



# WestWord

niles west high school | march 26, 2010 | www.thewestword.net | volume forty-nine | issue six | 5701 oakton street | skokie, il 60077 | 847.626.2618

## CVE/CDE program restructured by board

**w** Hillary Lindwall  
Managing Editor

Proposed changes that would eliminate 17 teaching positions and disband academic programs have been modified after negotiations between the District 219 Board of Education (BOE) and the Niles Township Federation of Teachers (NTFT).

A dispute between the two sides arose about the possibility of a reduction in force (RIF) of both non-tenured and tenured staff members and elimination of both the Academic Achievement Center (AAC) and the Cooperative Vocational Education/Cooperative Distributive Education (CVE/CDE) program. At their meeting on Feb. 22, the union, administration and Board of Education came to an agreement to resolve these issues.

"The [original board] plan called for eliminating 17 positions, but [the board was] going to hire back seven of those in the other areas, so it was going to be a net loss of 10 teachers," said union president Steve Grossman.

According to the *NTFT News*, the agreement that was reached in order to "avert ... [the] unprecedented layoff of tenured staff" as well as to "save a vital program and minimize the loss of jobs due to restructuring" the CVE/CDE program.

The *NTFT News* reported that at the Feb. 22 board meeting, union leadership arrived at the "unorthodox decision to rewrite contract language." The decision was unorthodox because this year is a non-negotiation year. Four articles in the contract that were centered on the CVE/CDE program were amended. Because of this change, "no tenured teaching staff will be RIFed in the 2010-2011 school year," the *NTFT News* reported.

According to Grossman, the decision not to RIF tenured teachers is a result of negotiations with the school board and these contract amendments.



Grossman

The proposed tenured RIFs would have come in the Applied Science and Technology (AS&T) department, the result of the dismantling of the CVE/CDE program.

"[The union] believed that that [CVE/CDE] was an important program and that it serves an important population in school," Grossman said. "There are kids who depend on that program, so we made that argument to the board."

Another result of the amended contract and negotiations is the student-to-faculty ratio of what will now be called Work Study (W/S), which will more than double during the 2010-2011 school year from 1:40 to 1:96.

Furthermore, while plans to eliminate the AAC program will go forward, no tenured staff will be RIFed as result, according to the *NTFT News*.

Originally, the administration presented the BOE with a restructuring plan that outlined the complete elimination of the W/S program. According to Grossman, the board did whatever they could to avoid this drastic measure.

"[The Union] tried to work with the board and the administration about [these changes]," Grossman said. "One [of] our arguments [was] that [W/S] is a necessary program and that [the board] should not RIF teachers."

Superintendent Nanciann Gatta added that she believes that any changes made to the AS&T department are necessary in order to keep up with continually improving technologies.

"There are a lot more changes than just [W/S]; we have also added a lot of programs," Gatta said. "I would rather a student take an AS&T course and receive skills that can be utilized on a job than opt for [W/S], which doesn't provide specific technical instruction."

According to Grossman, the changes in the W/S program will afford fewer students access to the program.

"[Originally in the W/S program], 40 students equated one full time teacher," Grossman said. In the W/S program, however, "because of the workload of having to travel to worksites, [the program] is expensive. [To make the program] more cost-effective, we agreed to raise the student load from 40 to 96."

Niles West Principal Kaine Osburn thinks that the changes to this program will be beneficial for students at West.

"I think that the changes in the [W/S] program are probably

a much needed update that makes it possible for us to realign what we offer to kids that will better prepare them for college and career readiness," Osburn said. "We feel that by reemphasizing other coursework more related to core knowledge in literacy, science, math and engineering, we will be able to better prepare students in the long term for college and careers."



Gatta

Grossman expressed the belief that the administration and BOE made the most beneficial changes that they could while minimizing a major program.

"The administration did a good job because many of [the proposed] cuts were done through attrition, which means that people were leaving anyway [through] retirement and other things," Grossman said. "[The board] decided to cut programs then so that they didn't have to replace people who were leaving anyway, which is a good, efficient way [to restructure the program]."

Osburn outlined the positions that will be filled by previous CVE/CDE teachers, including teaching English Language Learners (ELL) courses.

"[The CDE/CVE teachers] had a lot to give; it just wasn't in [W/S], so two of those teachers are certified or about to be certified in ELL," Osburn said. "The plan right now is they will go and teach classes in ELL. They are very experienced teachers, so they will be able to bring their experience to that teaching."

