

THE 2023 POETRY SLAM

Celebrating 30 Years of The East Harlem School



THURSDAY, APRIL 27TH

The Brearley School, 590 East 83rd Street



2023 POEMS

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THIRTY REVOLUTIONS IN SPANISH HARLEM

*Often in this life of ours we resemble, in our failure to meet,
the Shen and Shang constellations, one of which rises as the other one sets.
What lucky chance is it, then, that brings us together
this evening under the light of this same lamp?*

贈衛八處士 - Tu Fu

*Just this. And for its sake was our long childhood,
and grief and inclination and deep parting
was just for this. But this is worth it, all.*

Für Max Picard - Rainer Maria Rilke

We have made thirty quiet revolutions in Spanish Harlem.
Thirty turns around the nearest star.
Our days here seem mostly made up of enchantment and presence.
And even when our bright lives - and these streets, at times -
Fall dark beneath scattered clouds of loss,
Quickly they grow dappled with new light
All the better glimpsed amidst shadow.
These thirty turnings have an infinity of meaning to me -
And to so many others here in El Barrio.

My brother and I began this school as a protest on behalf of
The forgotten children of a forgotten people.
It was and is something quite revolutionary.
Yet so soon it also evolved into a love song.
Sung for the deepest desire of humanity:
To reach something transcendent.

Together, you and I, we have seen such good things through.
Like a poem worth writing. Like a poet whose worth is worth witnessing tonight.
Like our friendship.
You have given light and life to our school community and our half acre of
Spanish Harlem for 30 years. Each day a blessing beyond any sacrifice.
This - the school of the free and the brave,
Where poetry is mandatory -

*In any flourishing, living civilization [...] poetry has a vital function that is both
social and liturgical.*

Homo Ludens - Johan Huizinga, 1938 -

This is worth it all.
So many of you, near and far have made it possible for our shining community
To create and share lives of deep meaning and transcendent joy.
We are more grateful than you can know.

Families, faculty, trustees, and all dear others
who have joined us here:
What lucky chance is it that brought us together
this evening under the light of this same lamp!

IN 30 YEARS...

- We have served over **5 million** plant-based meals.
- We have hiked over **2,000** miles together in outdoor education programming.
- We have graduated nearly **1,000** students.
- We have welcomed **dozens** of alumni back to EHS as volunteers and summer teaching interns, and two as full-time employees.
- We have hosted **20** Poetry Slams.
- We have remained committed to **one** mission: Creating and sharing lives of deep meaning and transcendent joy in Spanish Harlem.

- IVAN

MC SPOTLIGHT: PERLA

Perla Figuereo was born in Santiago de los Caballeros, Dominican Republic, where she lived until she moved to the Bronx at age nine. At the beginning of sixth grade, Perla transferred to The East Harlem School along with her brother Jeffrey (EHS '12, Putney School '16, Fordham University '20). Reflecting on her three years at EHS, Perla has particularly fond memories of her first year in humanities class, where she discovered a passion for learning history. She remembers loving EHS outdoor education trips to Massachusetts in sixth grade and West Virginia in eighth, as well as an eighth-grade field trip to Washington, D.C.

After graduating from EHS in 2013, Perla attended Cristo Rey New York High School, and interned at JPMorgan Chase in her time there. While at Cristo Rey, Perla traveled across eastern and southeastern Europe as part of a school program.

Perla went on to attend Bates College, where she was elected student body president in 2020 and received the Benjamin E. Mays Class of 1920 Award, conferred to students who excel in academics, service to others, and moral leadership. In college, Perla held an internship in Bolivia, and also traveled to Brazil, Hungary, and the Czech Republic for her studies. Since graduating, Perla put her Rhetoric, Film, and Screen Studies degree to good use at the 2021 Cannes Film Festival, where she interned at the American Pavilion Student Program. Perla now lives in Los Angeles, where she worked in production at Fabletics for over a year, helping to launch Lizzo's "Yitty" brand as well as to coordinate other campaigns. She recently began working full-time as a freelance model.



SPECIAL THANKS

We would like to thank the inimitable **Jordin Ruderman**, whose behind-the-scenes magic has been vital to the success of the Poetry Slam for about as long as it's existed. Jordin draws out the strongest and brightest elements of our students' voices, and she is a creative force to be reckoned with. Jordin is a proud Brearley parent and a lifelong friend of The East Harlem School.

We extend our sincerest thanks to **Olivia Oh** (Brearley '23), whose virtuosic violin skills grace the performance hall this evening, and whose commitment to the EHS Violin Club has been instrumental in enriching our arts programming on 103rd Street over the past two years.

