015 convocation, by Ekene Obi-Okoye '12:

9 years old.

Ready to school me on every top rap single of the 90s.

(And yes, you are probably thinking what I was: But weren't you born in 2001?)

He shrugs and puts his pencil back to work.

Hands moving with the letters across the page,

He makes this bit of school work his own stage,

Upon which he acts out feats beyond his age

Fingers shifting, chest lifting

Soundless, he is, but his eyes tell you a different story.

"Please don't take my quietness for weakness.

Don't take my silence for disinterest.

I am built to be strong, to defy and to prove all others wrong."

Check his notebook and you find lyrical genius,

So hot fire Lil Wayne should be scared.

The same boy that teachers say struggles with literacy.

Pause.

He is illiterate?

Play.

I don't think so.

Forget all that you've been told.

This boy is a light hidden from the world.

Now rewind.

51 years old.

With a smile that makes the world go round,

With a laugh that diminishes all negative sound,

She is the epitome of strength.

The 1980s were part of her youth,

going to a high school where she was jeered at,

sneered at, leered at,

Made to feel like she couldn't be near that

Oh-so-magnificent terrace of higher education.

The color of her skin was like a stop sign, causing many to pause only a few seconds before they ran right past her.

Her words were to be treated like wind, to be paid no mind.

But their hopes were dashed when she stepped onto this campus, Harvard College

For here she found a community of people like her yet unlike her.

In the midst of the same racial tensions, they stood

Defiant, outspoken, *yet willing to listen*

Willing to embrace her, support her, and uplift her in her search for herself,

In her search for her voice. And when she found it, she made sure everyone heard it.
She was the president of Kuumba in the 1980s.
And her voice was among the many that paved the way for people like me to find mine.

Fast forward to the 9 year old boy, ready to school me on every rap single of the 90s.
I, his tutor, an unsure sophomore, lost, searching for purpose, for self
And I find him in a PBHA program in South End, Boston.
This boy, who through his silence, taught me about the significance of voice.
9 years old spewing forth hotness on pages that people are not ready to read.
He schooled me on more than rap singles.

Voice.

Let it echo from your soul outward.
Know the sound of your voice, both inner and outer.
Know that you don't have to speak to share it.
Know that in it lies your power.
Know that it emanates from the choices you make, from the friends you have, from the clubs you
join.
Know that it defines you, changes you, and defines you again.
Know that it is both individual and collective
Know that it is a child born from voices willing to survive censorship and threats of
extinguishing.
Know that it is yours.
And Know that it does not have to be hidden.

College is a searching for that voice.
College is a freeing of that voice.
Embrace the discovery.