Grossman added that overall, the restructuring plan's effect



Powell

on students will be minimal, but its effect on the lone W/S teacher will be maximal. The W/S teacher will be responsible for more students, but fewer students will be allowed into the program.

According to Grossman, the school board evaluated the student population who opt for W/S and hope that many of these students will take other classes offered in the AS&T department.

"Whoever teaches W/S will not have the opportunity to be as hands-on with doing site visits," Grossman said. "I suppose that the hope is, today, that there will be more communication through e-mail."

School officials agree that the compromise benefits everyone.

"In the end, we were able to find a way to continue to help kids in the classroom and not have to release tenured teachers," Osburn said.

Grossman agrees that the board did the best that they could to accommodate all of the necessary changes.

"Sometimes you just have to go through a process like this," Grossman said. "You work together, you compromise, and in the end the program lives, albeit in a different form, but no tenured teachers lose their jobs."

AS&T director Chris Powell concurs.

"It allows us to do more than we have ever been able to do in the past," Powell said. "As technology evolves, it allows us to be more efficient in everything that we do."

## Former student offers cautionary tale

**w** Zoe Ljubic  
Editor in Chief

In April of 1999, "Michael" (not his real name), a former Niles West student (class of 1999), was sentenced to 40 years without parole in prison for first-degree murder in a gang-related shooting.

Attendance manager Robert Vujovich has known Michael since his days at West. According to Vujovich, Michael has learned a lot from his experience "being locked up" in the Menard (IL) Correctional Center and hopes to teach students the reality of the consequences of gang life. Vujovich added that Michael's decision to submit to a *West Word* interview was an encounter with other prisoners who were friends of Michael's victim. With Vujovich's help, *West Word* was able to interview Michael via letters. In his interview with *West Word*, the prisoner explains the hardships of the lifestyle he once lived.

**West Word: Explain the interaction with your victim's friends at the prison.**

**Michael:** About two months ago, a friend told me the friends of my victims in the case were [in Menard]. I told him to let him know I was here. A few days later, he came by my job, and I let him know who I was and my intentions, which were to get information about the victim's family so that I could write to them. He wasn't close to the family but let me know about two other guys who were also in the prison who knew the victim. I came to find out I actually knew both of them and was real cool with one especially. It really is a small world.

A couple days later, I saw one of them during our recreational yard time. I pulled him to the side and let him know I was locked up for his friend's murder. I knew I didn't have evil intentions; I just wanted the family's [contact] information. It was not easy for him at first; [he was] a little shocked. We talked for about 20 minutes and agreed that had this conversation happened even a few years ago, it would have been trouble but [that] we were both grown men now and Christians and understood that we must move forward.

About a week later, I saw the second one: his best friend. He

Please see **Michael**, page 4



Former West student serves his sentence at Menard Correctional Center. Photo courtesy www.wikipedia.org



# WESTWIRE



## Gotcha milked

**Uzma Ahmad**  
News/Wire Editor

The senior Gotcha tournament has been a cherished tradition for the graduating class here at West for many years. This year, students were extremely excited to finally participate in the game after waiting for the opportunity for almost four years.

Unfortunately, recent blunders with authorities have caused a crackdown of sorts on the continuation of this year's tournament. Thus, many students have felt disgruntled and have expressed contempt against the administration for frowning upon the tournament.

Before you read further, seniors, ask yourselves this question: when was the last time the administration became actively involved in Gotcha? Time is up. You can't answer the question because it happened before you started at West—for the same reasons that I am about to articulate.

What unhappy seniors fail to recognize is that they have only brought this misfortune upon themselves.

The problem does not lie in the actual game itself. There is almost no real danger in shooting cushiony Nerf™ darts at each other. However, the problem does lie in our senior class' habit of continuously talking about the game throughout classrooms and school in general and in the planning, organizing and playing of the tournament on school grounds.

Teachers and faculty have become extremely frustrated by the amount of chitchat and Gotcha updates that they are forced

## Whether we realize it or not, we seniors have brought undue attention to the game by simply talking about it so much during school

to endure. Whether we realize it or not, we have brought undue attention to the game by simply talking about it so much during school.

Two more blatant errors have attracted scrutiny, attention that previous senior classes managed to avoid: 1. handling the money involved for Gotcha "entrance fees" openly during school and 2. keeping and brandishing Nerf™ guns in our cars.

The administration cannot possibly condone gambling (that is what it is, no matter how you try to spin it) over Gotcha on the school campus, and no student can expect the school to tolerate this. Furthermore, when students keep replica weapons, regardless of their color and ammunition, in their cars, then pull them out upon dismissal, they attract the attention of passersby and law enforcement personnel. From 100 yards away, no one can tell a Nerf™ gun from the real item.

