

On The Rise

*Just strong
feel strong
thought strong
friend strong*

*Project My Time:
Middle-Schoolers
Have Fun Options*



PHOTOS BY SARAH L. VOISIN — THE WASHINGTON POST

From left, Cierra Thomas, Tanisha Tate, teacher Kathleen Gonzales and Pairie Mallory practice performing a play they have created.



Eronmwon Oviasogie, right, and Naquaisha Bowen work on their moves at Kelly Miller Middle School.



Cierra is spun around by her classmates in an acting exercise.

School's out for the day, but these girls are still in.

Pairie Mallory, 12; Ebony Sweeney, 13; Eronmwon Oviasogie, 14; and about half a dozen others are in place, in character, ready to go.

These sixth-, seventh- and eighth-graders are hard at work, practicing for a performance they have written, acted and directed, at Kelly Miller Middle School in Northeast Washington. It's long after most students have left for the day. In fact, these kids have chosen to stay until nearly 6:30.

The girls are in a program called Project My Time, which started in January at three Washington schools — Kelly Miller, Charles Hart and Lincoln middle schools. Next fall, it will be in two more schools, and within five years Project My Time organizers hope to have free after-school programs in every middle school in the District.

Project My Time provides kids with a variety of activities, including sports, African drumming, debate and tutoring, which the students participate in by their own choice. The idea is to give kids experiences they might not have otherwise. And the

project doesn't stop when the school year does: All three schools will have summer programs, too.

There are a number of programs underway at Kelly Miller. The playwriting students are working under the direction of staff from the Young Playwrights' Theater in Washington. Several months ago the students read a well-known poem by Maya Angelou called "Still I Rise." The poem is about not getting beaten down by people and situations, but being able to stand up for yourself and what you believe in.

The kids then used the poem as the basis for their play — adding their own language and movement. "Each girl got a stanza to work on," explained Patrick Torres, program manager at Young Playwrights'. They supplemented it with thoughts and scenes from their own experience, and will perform it Thursday for kids in other after-school programs run by Project My Time.

Pairie, a seventh-grader, thought the poem was great because "no matter what people bring to you, or do to you, you're going to rise up."

The process gives "you a lot of expression," said Tananishia Moore,



Pairie runs through the choreography for the production of "Still I Rise."

13, a sixth-grader. "You feel strong."

"It was fun, it was different — joyful," said Tanisha Tate, 13, an eighth-grader. "I used words like what they like to eat to express themselves — what plates made them happy."

Finding inspiration in Angelou's words, Tanisha wrote:

*feel strong
feel strong
thought strong
friend strong
not afraid*

*I am a red, pink, white, black,
grey or sweet potatoes, steak and
ummmmm ribs.*

Ebony, an eighth-grader, is in front of the group, directing her section of the play. She arranges the girls in two rows.

You may shoot me with your words,

You may cut me with your eyes,

The front row goes down on the ground as they shout Maya Angelou's words.

You may kill me with your hatefulness,

But still, like air, I'll rise.

The girls in the back row reach out to help pull up the front row.

And they rise.

— Ellen Edwards



BY DWIGHT CARTER — ASSOCIATED PRESS

Maya Angelou is the author of 12 books and 10 collections of poetry.

Mark Her Words

Maya Angelou, whose 1978 poem "Still I Rise" was the basis of the Kelly Miller Middle School playwriting workshop, is an author, actress and teacher.

Angelou, 79, also is a leader in the movement to get civil rights for all people. She has received many awards and praise for her work, including being asked to read one of her poems at the inauguration of President Bill Clinton in 1993 and having a D.C. charter school named for her.