Finally, we are deeply grateful to **The Brearley School** for opening their doors and hearts to us as the venue for this year's Poetry Slam, after years of fruitful partnership between our schools. We so appreciate Head of School **Jane Foley Fried**'s generosity and vision in welcoming the 2023 Slam into Brearley's magnificent performance space. We would also like to thank the Brearley staff members who have helped bring this event to life, including the many present this evening to help the Slam run smoothly.





ABOUT EHS

The East Harlem School is an **independent** middle school currently serving 120 students in fourth through eighth grade. Still led by cofounder Ivan Hageman, who grew up on the site of the school when it was a drug rehabilitation center run by his parents, EHS has brought elite, elegant education and unique extracurricular opportunities to students from low-income families of East Harlem, the Bronx, and beyond, since 1993.



Geraldine (EHS '21, NEST+m '25) enjoys a plant-based meal at EHS

BY THE NUMBERS

- Classes at EHS range in size from 12 to 18 students, and our student-to-faculty ratio is 10:1.
- 92% of EHS students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch based on household income eligibility standards. 74% hail from immigrant families.
- EHS alumni attend top boarding, day, Catholic, and public high schools. 90% of EHS alumni matriculate to college, and 100% our graduates grow to become stronger, kinder, and wiser citizens. Over half of our students will be the first in their family to graduate college.
- EHS provides an exceptional education at a lower cost than New York City's public and private schools, with our regular session cost per child less than \$19,000/year. (By contrast, the NYC Department of Education pays \$28,000 per public school student each year.)
- 100% of EHS students receive substantial tuition support, and average annual tuition is \$555.

THE WHOLE STUDENT

- Students at EHS practice meditation at the beginning and end of each class, and older students engage in guided extended meditations every day.
- EHS features a robust arts program, with Choir, Art Club, Poetry Club, and Violin Clubs all on offer in addition to the visual and dramatic arts classes that each EHS student takes every year.
- EHS provides nutritious, locally sourced, organic daily breakfasts and lunches to every student, and transitioned from vegetarian to fully vegan at the start of the 2021-22 school year.
- Daily fitness, sports, and free time outdoors are integral elements of an EHS education, with seventh and eighth graders participating in soccer, wrestling, lacrosse, and track and field seasons. Every fourth, fifth, and sixth grader takes swim lessons at Asphalt Green each week.



2023 STUDENT POETRY

THE POETRY SLAM
THROUGH THE YEARS

A MAP OF MY MOTHER'S LIFE

Yolzint, Grade 5

My brother's name is Luis Hernandez.
He was born in sweet, sweet Mexico.
When he was four, his father died, and our mother
Took my brother across the Mexican-American border.
Now, he works at Nordstrom on 57th and 5th Avenue.

After her journey across the desert,
My mother arrived in noisy, happy Harlem.
She met my father on 116th Street.
Her heart skipped a beat in noisy, happy Harlem.

My sister's name is Yolathaly Cisneros.
She was born on October 30th, 2002, in New York City.
Now, she's acing all of her college classes full-time
And works part-time as one of the best sisters in the world.

Fast forward, my mom and dad moved
Into an apartment on 138th Street
Where they welcomed a second baby into the world:
Another girl. You may know her by now.
Her name? Xochiquetzalyt. Born February 14th, 2007.

Xochiquetzalyt is an amazing poet,
And I hope her poetry rubs off on me.
I am Yolzint, which means little heart.
But I hope you'll see my heart is big.
I am not the end of my mother's map,
I am just the beginning.

Yolzint is the youngest of four siblings, one of whom, Xochiquetzalyt (EHS '21, Young Women's Leadership School '25) performed in multiple Poetry Slams when she attended EHS. Raised in the Bronx by parents from Guerrero, Mexico, Yolzint is an avid and talented soccer player, and his favorite EHS memory is when he got special permission to play on the seventh- and eighth-grade boys' soccer team this fall—as a fifth grader!

LIKE A SECOND HOME

Vanessa, Grade 8

From phone calls
And endless pictures
I met my second home.

Veracruz, Mexico
Where the scorching sun
Sits on the top of the roof
Where the summer days
Never end
Where the hot air breeze passes through
The strands of my hair.

Puebla, Mexico
Where my dad woke up
Before the sun
Working every drop of sweat off on my grandpa's field
Where the draws of the mountain's eyes and lips
Look onto the pueblo,

Where the comfort
Of the stars greets me
To my second home.

Vanessa visited her mother's hometown of Veracruz, Mexico, last summer, and was inspired to write her poem after experiencing in person for the first time what she had formerly known only through her phone. Vanessa's father hails from Puebla, Mexico, while Vanessa and her older sister Melissa (EHS '21, Cristo Rey '25) grew up in the Bronx. A three-time Slam poet, Vanessa is excited to return to the stage this year because she is a passionate performer, and loves hearing others recite their own poetry live on the night of the Poetry Slam.