We seniors dug our own Gotcha graves by bringing the game on campus.

So for the underclassmen who are reading this, take this advice as our senior class' parting gift: when you are finally seniors, don't mess up and make the same mistakes that befell our class. A few tips:

- Don't draw too much attention to the game in your classes. Leave the conversations about team eliminations and funny Nerf™ assassination stories for outside school.
- More important, conduct the money gathering involved with Gotcha fees outside of school, as gambling within school is a serious offense and will not be tolerated by the administration by any means.
- Don't bring your Gotcha Nerf™ weapons anywhere near school. Furthermore, do not showcase your Nerf™ guns anywhere near the school campus, as this will undoubtedly attract the attention of the local authorities, forcing them to become involved and ruining the game for everyone.

The 1999 tragedy at Columbine High School might be a vague memory of your childhood, but it is still very real for school personnel and police. Can you say, "Lockdown drill"?

Gotcha can be harmless fun if students take the necessary precautions against causing a nuisance that cops or school authorities are obligated to fix.

## Theatre department shoots for *Fame*

**Kathryn Booker**  
Staff Writer

The theatre department will perform the musical *Fame*, Friday-Saturday, April 30- May 1 at 7:30 p.m. in the Robert L. Johnson Auditorium.

Adapted from the 1980 film of the same name, the 1988 play is an upbeat musical centering on a group of diverse, talented students at the High School for Performing Arts in New York. It chronicles the students' successes and failures as they commit to four years in a pressurized, performance-oriented environment in an effort to achieve the elusive concept from which the play takes its name.

According to senior Jeremy Berman (Joe), the play will feature "the largest cast we have ever had," including a variety of dancers, singers and musicians who will augment the core group of thespians who regularly perform onstage in the auditorium and in the Black Box theater.

Director Andy Sinclair echoed Berman's comments, saying "*Fame* is a huge rock-and-roll musical, featuring a whole bunch of people from our school."

"It is going to be the biggest show our school has ever done," Sinclair added.

Berman also said that the cast is "doing some creative new things to make [the production] work," adding that preparations are very labor intensive.

"We have rehearsal every day, where the adults help us with singing, dancing and acting," Berman said. "We play high school students who are in the arts, so it feels natural to us."

Junior Lauren Langer (Serena) opined that the play holds a strong moral about determination.

"The main message of the play is hard work," she said. "If

you want to achieve your dreams, you are going to have to push yourself to the limit."

Cast members expressed some disagreement about the play's target audience.

According to senior Alicia Peake (Carmen) and Langer, adults should proceed with caution when bringing little ones to see the play.

"Anyone 13+ should come see this play," Peake advised. "It is very high energy— full of pop dancing and singing—but has some language and sexual innuendo. Maybe bringing your 85-year-old grandma might not be the best idea."

Langer echoed Peake's concerns.

"The play is definitely directed towards a more mature audience, but I think everyone can relate to it one way or another," she said. "The audience should expect to be blown away by the upbeat dancing and singing, but the play is also full of bittersweet moments and unexpected twists and turns."

Berman disagrees and countered that *Fame* is "geared toward everyone. There is drama, comedy and tears all integrated through multiple story lines. Everyone in the audience will find a character that resonates with them."

Other leading cast members include sophomores Quinn Lawson-Hall (Tyrone), Julia Zasso (Ms. Bell) and Elizabeth Mangulabnan (Iris); junior Aleks Krapivkin (Nick); and seniors Morgan Quilici (Mabel), Ani Poladian (Lambchops), David Fisch (Scholomo), Alyssa Jutovsky (Mrs. Meyers), Dan Machalinski (Mr. Seinkopf) and Charlee Cotton (Ms. Sherman). In addition, there are 45 members of the male and female ensemble.

The stage crew includes senior stage manager Fiona Stephens, freshman assistant stage manager Sarah Meehan, junior costume head Sarah Hernandez, senior head carpenter Dan Machalinski, senior lighting technician Scott Sheffield, freshman paint lead Becca Gratch, junior prop master Andrea Lupas, sophomore sound lead Zachary Tarnoff. Sophomore Nick Behm is in charge of publicity.

Cast members agree that audiences should be prepared for an enthusiastic musical performance.

"The audience should expect a show that is truly amazing with dancing, singing and many great actors," sophomore Randy Tran (Goody) said.

