



KEL SHABAZZ

Poet to Share Writing Gift as a Teacher

A strong social conscience and a commitment to being a positive force in uplifting the community are just two of the reasons why Kel Shabazz is becoming a teacher. Another is a desire to share his gift of writing as an English teacher upon graduation from the Master's in Urban Secondary Teaching (MUST) program.

Shabazz began considering a career in teaching back in 2013 when he was an undergrad at Cleveland State University, majoring in English.

"I started to educate myself on how there is a lack of Black male teachers and the importance of having them in urban schools as positive influences on Black youth," he explained. "I realized that I didn't have that and a lot of my peers didn't have that."

"I want to give back to the community," he asserted.

Shabazz was encouraged to enroll in MUST by Dr. Donna Whyte, whom he met three years ago when she was the interim director of CSU's Black Studies Program.

"I observed Kelton's strong leadership and organizational skills as president of the Speak Up student organization, and especially in his success in hosting Ilyasah Shabazz, Malcolm X's daughter, for a large public presentation on campus," Whyte said.

"Kelton is diligent, committed and focused in his pursuit of educational and career goals. Other qualities that I believe are important in his success in the MUST program, and subsequently as a teacher, are his creativity, confidence and approachability," she added. (Shabazz recently changed his first name from Kelton to Kel.)

Shabazz graduated with a master's degree

this summer, which has prepared him to teach English. Shabazz earned his bachelor's degree in English with a concentration in creative writing from CSU in 2017. He credits his English teacher Marian Sroka of Cleveland Central Catholic High School with noticing his talent as a poet.

"She saw how good I was and she encouraged me to write and get published," he said.

Sroka also urged him to participate in poetry slams at Central Catholic, which he won his junior and senior years. His poetry helped him earn a scholarship to Kent State University, where he went a few semesters before transferring to CSU.

He also enjoys reading novels. His favorite authors are Omar Tyree and Eric Jerome Dickey, who both write about modern relationships of African-Americans. Tyree's books in particular inspired Shabazz to write his own book. Shabazz self-published "Kel's Poetry Blues" in 2013.

Shabazz also has read the works of African-American scholars and historians on the liberation of Black people. He was inspired to become a teacher from the knowledge he obtained from those books and from instructor Philip Cole, who taught Black Religion here at CSU. Cole's course was the first time he learned about Marcus Garvey, who led the largest Black liberation movement in the western world, Shabazz said.

"[Cole] taught us a lot of history that we don't really get taught in schools. That added to why I wanted to become a teacher," he said.

Through MUST, Shabazz received classroom experience working with mentor-teacher Jim Heffernan at New Tech West in Cleveland. Shabazz had the opportunity to teach poetry and history there. He also learned more than pedagogy.

"I learned a lot about what goes on behind the scenes, a lot about policy, the political things that go on between teaching staff and administration, the good and the bad," he explained.

Shabazz said he also learned about all the work that goes into preparing lessons and how teachers make sure those lessons align with school testing standards.

As a student teacher, Shabazz said he was not intimidated being in front of a classroom for the first time. He had experience working

with third- to eighth-grade students through America SCORES Cleveland, an afterschool program run by the Cleveland Metropolitan School District. Shabazz alternated between teaching writing and coaching soccer. The children participated in poetry slams and soccer matches at Cleveland's recreation centers. He also did administrative work with Coach Across America, a sports and mentoring program. That position was funded by AmeriCorps. Shabazz said those positions readied him for the classroom.

"I was very comfortable. I was used to it," he said of his student-teaching experience.

One new classroom experience that he found positive was co-teaching. He and another MUST cohort Trent Bailey co-taught history. "We had the same passion and mission for teaching, so that made co-teaching work," he explained.

"Our mentor teachers let us have creative control and let us do things we thought were good ideas," Shabazz added. For example, one lesson they used poetry to teach students about imperialism.

While at New Tech West, he learned that what students expect most from teachers is to be understood and accepted as individuals.

Shabazz thought being a strict disciplinarian would be a part of his teaching style when he first decided to become a teacher.

"Discipline is important, but I want to be their emotional and social support," he said. "There is a time when we can play. We can joke. We can laugh, but it's a time when we have to be serious."

In addition to his schoolwork, Shabazz also worked 20 hours a week in the university's housekeeping department. He said the challenge for him was "trying to balance the school life with the work life."

Shabazz would like to see more African-American men enter the teaching profession.

"If you want to get youth on the right track, it can be done by people who come from the same experiences, who can show them this is what you can do if you stay focused, stay positive," he said.

"You go for that education, you can be in the same position I'm in and help the generations behind you," Shabazz stated.