HIS QUECHUA

Karim, Grade 8

The first time I visited my family's
country,
I was greeted with the weirdly
familiar winds.
I had never been before,
But it seemed as if I was meant to
be there,
As if they knew I was going to be
there.

I heard a familiar sound:
My grandfather's voice filled me
with comfort.
His Spanish filled me with comfort.
His Spanish was uniquely his.
His Spanish held importance in
what he said.
But it was never demanding.
He is, was, a caring and careful
soul.

His Spanish, however, did not
compare to his Quechua.
His Quechua called back on our
ancestors,
All the way back to the Incas and
brings it out to us.
Every time I heard his Quechua,
The words lingered in my mind,
Encouraging me to learn,
Making my mind wander:
A language from my culture, my
heritage,
That I have not yet explored.

Hearing his Quechua
Became like mini-lessons to me.
I wanted to learn,
I wanted to hear him speak
Quechua,
I wanted to forever say the words
he spoke to me:
Kuyaykim, I love you.
Faltayki, I miss you.
I wanted to take a piece of him
with me
For when he would no longer be
with us.

I thought I would have more time.
But it happened too soon.
Now I cling to those words I
memorized
To keep him close.
With him, I learned a new
language,
The language of my ancestors,
But I also learned how to keep his
memories alive.
I now understand what made him
so special.
I was able to love all of him
I still do, and I always will.

Karim is the youngest of three children—her sisters Kristine (EHS '18, Dana Hall '22, Colgate University '26) and Katherine (EHS '21, Cathedral School '25) were Slam poets in their time at EHS, too! Raised in the Bronx by parents hailing from Chaucayan and Huacho, Peru, Karim's poem speaks to the importance of preserving Indigenous linguistic and cultural heritages—beyond just her grandfather's beloved Quechua, which he hoped to keep alive in his family after he passed away.

BALL OF FIRE

Charlie, Grade 7

I am a short-fused ball of fire
I wonder what happens after death
I hear the song of life through the world
I see lies in the days that pass by
I am a short-fused ball of fire.

I pretend that nothing bad is happening
I feel my eyes closing in the night
I touch the pencil writing on this paper
I worry we don't have long left
I cry when my failures catch up to me
I am a short-fused ball of fire.

I understand I can't fix everything
I say, do whatever feels right to you
I dream to be as free as a bird
I try to be the best me
I hope to be the best me
I am a short-fused ball of fire.

Charlie is looking forward to pushing himself as a public speaker when he takes to the stage at this year's Poetry Slam, after he filmed his recitation of "Coffee for Abuela" for the 2022 Slam film. Charlie is the oldest of six children, one of whom, Charlotte, is in fourth grade at EHS this year! Charlie lives in East Harlem with his grandmother, who comes from Puebla, Mexico, his aunt, and his siblings.

JUST LIKE HER

Ailyn, Grade 6

As we sat in our room at home,
I braided her hair
So it would not get in her face
As she studied.

She told me,
You don't have to be like me.
I stayed quiet.

She handed me a red Skittle,
Knowing I would accept it.
I moved closer.

On the dresser beside us,
Among face creams and makeup,
Her favorite perfume bottle was almost empty.

She handed it to me,
And told me to have the rest.
It smelled just like her:
Jasmine and elderberry.

I knew the scent would linger on my wrist,
Her essence would always be there.
But I knew, too, that I could find my own way.

Ailyn wrote about her sister, Corelie (EHS '20, Westover School '24), who herself was a Slam poet in her final year at EHS. Ailyn's poem was inspired by her hopes of forging her own path in life. She fondly remembers Corelie teaching her English as a child, when the two would play "classroom" together. Their parents are originally from Guayaquil and La Sierra, Ecuador.

HOW ARE YOU?

Ashley, Grade 7

When people ask, *How are you?*
She says, *I'm good.*
Good as in okay, good? Fine, good? Great, good?
Because if you take two seconds out of your time to
Ask how she truly feels, "good" wouldn't cut it.
In shock that you care,
She begins to tell you how her "good" is slowly killing her.

The push and pull.
The struggle of knowing right and wrong.
The smiling through the pain.
"Good."
Where would she start? Beginning? Middle?
How can she explain her past without sounding crazy?
How should she communicate that she's broken and
Attempting to put herself back together?
She starts by explaining her shortcomings in the hopes
That you will strive to understand.

Looking at the screen,
She doesn't know who is on the other side,
But she clicks and types fast,
Send
I'm good.