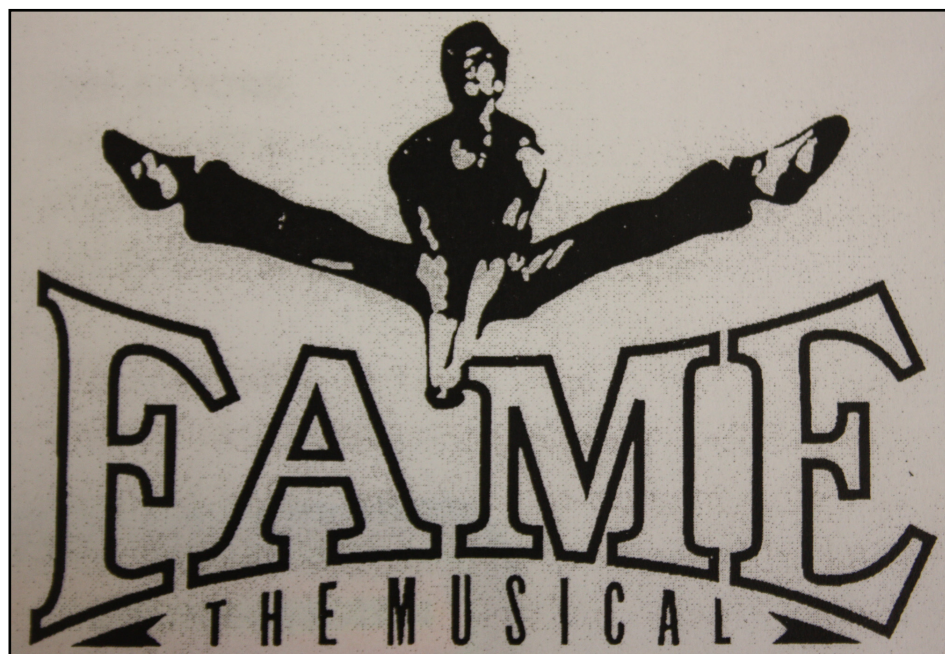
Tickets cost \$7 for students and \$10 for adults. Audience members may pre-order tickets through one of the cast members.

Proceeds will help to finance the thespians' trip to the Edinburgh, Scotland, Fringe Festival next summer.

Sinclair calls *Fame* "one of the brightest and splashiest musicals."

Berman encourages all audiences to attend.

"If you like music, dance, stories, and want something fun to go see with friends, skip the movie theater and check out *Fame* at Niles West!"



## Shadow days to orient incoming freshmen

**Sofiya Pershteyn**  
Staff Writer

For the fifth consecutive year, Niles West will open its doors in April to the eighth graders of the sender schools during the four designated Shadow Days.

Junior high students from Lincoln (Tuesday, April 6), Park View (Thursday, April 8), Fairview (Tuesday, April 13) and Culver (Friday, April 16) will sample high school life during the visits.

"[A Shadow Day] is a really great way for eighth graders to come in and get the best of their high school experience started right away," student activities director Jessica Ogulnik said.

As the name suggests, during a Shadow Day, an eighth grader "shadows" a high school student volunteer, who escorts the junior high student to his/her classes, showing and explaining certain elements of high school.

While every student has the opportunity to request to be a volunteer, freshmen and sophomore students are especially encouraged to participate. Ogulnik reasons that eighth grade shadows are more likely to connect better with volunteers closer

to their own age.

"We really need freshmen and sophomores to volunteer because it kind of makes more sense that an eighth would follow a freshmen or a sophomore because eighth grader[s] in all AP classes might be a little over their heads," Ogulnik said, "but really, anyone can participate."

Ogulnik added that students interested in guiding a specific eighth grader may submit a request during registration. Otherwise, they will be paired with a random student from the visiting school.

According to Ogulnik, one of the main reasons Shadow Days continue to be held in the school is because they help eighth graders comfortably adjust to future high school life.

"I feel like they hear a lot of rumors from their teachers, their parents and other people, and they watch movies and get terrified of being stuffed in their lockers and having pennies pelted at them," she said. "Hopefully a Shadow Day is a better way for them to get an actual vision of how [high school] is actually going to be."

Ogulnik said that she hopes that just as in the years past, both eighth graders and student volunteers would benefit from their Shadow Days.

"[I hope that] all of the eighth graders have a pleasant and wonderful Shadow Day experience," she said.



# WestWord

## Spring art shows feature student artists

**W Sofiya Pershteyn**  
Staff Writer

Spring is the season of exhibitions for art students from a variety of classes, with both the fifth annual Central Suburban League (CSL) Art Show and the second round of the annual Life is Simply Art (LISA) show coming up in April and May.

