

March 21, 2007:**PROFILE — Joe Hernandez-Kolski '96****Empowering teens through poetry**

Every other Tuesday night at Santa Monica's Miles Playhouse, Los Angeles students line up to participate in Downbeat 720, an open-mic showcase for high school poets, singers, and dancers hosted by actor Joe Hernandez-Kolski '96.

Since 2002 Hernandez-Kolski has served as the students' mentor, master of ceremonies, and unofficial guide to the world of spoken-word poetry. A regular on the Los Angeles poetry scene, he has performed on HBO's Def Poetry — a premiere spotlight for poets who perform their pieces before a live audience.

In the past two years, Downbeat's reputation has grown. Hernandez-Kolski has co-produced two seasons of Downbeat Showdown, a locally televised competition among nine poets, nine singers, and nine bands that was awarded an Emmy for Outstanding Youth Programming in 2006.

Hernandez-Kolski and his fellow organizers have worked to make Downbeat 720 as welcoming an environment as possible. Before each show, which is open to any Los Angeles high school student, he offers feedback on new pieces and calms jitters.


Hernandez-Kolski encourages participants to draw on their own experiences for their material. Many of the students focus on deeply personal issues in their poems, from the shame of being sexually molested as a child to the heartbreak of being abandoned by a parent.

"Joe makes it feel OK to be yourself," says Desiré Johnson, a 15-year-old sophomore from Santa Monica High School and a regular Downbeat performer.

Hernandez-Kolski got his first glimpse of the spotlight at age 6, when he landed his first community theater role. By 11 he was performing regularly with the Chicago Actors Ensemble. At Princeton, he gravitated to Theatre Intime and BodyHype, while majoring in history and earning certificates in theater and dance and African-American studies.

Today, the themes of identity and ethnicity are central to Hernandez-Kolski's art. In 2004 he staged the one-man show "You Want a Piece of Me," a combination of comedy sketches, spoken-word poetry, and dance exploring his mixed Polish and Mexican upbringing. He has since toured colleges across the country with a modified version titled "Refried Latino Pride." In November he performed it at Princeton during the Kaleidoscope alumni conference on race and diversity. He currently is developing a sitcom and preparing his next stage project, a politically themed solo show called "Where Republicans Go to Read Their Poetry."

Now in his fifth year overseeing Downbeat 720, Hernandez-Kolski judges the program's success on the authenticity of the students' work and their evolution as artists. Several of his performers have gone on to compete in spoken-word competitions, and alumni of the program regularly return to take the stage during their college vacations.

"I want these kids to be empowered in who they are," he says. "All they really need to succeed in life is the confidence that comes from affirmation." 

By Tamar Laddy '94

Tamar Laddy '94 is a writer living in Los Angeles.



Actor and spoken-word poet Joe Hernandez-Kolski '96 hosts open-mic nights for Los Angeles high school students. (Courtesy Joe Hernandez-Kolski '96)