Ashley loves science, humanities, and playing basketball, and lives in the Bronx. Ashley's parents are from Abuja and Lagos, Nigeria, and moved to the U.S. in 2005. Ashley has attended EHS since fourth grade, and this is her first Poetry Slam. She is looking forward to the opportunity to express, through her performance, the importance of being truthful with emotions after a friend's internal struggle inspired the poem "How Are You?" earlier this year.

THE FLOWER POT

Rafael, Grade 5

As I was moving into my new home today,
The blue jays sang some sweet, happy tunes.

My mom asked me to clean up the precious items
We took with us from our old house
And shuffled into our new home.

That's when I found it—
My grandpa's flower pot,
One he bought a long, long time ago.

Inside the pot there was a note!
It said, *Hello grandson,
I will be gone for a while.
Can you protect my pet?*

I was crying,
And I was so confused!
What pet?
I bet this note was put in the wrong place.

But then, I saw a tiny face
Poking out from the bottom of the pot.
A little worm wiggled out
And now, I have a pet named Stanley!

Rafael remembers helping his mother clean their attic in preparation for a move to the Bronx when he was little. When he came across his grandfather's old flower pot, Rafael says, he found no flowers, but was ecstatic to come across a worm, soon called Stanley, whom he befriended instantly. The youngest of four siblings, Rafael is the third in his family to attend EHS, following in the footsteps of April '22 and Ana Rosa '19.

THE BEAT OF CÔTE D'IVOIRE

Rebecca, Grade 8

My mother's family is from Côte d'Ivoire
And every summer before Covid,
We'd fly to Maman's big house
Where the air is heavy and hot,
Where the aunties and cousins are
too many to count,
Where the waves sound like
peace in your heart.
And yet.

When we'd get back to New York,
I was embarrassed of the orange,
white, and green
Of the colors of our country.
Of the attiéké and foutou my mom
tried to send in for lunch.
*No, I'd say. You can't send
me that.*
And yet.

The beat of Côte d'Ivoire was in me.
Summer after summer, we'd return.
Sweet aunties smothered me in
hugs and kisses
Maman's neighbors and my
cousins invited me to play,
Soccer balls at their feet and
melted Kinder bars in their hands.
Maman's house felt far from home,
but it was exactly
Where I wanted to be.

The beat of Côte d'Ivoire was in me.
The last time we went to Maman's
house in Côte d'Ivoire,
Someone turned the speaker up.
*Quelqu'un a mis sa chanson
préférée*
Maman said, *lèvez-vous, on va
danser*
Maman's toes started tapping to
the beat,
The soles of her sandals curled into
the grass.
My mom's red nails and ringed
fingers patted the top of my leg
To the rhythm of the song as her
shoulders swayed
And gently bumped into mine.
I couldn't help but dance.

And now, I'm not embarrassed
anymore.
The orange, white, and green is
inside of me,
It calls me.
And this summer, we will go back
again,
And I will dance to the beat of
Côte d'Ivoire.

Rebecca came to EHS in sixth grade, and says that switching schools is what caused her to start taking pride in her Ivorian heritage. The second of five siblings, Rebecca was born in New York and then spent her first four years in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, before moving back to Harlem, where she's lived ever since. Rebecca loves exploring New York with her family, and is looking forward to her first trip back to the Côte d'Ivoire since 2019 this summer, and spending time there with her grandmother, cousins, and aunts.

HERITAGE

Kaitlyn, Grade 7

I am from the streets of Derry.
My soul wanders there while I walk here on 105th Street.
From Boise to New York to LA to Florida,
I feel my ancestors leading the way.

My aunt in Boise always tells me to be strong.
Her house smells like fresh linen.
Always with a laundry basket nearby,
She talks about church and Disney.

I am from '80s rock and Irish music
That my parents blast on the speaker in the kitchen.
I am from Mary O's scones that she bakes
On the Lower East Side with Odlums Irish Flour.

I feel my roots clinging to me
Every step of the way.
I see the coffee shop I will open
One day on the streets of Derry.
Like the Sargents and the O'Connors,
I was raised to hold my own.

Kaitlyn has never been to Ireland, where her family is from, but she plans to go after high school. Kaitlyn grew up in East Harlem, and she has traveled throughout the U.S. to spend time with family, to whom she pays tribute in her poem. Kaitlyn has fond memories of racing her father to make pots of coffee and raspberry hot chocolates in the mornings of her childhood, and hopes to use these skills to open a café of her own someday.

LA CASA MIA

Zoe, Grade 7

I grew up in the house where my mom grew up, too.
A long but small apartment
With my mom, mi abuelita,
My aunt Brittany who is like my sister
And my uncle Vale, tall and tattooed,
With a soft smile.
All packed in tight.
My mother wanted a place of our own.

So now we live in Brooklyn,
In a tall glass building next to the East River.
I live with successful people who live alone.
But that's not where I'm from.