The CSL show will be held at the Highland Park Art Center beginning on Thursday, April 8. The reception will be held 6-8 p.m. on Friday, April 9.

"[The CSL Art Show] is an opportunity to highlight our program and give the students an opportunity to exhibit their work in a professional setting," art instructor John Zilewicz said.

The material for the show will come from the students of the 12 high schools in the CSL. The participating high schools include Niles West, Deerfield, Evanston Township, Glenbrook North, Glenbrook South, Highland Park, Maine East, Maine South, Maine West, New Trier, Niles North and Waukegan. Each school is asked to turn in 55 pieces of artwork.

"[Work from] all of our visual art classes from AP to Art One to Digital Photography to Ceramics will be there," Zilewicz said.

Founded in 1988, the CSL Art Show was organized to give a wide variety of art students the opportunity to participate in an art show without competitive pressure.

"[The CSL Art Show] is not competitive. There are no awards, or prizes. It just highlights the kids' work and what the schools

are doing," Zilewicz said.

Due to the large size and the noncompetitive nature of this program, Zilewicz hopes the students participating will gain the sense of a real gallery opening.

"Our students attend [the show], see what it is like to be involved in a gallery opening and see what it is like to work in a gallery setting," Zilewicz said. "I think it translates into the real world of an artist. [Students can] see what it would be like to see your work on opening nights," he added.

Through his four years of involvement with the CSL Art Show, Zilewicz said that has witnessed the show's relocation from the Oakton Community College to the current location in Highland Park. He added that his most unforgettable memories from past events come from meeting the parents of his students.

"[Last year] the majority of the kids were out there, I got to meet a lot of families," Zilewicz said.

Zilewicz also said that he hopes that the students participating this year will attend and encourages others to attend as well.

"I hope that my students get out there, take advantage of the night, bring their parents, their friends and their families and just enjoy the evening," Zilewicz said.

Recently, five Niles West students were selected as the Best in Show winners of the 2010 LISA show, sponsored by the Great Frame Up and held at the store's Evanston location.

The winners include freshman Tiffany Neal for drawing, senior John Kim for painting, senior Ainee Fatima for photography, senior Paulina Szara for graphic communication and senior Clark Finkelstein for three dimensional.

Kim, whose winning piece is entitled "A Father's Pastime," was inspired by his father's love of fishing.

"The idea of it came quickly, but the composition took some

time. I decided to go simple but deep, kind of like the ocean," Kim said. "I focused a lot of time on how I was going to combine my web of colors. I would pick a certain red, a certain blue, etc., to reflect a passion that never dies. In a sense, it resembles my own beliefs in God."

Szara's piece, entitled "More Than Thread," was created using programs such as Adobe Photoshop™ and Illustrator™.

"[My favorite part of the show was] explaining my piece to an audience," Szara said. "Also, I was very surprised I won, I was not expecting my name to be called."

The winning students will advance to the Best of the Best Show held on Sunday, May 16 at the Thompson Center in Chicago. There, they will compete against students from 25 other high schools for scholarship money.

"Hopefully, I will win that [art show] too. I plan to become the best at everything I do. Big dreams leads to big accomplishments," Kim said.

The LISA Art Show began in 1995 when David and Marlowe Klitzky, the founders of the Great Frame Up store chain, realized that funds for local high school art programs were diminishing. The seven Great Frame Up stores in Chicagoland provide art supplies to the community high school art departments and frame over 700 pieces of art. Formerly known as the Creative Self-Expression Show, it was renamed the LISA Art Show in 2003 after the death of the Klitzkys' daughter.

Embracing the spirit of sharing and appreciating artwork, Kim said that one of his favorite parts of the show was discovering what other young artist created.

"I really like to see what artworks other people produce. I am still a student, and I try to learn from all pieces that I encounter," Kim said.

## DECA members advance to national competition

**W Sadia Ansari**  
Staff Writer

Four students will compete in the International Distributive Education Clubs of America (DECA) competition in Louisville, KY, Friday-Tuesday, April 24-27.

Based on their performance at the state competition March 4-6 in Decatur, IL, the following club members advanced: senior Karim Lakhani placed first in the entrepreneurship/franchising event; seniors Greg Fleytikh, Matt Moy and Lakhani placed second in the creative marketing project and junior Alex Antonow and Moy placed third in the buying and merchandising team decision event.

In the DECA competition, club members may present either a written or case scenario project that they can do alone or with a partner. If they choose the written, they can write about themes in their list, such as creative marketing, learn and earn, hospitality

and advertising.

