



# “IT’S PEOPLE COMING TOGETHER AS ONE”

Guided by teaching artists and Skirball educators, a group of tenth graders joins forces to speak their truth.

In front of more than 200 high school students and teachers from across the city, twenty-nine sophomores from Community Health Advocates School (CHAS) at Augustus Hawkins High School took the stage at the Skirball. The ensemble performed an original work called *Walkout!*—a blend of theater and poetry that gave voice to their experiences and concerns as young Angelenos. One group poem, “Fighting for Our Rights,” resolutely described the nature and purpose of speaking out as a community: *It’s people coming together as one / It’s our freedom / It’s who we are / We matter.*





Above: Before heading to the auditorium, the student audience prepared for the performance by discussing issues they are facing as a community, including bullying, drug abuse, and affordable health care. Right: The residency participants collaborated on the writing and reading of their poems. In her evaluation of the program, one teacher hailed, "Providing students with a stage that asks for their uncensored voices was the heart of this opportunity."



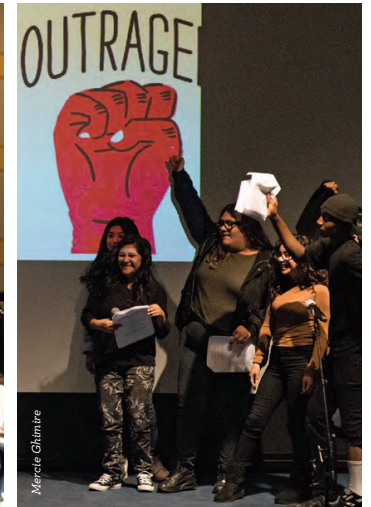
The staged reading was the culmination of a ten-week program that affirms that students do matter, especially as leaders of tomorrow. For eight years now, the Skirball has organized dynamic in-school residencies, each designed to transform teens into creators of their own works and active members of their communities. Last year's residency teacher, Kelly Herrera of Canoga Park High School, applauded the program for aligning with her goals as an arts educator: "to not only teach the skills and values associated with the arts... but to give students the tools to learn how to be concerned citizens of the world."

This year, the participating tenth-grade students worked with their CHAS schoolteacher, Maria Gaspar, and artist-educators Kahlil Alm Mustafa and Julia Grob to explore how storytelling can serve as a tool for civic engagement. Though years away from voting age, the participants chose to tackle sociocultural and political issues of the day, especially following the 2016 election. Over ten weeks starting in January, the residency class

convened twice a week to engage meaningfully with one another and a range of critical topics.

An author and poet, Alm Mustafa mentored the novice writers through the creative process. Supported by Skirball staff, he ensured a safe, nurturing environment for students to find their voices and collaborate on writing *Walkout!* Many of them expressed their fear of what the future holds, especially as first- and second-generation immigrants. In Act I, Scene 2, they dramatized a classroom scene in which a teacher asks, "How many of you have family or friends who are undocumented?" The scene is followed by a poem on prejudice and discrimination, poignantly written by fourteen-year-old Ayzha. In it she points out our common humanity and commits herself to standing up for what's right: *What's so different about us / We all have mommas, daddies, sisters, brothers / We all have the struggle / I want my rights and I'm going to fight for them.*

As they fine-tuned their script, Grob, an experienced actor, led exercises to help the class build



Left: Students spoke about the ten-week residency during the Q&A. They were proud to give voice to their experiences as Angeleno youth. Above: The budding performers dramatized an LAUSD school walkout following the November 2016 election.

confidence and bring life to their words. Working in subcommittees, they assigned roles, figured out props and backdrops, and rehearsed their parts. Whether behind the scenes or in the spotlight, every teen contributed.

Weeks later, at the culminating program at the Skirball, the residency participants put their new skills to the test, garnering cheers from students and teachers alike. After the performance, participants took questions from the audience. Responding to one skeptic who wondered what the point of raising their voices is, one actor-poet, Natali, explained, "It's important for you guys to speak out—this is your form of voting." Her classmate Taiwan put it this way: "Something's gonna happen if we keep talking about [the issues]." Bernardo, a budding rap artist, remarked that the residency made him much more interested in civic life. "It has helped me see things more clearly and what my duty is in government."

For the educators in attendance, it was a moment of pride to witness the students—many of whom were strangers when the program began—come together

as a community and support each other through the process. Their CHAS teacher was moved by the growth she witnessed in one student, a shy girl who drew courage from her peers and teachers and read her very own poem before hundreds of people. Praising the participants for their initiative and drive, another teacher in the audience urged the class to take this experience forward and be more than just "a generation of talkers" but "a generation of doers" instead.

For the promising young artist-activists, these words of encouragement confirmed what they seemed to have learned during the residency. In their own words, from just one of the many poems they wrote for *Walkout!*:

*And we know*

*We are stronger*

*When we are united.*