I'm from the three apartments on 110th Street
With the old and tall walls.
I'm from the small kitchen
Where mi abuelita cooks spicy chile verde.

I am from going outside from seven to ten in the summer,
Playing in the park till sunset.
I am from my mother kissing me and telling me
Hasta mañana, love you.
I am from giving big hugs to my uncle.
I am from *ten cuidado*.
I am from *te amo siempre*.
That's what I've been told my whole life.

I am from my mother,
Whose hands always carry me home.
I am from my mother,
Who is my home.

Zoe moved from East Harlem to Williamsburg during the pandemic, and has grown used to Brooklyn in large part because in her mother, Zoe says, "I have someone who has my whole world, and brings home to me." Zoe's mother hails from Tlaxcala, Mexico, where Zoe hopes to visit again this year, to spend time with family and to visit Mexico City. Zoe has attended EHS since fifth grade, when her poem "Almost Breathless" was featured in the 2021 Slam.

NEW YORK CITY, MY CITY

Taylor, Grade 5

New York City, what a unique place.
I wake up and go to sleep to the same
Ol' honking and beeping.
That's New York traffic.

I put my sneakers on, tied up tight,
Ready for the city
To swallow me whole like a hungry whale
The split second I walk out of my apartment building.

Wow, I live in this city!
Isn't that the saddest, most beautiful thing you ever heard?

The bright, vibrant graffiti pops!
The New York streets hiss and shimmer with shine!
Times Square that doesn't care what you think of it!
And those scary, sketchy alleyways we never talk about,
Or the never-ending amounts of fast food:
There are temptations on every corner.

But New York City,
Your top-notch education
And dirty train stations
Have nothing on this cornrowed queen!

Taylor loves writing, singing, and performing. It's no surprise, then, that one of Taylor's favorite memories since starting at EHS this year has been writing her poem and preparing for the Slam. Inspired by the vibrancy and resilience of the city that never sleeps, Taylor was born in the Bronx but grew up in East Harlem, where her parents are from, too! When she's not reading or writing, Taylor loves sports and spending time outside.

GOING TO MY DAD'S HOMETOWN

Jonathan, Grade 8

My dad grew up in a small town
In the state of Guerrero,
Mexico.
In my dad's town, you can see
The bright white clouds in
the sky
That look like angels' wings.
You can see the bright blue sky
That looks like the waves of
the sea.

When I went to my dad's
small town
In the state of Guerrero,
Mexico,
I saw two wide, empty roads
With no cars passing by.
It was 2021 and the richest thing
Were the big tall trees,
Ripe with fruit in the summer.

But when I went to my dad's
small town
In the state of Guerrero,
Mexico,
It wasn't safe.
Some kids had nothing to do,
Except find trouble.
I saw poor houses
Like sheds of tears,

Families hopeless and
desperate,
Hiding in their shadows.
I saw kids' tummies writhe
with hunger.
And yet their smiles shone
As brightly as the sun.

Now, back in my not-so-small
city
In the state of New York,
I can see the same blue sky
That I saw in my dad's
small town
In the state of Guerrero,
Mexico.
The bright white clouds still float
like angels' wings.
The sky is still the color of the salt
water waves in the sea.
How can two places beneath
the same blue sky
Be so different?

Jonathan is a first-time Slam poet and the oldest of four children, one of whom, Jeffrey, is a sixth grader here at EHS. "At first I wanted to keep my poem personal to just me," Jonathan says, "but now I'm excited to share it with other people who might have had the same experience of going where their parents grew up—not just Mexico, but other countries, too—and seeing financial struggles." Jonathan grew up in East Harlem, and both of his parents come from small towns in Guerrero, Mexico.

EL BARRIO

Vivianne, Grade 6

Back in the past
El Barrio was my home.
Hoard of chattering people
all over.
Honking trucks and cars.
Litter and cigarettes on the
street.

I can still see my younger self
Racing my cousin up the
dirty stairs
In the old apartment that
offered shelter
For my aunt and my family.

My cousin is five years older
than me
And quick as a cricket
When it comes to running.
To him I was a target for
teasing.
On his phone he'd take
videos
Of me crying without caring.
But he taught me wrestling
And used the queen-sized
bed as a ring.

I can still see my younger self
Going to school without
hurry
Never too tired from walking

From the market to the
bakery.
It was all near me
But things changed.

My cousin is now a teen
In his mind are only
Work and responsibilities.
He's in high school and has
a job.
He's in charge of his family.

And I've changed, too.
Now Astoria is my home.
Barely any cars on the street.
Only leaf bits lay on the
concrete.
I own a room now.
Not the shy and sensitive girl I
once was,
I am stronger now.