Case study involves working out solutions to problem scenarios and presenting these to judges from the business world.

"[The] very enjoyable and most challenging part of the competition is performing in front of the judge," senior Nadia Sarnecki said.

First-third place finishers advance to the international competition.

"[DECA members] take pride in being members of the club and want to reach the next level," DECA sponsor Tricia Brown said.

According to its website, www.deca.org, the organization's stated goals are: that students learn the respect of education while competing and learning how independent these competitive competitions are; that students are prepared for future business careers, while also learning about leadership and community service and that students learn about marketing, management, merchandising and entrepreneurship careers.

"They are learning things that will help them in the future," Brown said.

Sarnecki expressed hope that new members of DECA next year will "get more educated with the world of business and most important, enjoy the fun activities that we do [in DECA]."

Funding for competitions is derived from the sale of DECALicious ice cream.

"DECALicious is primarily run by students and teaches them a sense of responsibility," Brown said.



All DECA members participating in the state competition. Photo by Zoe Ljubic



- In the Catholic religion, what is the last Sunday before Easter called?
  - Palm Sunday
  - Palm Sunday
  - Palm Sunday
  - Palm Sunday
  - Palm Sunday
- What is the number one easter egg dye brand?
  - Crayola
  - Crayola
  - Crayolka
  - Paas
  - Cadburry

- What is the first question asked at seder?
  - Do you believe in God?
  - How old are you?
  - Why are you here?
  - I don't know
  - How are you feeling?

- Which school holds the record for most NCAA basketball championships?
  - UCLA
  - Lakers
  - UCLA
  - I don't know
  - UCLA

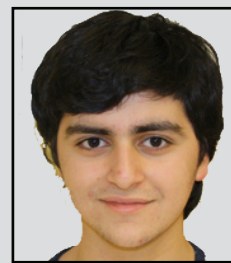
- What was the name of the MLB team in Washington DC before The Nationals?
  - The Senators
  - The Senators
  - The Senators
  - The Senators
  - The Senators



A. Freshman - Jeremy Metz



B. Sophomore - Czarmaine Landicho



C. Junior - Shazain Khan



D. Senior - Christine Antonio



E. Faculty - Patti-Anne Smith

Answers: 1) Palm Sunday 2) Paas 3) Why is this night different from all the other nights? 4) UCLA 5) The Senators

Compiled by Sarah Espinosa



# WESTWIRE

## A Tribe Called West falls short at slam semifinals

W Sadia Ansari  
Staff Writer

A Tribe Called West, the school's poetry slam team, found competition a bit stiffer at last month's Louder Than a Bomb semifinals.

Coming off a year in which the team won the statewide Louder Than a Bomb slam and qualified for the national Brave New Voices competition, team members' hopes were high for a repeat performance.

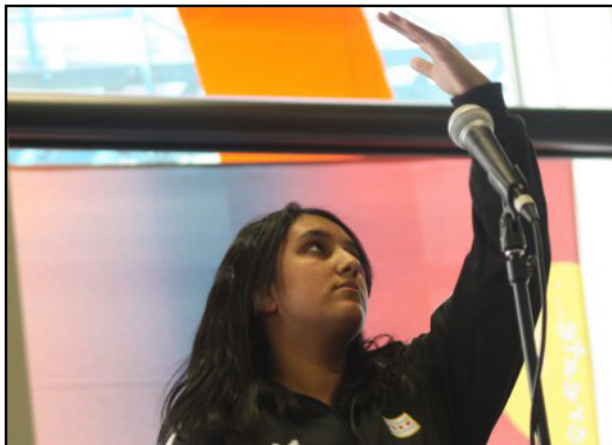


West's slammers perform their group piece. Photo by Irfan Qurashi

However, in the penultimate round held at Lincoln Park's Steppenwolf Theater, the team fell short of its goals, failing to qualify for the finals which were held once again at Lakeview's Vic Theater on March 6.

Facing teams from North Side College Preparatory, Maine East and Oak Park River Forest high schools, the Tribe could not muster the same spark that carried it to victory last year.

Sponsor Paul Bellwoar summed up the experience.



Hasan participates in the preliminary round at Columbia College Chicago. Photo by Irfan Qurashi

"It was a decent slam; we didn't finish as we hoped, but we gave it our all and tried our best," Bellwoar said.

Senior slammer Noor Hasan concurred.

"It was fun. We played our A game," she said.

