

IDENTITY AND COMMUNITY AT SPA

Students collaborate with Penumbra Theatre on powerful series of monologues about race, class, ethnicity, and difference



Ami Berger

COMMON GROUND STUDENTS PERFORM AT AN UPPER SCHOOL ASSEMBLY IN APRIL 2014

The Common Ground students worked with Sarah Bellamy, Co-artistic Director of Penumbra, and Claribel Gross, Penumbra's Community Outreach Coordinator, to write and perform monologues that explored a particular aspect of each student's experience around their race, ethnicity, class, or religion. The monologues are deeply personal and emotional, and Bellamy notes the students' courage in sharing these experiences. "They are passionate, smart, caring individuals who demonstrated great courage and leadership throughout the process of creating and sharing their monologues,"

A powerful and moving performance of monologues by members of Common Ground, SPA's affinity group for Upper School students of color, was performed in April 2014.

The performance was the result of a year-long collaboration between the students and the Penumbra Theatre. According to SPA Diversity Dean Karen Dye, the monologue project grew out of the work Penumbra was already doing with students in the Middle School. "We initially thought the Common Ground project would be a way to connect our Upper School students to our eighth-graders as a mentoring project," Dye says, "but once the Penumbra staff saw what the students were capable of, the performance aspect really took off."

The fourteen students who participated in the Common Ground project come from a wide range of backgrounds, races, religions, and ethnicities: Asad Masood '15, Emma Rodgeron '15, Jared Mosher '14, Jesus Vega '15, Mansuda Arora '15, Marcus Alburez Myers '14, Ysabella Johnson '14, Yusra Murad '14, Ellis Evans '14, Bella Martinez '15, Dozie Nwaneri '15, Sam Carlson '14, Isabella LaBlanc '15, and Ava Gallagher '14.

says Bellamy. "I believe the students realized the profound value of being honest about who they are, how that shapes their experiences, and ultimately enriches what they can offer."

Yusra Murad '14, one of the Common Ground performers, agrees. "I think what struck me the most is that while writing the monologue I was able to discover feelings which I had never been able to articulate before," says Murad, whose monologue focuses on confronting anti-Muslim sentiments.

Creating the monologues was not always easy, says Common Ground member Bella Martinez '15, whose monologue tells the story of being the only person of color in her kindergarten class. "Initially the monologues were just going to be for the eighth-graders so I wasn't that nervous to write or perform one," says Martinez. "Then I actually started writing mine and it got more difficult. Performing them was scary because it was very personal, but everyone was very kind and supportive. Every time we performed it got a little bit easier to tell our stories." Martinez says she was nervous about sharing her story with her Upper School peers, but the positive feedback after the performance was reassuring. "I know it's important for the community and I'm relieved people reacted well to what we had to say," she says. "I hope it's starting some new conversations within SPA."