But mi primo y El Barrio made
me who I am.
My footsteps from those dirty
stairs
Made me run fast.
Wrestling gave me strength
and confidence.
Now I'm courageous.
And I've got El Barrio
To thank for that!

Vivianne was inspired to write about El Barrio after realizing recently that the neighborhood forms "the highlight of [her] childhood" and that where she was raised defines who she is today. Vivianne's parents come from Hidalgo and Oaxaca, Mexico, and she has one younger sister. After learning to wrestle when she was little, Vivianne started doing mixed martial arts two years ago, and it has quickly become her favorite extracurricular activity.

REFLECT AND REFRACT

Addison, Grade 7

Reflect

The Sun

Blinds the stars with a light so bright
And binds the planets to a dance forever

Like

A flashlight searching
A sunset creeping in front of a sunrise
The moon witnessing its opposite

Burning

Like a bonfire creating a cast of colors and light into
the world.

Refract

Colors

Appear bold on a canvas
Enchanting the eyes of people in museums
And inspire all who look deep in their hearts and
cultures

Like

Water splashing on paper
The sun in the eyes of everyone who looks far enough
And like a paintbrush meeting its match

Creating

A moment that will stay in history.

Addison was never fully invested in poetry before she came to EHS this year, when she was given the space to pay attention and consider what inspires her. Addison is a self-declared morning person and fan of drawing who also loves playing sports in her spare time. Addison was born and raised in East Harlem by a mother who also grew up in New York, and she has one older brother.

SOLDIER

Jayden, Grade 5

One day my grandpa went to the hospital.
His name was Jack.
He loved to help people,
Which is why we called him a soldier.

At the hospital, looking down at my grandpa,
Who always stood so tall
That we needed to look up
To see him smile,
It made my grandma, my mom,
And I start to cry.
I took his speckled fingers in mine.
His hands were brown, like the trunk of a tree,
Wise with age, but cracked and wrinkled with time.

I was scared. If Grandpa Jack could get so sick,
What could happen to me?
My grandma prayed to God to take care of my grandpa
And make him wake up:
Stand and walk out of his hospital gown, bed and room.

But Grandpa Jack never woke up.
I was six years old
When his golden heart turned to bronze.

Jayden wrote about his grandfather, who he describes as one of his best friends. "Grandpa Jack" spent much of his life in Mexico before joining Jayden's family in the United States. Jayden has four siblings, including Justin, a current EHS seventh grader. This is Jayden's first year at the school, where his favorite memories include his grade's first field trip of the year (the American Museum of Natural History), and swimming lessons at Asphalt Green every Wednesday.

AFTER THE FIRE

Kareem, Grade 7

After the fire, I spend more time with my dad.
We play basketball on 121st Street,
Where his dribbles sound like his heartbeat.
The court smells like gas from cars speeding by
And the cold air pushes against us.
We work tirelessly on form, shooting, and conditioning
Until sweat pours down my face
And I feel myself getting stronger.

At home, in the kitchen with yellow curtains,
He makes us chili dogs from a can.
On the brown linoleum table,
He pours water from a pitcher
And helps me with my homework.

On the weekends, he gets up early
And drives me downtown to my games.
In the fluorescent lit gym,
He cheers when I succeed,
And lets me know my mistakes
On the ride back home.

I know I will get better at basketball,
Bigger, taller, faster, even, than my dad.
But being a better man than he is
Might prove to be the tallest task
Because I think he is the best.

Kareem has nine brothers and sisters, several of whom are alumni or current students at EHS. Kareem wrote "After the Fire" to show how much he appreciates everything that his dad—a born-and-raised New Yorker like Kareem—does for him and siblings, in addition to playing basketball with them. Kareem is, of course, also grateful to his mom, whose strength has always been a source of inspiration to him. Now in his fourth year at EHS, Kareem reports that sixth grade has been his favorite yet.

PORTATE BIEN

Briana, Grade 8

Ten months
That's how long she's been gone.
But it feels like yesterday that she went away.
All I hear are her last words to me:
Portate bien, behave well.

Breakfast at Brother's Bakery
On early Sunday mornings.
My tired siblings on creaking chairs,
Grateful to be with our mother.
Portate bien, behave well.

French toast and eggs, too many cups of juice and water.
Something spills, my mother smiles.
Pulled from bed too early,
Before we knew it was too late.
Portate bien, behave well.

Haz tu trabajo
Sometimes after a long day,
We would argue,
We would cry.
It wasn't all rainbows and sunshine, my mother and I.
Portate bien, behave well.

But I listen to her wise words
I'm going to forever miss them
I'll do my work.
I'll clean up the spills.
And all I think about is the last thing she told me:
Portate bien, behave well.