Hasan and senior Aninee Fatima did advance in the duet finals, placing first in the semifinals, reciting a Hasan-penned poem.

Approximately 60 teams from schools throughout Chicagoland participate annually in the competition.

Other Tribe members include seniors Chase Langston and Hera Shakir and junior Rocio Ruiz.

All members write their own poems; Bellwoar reviews them and gives advice about possible revisions. Team members must deliver the poems from memory.

A Tribe Called West was formed in 2008, when current senior members were sophomores and arrived for tryouts not knowing anything about the team. Their learning curve accelerated rapidly, Noor says.

"We came around and learned how much fun it is to compete against other people. You get to go on Chicago Public Radio [if you win], which is cool," Hasan said. However, she added, slamming "is more about the community, having fun, making friends and listening to cool poems."

## Over 250 colleges expected at annual fair

W Mary Basic  
Staff Writer

The 32nd annual college fair will be held in the contest gym on Wednesday, April 14, 7-9 p.m.

Each year, the fair provides students with an opportunity to learn about the college, residency and student life.

"The college fair helps students with their post high school plans," college and career advisor Daniel Gin said. "[It is

an] opportunity for students to do research and find the right school."

The event will feature over 250 schools from around the world. According to Gin, schools that plan to send representatives for the first time include the University of St. Andrews in Scotland and the University of California Berkeley. To view all colleges that will attend, students can access the college and career website, [www2.niles-hs.k12.il.us/westGuidance/](http://www2.niles-hs.k12.il.us/westGuidance/).

Gin added that college representatives will answer any questions and discuss all of the students' options, including majors offered at the schools.

"[The fair] is a great opportunity for students to get a lot of research on colleges in a small amount of time," Gin said.

Michael, from page 1

was the best friend, and I am the one locked up for his [friend's] murder. I didn't know what to expect but was ready for whatever. I could clearly see that our conversation was not easy for him. The conversation was an eye opener for me. For the first time, I heard things from the victim's side. We also agreed that we were grown men now and no longer kids. We have left the door open for any future talks.

Let me say that I respect both those guys. They are examples of real, mature men. I guarantee both felt pain, anger and desired vengeance, but as mature, real men, they put feelings aside and understood that moving forward is what is right...not living in the past. We were once enemies, we were in opposing gangs, and if we had [run] into each other out on the streets, we would not be talking about embracing. We now see things for what they are. How you throw up your fingers or dress doesn't define you. Your character does.

**WW: What helps you get through each day?**

**M:** Well, the first is truth—the truth that although I am sentenced to 40 years, I only have to do one day at a time. I make wise decisions in my today so that I am blessed with a tomorrow. Remember this: every decision you make has a consequence that will come sooner or later, good or bad.

Secondly, I would say love helps me get through each day: the love of God, my family, my friends, loved ones and loving myself. The love of God lets me know I am worth loving. The love of my family, friends and loved ones energizes me not to give up. It energizes me to be a better person so that I too may love others. Their love helps me face the hard times with the attitude that I will overcome rather than be beaten down by life's hard days.

The truth is I am human just like you. Each day is different: some good and some harder than others. It is not easy, but enduring is necessary. I am a fighter, and I refuse to stay down. We all will make mistakes and fall in life, and it is not about how many times you fall, it is about that spirit in you that refuses to stay down; it is about getting back up. It is about learning from your mistakes and moving forward. It is about not giving up. It is about knowing you are worth it, even if you may not feel you are. Trust me, know [your worth] in the depth of your being, and your feelings will catch up. For good measure, say it to yourself: "I am worth it." You would be surprised.

**WW: Explain gang life.**

**M:** I was attracted to gangs ever since I was young through friends and relatives. The lifestyle seemed fun. I liked the sense

of brotherhood. On a deeper level, I would say it feels good to be a part of something bigger than just you, not to mention the respect, girls, money, parties, even a sense of adventure when you ran into an opposing gang and [fight]. People don't join gangs because they are bored. They join because it fills a need within.

Keeping all that in mind, let me explain the reality. It is simple: there are only two paths in that lifestyle—prison and/or death. Neither [is] cool, nor fun, and I already know someone is thinking, "Not me." Do you think all of us locked up said, "Me! I want to get caught; catch me!" Of course not, I said, "Not me," and yet, I sit in prison with a first degree murder sentence to 40 years. Nobody going out to commit a crime goes to get caught, and yet, in Illinois, there are 50,000 people locked up.

