

Young Minds

By Nicky Enright

Thinking of all the students I have known since I began working with youth many years ago has made me reflect about the young mind. We all know that it's easier for children to learn language, and it is in part the youngness of mind that makes this possible. A young mind is a growing mind and an open mind - which is why it is so tragic to see close-minded kids.

A young mind is by nature a progressive mind, which explains why movements that bring about social change are upheld by youth. One of my favorite aspects of working with kids is their constant concern for justice, as evidenced by their mantra: "that's not fair." From an early age kids have a yearning to see justice in the world. This, combined with their innate optimism, idealism, open-mindedness, and energy, makes the young mind extremely well-suited to pursue dreams, which is the best thing young people can do for themselves, and for their world.

A young mind is an adaptable mind, capable of learning what it needs or wants to know. And the things that kids learn without anyone teaching them are indications of their true inclinations. Some kids figure out all electronic equipment without ever glancing at instructions; others play video games like they should be designing them; some have a deep understanding of science or math; others are natural-born artists in all different disciplines. We are born with many potential callings, as well as weaknesses. These strengths and flaws are downplayed to a large extent while we receive our general education, in the name of being "well-rounded." But we must never allow our natural affinities to be overly submerged.

Sunken talent is one of the biggest obstacles to the promise of a young mind, but not at all the only one. There are many negative stereotypes about young people in our society, ranging from the roving gang of hooligans, to the drug-abusing teen, and the raging-hormones/one-track-mind. Many believe that since teenagers are in the early stages of life, they are incapable of producing anything of importance - nothing worthy of the attention of adults. These attitudes are so widespread that kids internalize them, as evidenced by how often they put themselves down ("I suck at x"). In contrast, how often do teenagers declare what they are really great at?

Most kids *are* great at something, and you can't "suck" at anything until you've tried hard to excel in it (you may simply be a novice). But the general idiocy of much popular culture reinforces the idea that kids are incompetent, and worse. Epitomizing this, movies like *Dumb and Dumber* glorify stupidity to the point that it may seem cool to be dumb. Kids, and the rest of us, are bombarded with mediocrity to the point that it's remarkable when we really excel at something.

Yet despite these stereotypes about teenagers, kids have been exploring and developing their true potential throughout history. And sometimes history even takes notice, as in the following examples which I hope would inspire young minds to respect themselves and their efforts.

Robert Allen Zimmerman, widely known as Bob Dylan, began to play guitar and harmonica while still in high school, playing in a band called The Golden Chords. At the University of Minnesota he spent more time performing in cafés than studying; he dropped out after one year and hitchhiked to New York City where he became a staple in the downtown music scene. At age 20, Dylan had his first record contract with Columbia, and he has released over 43 albums since.

Mary Shelley caused a scandal at age 17 by running off with the poet Percy Shelley, and then marrying him. She wrote her most famous novel, *Frankenstein*, at age 19 one summer as a result of a ghost-story competition. It immediately became a bestseller when it was published, and later a classic.

Jane Austen wrote her first novel, *Love & Friendship*, at age 14. In her early twenties she wrote the novels that would later become *Sense and Sensibility*, and *Pride and Prejudice*, which would be published years later. She is now world famous for these novels and others.

Although Charles Darwin was a theology student, his love of biology led him to an expedition to South America when he was 22. His meticulous observations during this voyage caused him to conceive of the theory of evolution and eventually write *The Origin of Species*, published in 1859, which sold out immediately and gave birth to much controversy and a new science.

At age 19, Bill Gates dropped out of Harvard University to devote all his attention to writing software programs. Even back in high school Gates would get in trouble for overlooking schoolwork to stay in the computer room all day. His company, Microsoft, later became one of the world's largest producers of computer software.

Similarly, Steve Jobs, age 21, and Steve Wozniak, age 26, both college drop-outs, built and marketed the Apple II computer, the first computer with a small monitor and a useful keyboard. Back in high school, Jobs and Wozniak had such a passion for technology that they attended Hewlett-Packard seminars together. Their computer began a multibillion-dollar computer industry, and Steve Jobs went on to co-found Apple and Pixar animation studios.

Albert Einstein was by all accounts an average student in school. But at age 26, he published a paper on relativity, combining time, space, matter and energy (with the famous equation $E = mc^2$). The basis for that paper was an essay he had written when he was 16 years old! It was for these scientific advancements that he won the Nobel Prize in physics in 1921.

Robert Nesta Marley, known across the globe as Bob Marley, was born in 1945 and by the age of 16 he had cut his first record (*Judge Not*) in Kingston, Jamaica. He formed The Wailers at age 18, with Peter Tosh and Bunny Wailer. He became one of the most widely celebrated artists in the world at age 28, when he recorded his breakthrough album, *Catch a Fire*. He proceeded to record over 16 albums and tour the world before he died at the age of 36.

More recently, Edwidge Danticat was born in Haiti, where she wrote her first short story at the age of 12. Because of her French/Creole accent in English, (her third language!), she felt she didn't fit in when she came to America. But ironically it would be this very mix of language that would make her writing unique and powerful. She wrote *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, at the age of 25. A year later, she published *Krik? Krak!*, the collection of short stories she is most celebrated for.

Perhaps the most famous visual artist of the entire 20th century, Pablo Picasso, began drawing as a child. By age 19, he had his first exhibit in his native Spain, and by 20 he was in his famous "Blue Period" in France. He continued making art to wide acclaim until he died at age 91.

Martha Graham began dancing at age 10 and studied for many years to become a professional dancer and choreographer. Her dance company produced 181 dances, and she was the first dancer to ever receive a Guggenheim Fellowship (known as the "genius grant").

Paul Simon & Art Garfunkel met at Forest Hills High School in Queens and they were auditioning their music by age 14. They began recording together and released their first album at age 23. After six years and many hits, they both went solo, and are still actively making music.

James Baldwin, the African-American writer of numerous important American works including *The Fire Next Time* and *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, went to Clinton High School in the Bronx, where he first started writing down his thoughts, cultural commentary, and his novels.

In the arts and sciences, in history, technology and beyond, kids consistently play important roles in shaping our world. Therefore it is important to acknowledge the insight of the young mind. Wise teenagers pay close attention to their inner voices, and they should never underestimate their genius. Young minds that are conscious and respectful of their own abilities are guaranteed to make an impression on the world.