Briana is the middle child of five, and says that she and her siblings struggled a lot with the passing of their mother in 2021. "I thought that if I had those feelings bottled up inside, it was better just to let it out" through poetry, Briana says. An avid reader and creative writer, Briana loves studying humanities at EHS, and says that she is looking forward to the academic challenges that high school will bring. Outside the classroom, Briana's favorite EHS memories include laughter-filled walks home with her classmates after seventh- and eighth-grade soccer and lacrosse games.

A BUTTERFLY SOUL

Liana, Grade 7

My soul moves like a butterfly
Flying from harm,
Flying to freedom.
My soul dreams about living
Growing up,
Drinking tea in a garden with little bees
Taking pollen from a plant on the side of a tree.
My soul chooses my emotions.
One day I'm a happy golden
Retriever when they see their owner
But then other days
I'm a little girl in solitude with
Rocks and stones breaking her bones
Down and down and down
My soul is like a dandelion,
It gets blown away for a wish, then it's free;
Or like a tiny poppy just sitting there in a grassy tickling field
in peace.
My soul moves like a butterfly,
Just busy being me.

Liana and her twin brother Anthony—also a current seventh grader at EHS—were the subjects of Liana's 2022 Slam poem, "Twin Life." Liana and Anthony are the youngest of six, and have lived in East Harlem their entire lives, raised by a mother who came to the U.S. from Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, and an Italian American father from New York. Liana is a fan of math class and an aspiring architect, and is in her second year at EHS.

HARLEM NIGHT

Naomi, Grade 8

It is a cool bright night as
The moon smiles upon father
and daughter.
You can hear the wind
blowing slightly and
Smell the winter air in the
Harlem streets.
A curious child complains
about being “poor.”
My patient father never fails
to teach me something new.

When he was younger, my
father was rebellious,
Like the king of the
playground in a way.
But America was cruel to him
Like many other Black
families in
The United States.
We are human.
And we all do what we can
to survive
In this very broken world.

I was always spoiled without
knowing,
Understanding things other
young children wouldn’t.
So when my father tells me
that we first laid eyes
On each other in jail, I don’t
know what to think.

But he mentions one thing:
*When I first laid eyes on you,
I knew I had to change
to be there for you.*
For me.
That day, my perspective on
my parents forever
changed.

I may not have everything
I want—
Technology, money, or a
ginormous mansion.
But I do have everything
I need—
A loving family,
My parents who sacrifice
everything for me
And will support me no
matter what path I choose.
So on that silent night
walking,
As leaves blow off the trees
And cars pass down the
Harlem streets,
A curious child and patient
father laugh and
chat away.

Naomi loves to debate—so much so that she hopes to become a senator someday!—and her poem depicts the internal debate that comes with, in her words, “being rich in things you need, but poor in things you want.” Naomi’s younger brother Davaughn is a fifth grader at EHS, and her four other siblings live in Florida. Raised in the Bronx until she was 11, Naomi now lives in East Harlem, and her parents both grew up in New York as well. Naomi loves math and humanities, and has been teaching herself Japanese since 2020!

THE WORLD THAT WAS SUDDENLY NEW

Logan, Grade 8

I had never left New York until last fall,
I had never been gone so long.
What the world in West Virginia
Had to offer was suddenly new:
No phones, no homework, no deadlines.

I never thought I could miss somewhere
That I had never been.
But now I miss West Virginia the way
You miss an old friend.

I miss the way the mountains watched over us
As we craned our necks to look
At the peak we were about to summit,
Hands shielding our eyes from the sun.

I miss the way the damp ground embraced us,
Warm in our sleeping bags at night.
I miss the way we laughed as we hiked,
And the birds seemed to answer our calls.

I miss the way our heavy breath,
Somehow always in unison,
Made music with the crunch of our determined footsteps
That echoed into the quiet canopy of trees.

I miss the weight of my pack,
The way it pulled me back into the Earth.
But most of all, I miss the way I felt lighter than ever
In the world that was suddenly new.

Logan says that his fondest EHS memories involve being outside with his friends—whether competing on Randall’s Island, climbing Bear Mountain, or backpacking in West Virginia. Logan and his two younger siblings have grown up in the same East Harlem apartment where his parents have lived ever since moving from Mexico City as young adults. Logan, too, hopes to move to a different country someday, and to work either as a professional soccer player or doctor.



THE EHS OUTDOOR PROGRAM

Building leadership skills and lasting bonds with one another, EHS students have traversed locales as close to home as Bear Mountain and as far-flung as Canada. For over a decade, a backpacking trip in West Virginia's Monongahela National Forest has been a cornerstone of the EHS eighth-grade experience. The Class of 2023 spent a week in West Virginia this past September!