**WW: What advice would you give to West Word's readers?**

**M:** [I am] not someone who hasn't been there or done that. I was a gangbanger [and] drug dealer. I smoked weed, did [mushrooms], tripped on acid, popped [Ecstasy], snorted cocaine, drank and got drunk. I wasn't a dope fiend; I just tried drugs. I have shed blood, my own and others for the malion (gang). I have been stabbed, I have been jumped, I have been snitched on. I am sitting here in a cell and have been for 11 years; my out date is in 2039. I was 19 years old when I got locked up. So, please, at least give me the benefit of the doubt that I might know what I am talking about.

The gang lifestyle is not worth the sacrifices you make. Remember that it is not just about you. You sacrifice mom, dad, sister, brother, uncle, aunt, friends and loved ones. Is it worth it? I have made my mistakes, and I have learned. I am not a hypocrite, so I am not asking you to do what I didn't. I don't know what you see when you look in the mirror, but I believe in you. I believe you are better than this. I believe it is not about yesterday; it is about today. You may have fallen, but what separates boys from men, girls from women, is getting back up and moving forward! You define who you are. No gang sign or color, no expensive clothes, no expensive shoes, no look defines you unless you let it.

Remember this: even your enemy is human. They feel, they have a mom and dad, they have a life ahead of them, they hurt, they are self-conscious, everything—just like you. So, the next time you are making fun, teasing, stealing, beating or any other thing to them, put yourself in their shoes.

**WW: If you could go back 10 minutes before the crime, what would you say to your younger self?**

**M:** No one knew there was going to be a shooting 10 minutes before the crime. So many crimes, especially shootings, are split

second decisions—some wrong place/wrong time. When you are young you are not thinking. A lot of guys locked up for murder are not the "cold-blooded assassins" prosecutors make them out to be, they are actually dumb teenagers acting before they think.

The truth is not so much of what I would say to myself 10 minutes before the crime but what lesson I have learned to give you a heads up. The trick is not choosing to shoot or not, but choosing the lifestyle that never puts you in the position to make that choice. My friends who were into doing good in school never had to think "shoot or don't shoot." It wasn't their lifestyle. Smart guys! So this comes down to your choices. Always know that it is never too [early] nor too late to choose a different course for your life. It may not be easy, but neither is a 40-year sentence.

Whatever upside you see or think you see in a lifestyle of drugs, sex, guns, crime, being a bully—it is all short-lived. The downside is deep, dark and destructive. This doesn't just apply to gangbanging. It is about any lifestyle that leads to trouble. Change isn't always popular; it is not always fun or easy, but take it from me. I rather be a homeless nerd and free rather than be in prison and be the cool guy.

**WW: What are some things you have learned from your experience?**

- M:** There are a few things I would like you to know:
1. I swear to you, you are not alone, you are not crazy, your mind tells you that you are, but it is the fear of people not understanding.
  2. You are not supposed to have all the answers, but there are people who can help.
  3. Don't be afraid to ask for help. You are better off asking for help then trying to hide it.
  4. Don't get stuck. This is not who you are. It is just a road on your life's journey, and you can decide to jump on a new road.
  5. Remember this: "This too shall pass"—no matter what you are going through, you can overcome. I am telling you because even though my circumstances suck, I no longer make the poor choices I used [to make]. I am worth more than that. I can make a difference.

For each of us who overcome, we are living examples to those going through it that you can overcome. For me, my faith in Jesus has helped me.

Lastly, I would like to thank each of you for reading this. I hope you got something out of it. Each one of you is unique, no two the same, but you share very similar experiences in different ways. I hope you choose to add to someone's life each day with a smile, with help or with an ear to listen to them. Whatever good you do always comes back to you in some bigger way. Just wait and see.



## WestWord

CREAM RISES TO THE TOP.  
THIS IS WHERE IT'S

stirred



There's a difference between communicating ideas and experiencing them. It's the difference between memorizing a foreign language and thinking in one. Between studying ruins and excavating them. Between analyzing dreams and living them. The difference is *huge*. And it's the very essence of the University of Chicago Summer Session. Where students are engaged at every level—intellectually, socially, personally, and professionally. Where you can benefit from the value of taking university courses in an accelerated, intensive format. Join us this summer for an extraordinary learning experience at the academic home to 85 Nobel laureates.

FOR STUDENTS IN HIGH SCHOOL, COLLEGE, AND BEYOND.

JUNE 21–AUGUST 27, 2010

3, 4, 5, 6, AND 9-WEEK SESSIONS

For more information, visit  
[summer.uchicago.edu/nw](http://summer.uchicago.edu/nw)  
or call 773/834-3792



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
CHICAGO

Summer Session '10