The Class of 2024 is already looking forward to exploring new frontiers in the Delaware Water Gap as eighth grade kicks off this autumn. Our outdoor education program received early, foundational support from the Lopez and Low families, and thrives to this day thanks to the generosity of the Lopez Family Foundation and many others.

SPRING

Naybi, Grade 8

As we walk past the melting snow,
The transition to a new season begins.
Realizing how much time has gone by,
Another spring will arrive and leave.
Every season brings different memories,
And soon spring will put away its heavy coats.
Harsh, cold gales will become soft, warm, and gentle.

The moon in the spring sky changes every night.
It hugs the sky's edges
Like spring hugs the edge of winter.
The moon is a warrior.
I am a warrior:
Naybi means Warrior of the Moon.

My parents named me as they
Crossed a man-made border many springs ago.
Like bulbs pushing through the dirt to bloom,
Like beaks cracking a delicate shell,
They left their country behind,
They gave up their dreams to make ours come true.

And so, this spring,
When I hear the birds singing
I know where I am and the reason I'm here.
I appreciate my parents' hard-working hands,
I remember their feet that traversed
The countryside in springtime.
I know the beginning of
Spring is just the
Beginning
To change.

Naybi sees the changing seasons as a metaphor for larger changes going on in her life as she prepares for high school after five years at EHS. "Writing a poem helped me express my emotions toward those changes," says Naybi, who has never performed in a Poetry Slam and is excited to share her voice in her last year of middle school. A sister to two brothers and the daughter of parents from Mexico City, Naybi grew up in East Harlem and enjoys studying math.

WHEN IT ALL ENDS

Alyson, Grade 8

When the bare-skinned trees
begin to bloom,
It is a reminder to all our time
must come to an end.
A brother and sisterhood
being severed,
Separated by schools and
distance,
It could rip your heart out.
But we reminisce about the
memories
We've made along the way,
Even the bittersweet ones.

I reminisce about the times in
the beginning
When I was afraid to speak up,
When I was afraid to be myself
and be judged.
But at The East Harlem School,
I made new friends and my
confidence grew.
I learned it's okay to lean on
someone.
These past five years have
helped shape who I am now.
But I couldn't have done it
without the support
Of those who walked the path
with me.

We've been through it all
together:
From hiking nine miles up a

steep, grassy mountain,
Where we all thought we
weren't going to make it.
We've traveled to different
states, singing songs in the car,
To the schools our futures hold.
We've felt the joy and held the
sorrow after soccer games.
It is these moments that
motivate me to work even
harder, for me and for them.
The family we've formed is
what makes letting go even
harder.

My heart aches to leave the
people
I grew up with, laughed with,
cried with.
But leaving doesn't mean I'll
forget the memories.
It'll make me embrace them
even more.
So when it all ends, and the
flowers begin to bloom
And the fresh summer air
begins to flow,
The cap with the gold-colored
tassel will move from right
to left
And we'll all begin a new
chapter
While we carry memories from
the past.

Alyson has performed in all but one Poetry Slam since she joined the school in the fourth grade. After writing "The World to Me" about her father last year, Alyson wrote a love letter to her classmates for her final EHS poem because she "wanted it to be about not just one specific person that I care about, but multiple people." Raised in East Harlem by parents hailing from Puebla, Mexico, Alyson has one older brother, Jason (EHS '14, Church Farm School '18, Hunter College '22). Alyson plans to continue writing poetry—if only for herself—after this year, and says that she's excited to experience "that last, final spark on stage" at the 2023 Poetry Slam.

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The Poetry Slam has been an East Harlem School tradition for over 20 years, and in more recent years, it has become our singular major annual fundraiser. EHS has been celebrating its students' voices and providing a beautiful and joyful education to students in Spanish Harlem for three decades—all thanks to the generosity of donors like you.

If you were inspired by our poets tonight, please support EHS with a donation, and help us educate and uplift generations of EHS Warriors to come.

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Fill out the donation card found in your program, and return it to an EHS staff member by the doors on your way out tonight (or mail it back using the included envelope!)



2023 poets rehearse for the Slam with performance coach Jordin Ruderman



EHS MISSION

The East Harlem School challenges students to develop a balanced physical, moral, and intellectual strength that they will use to adapt to change — and for the final purpose of creating and sharing lives of deep meaning, dynamic virtue, and transcendent joy. We are a middle school (grades 4-8) that recruits children from families with low income and the highest values, and we give preference to those who keep to the traditional belief that creative flight can only be sustained by grounded discipline.

EHS VOW

I vow to be aware of the world and all I think, say, and do.
With this awareness of the world and all I think, say, and do,
I promise to honor and protect myself, my family, and all others.



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