



The skit by Open Book participants from Schmid Elementary featured a scene depicting the terrible conditions in the Super Dome during and after Hurricane Katrina. The skit was based on Ninth Ward by Award-winning Author Jewell Parker Rhodes and was performed during an Open Book Program Author Event on December 3, 2011 at Mayo Elementary School, 269 E. 37th St., in Chicago.



Open Book participants from Williams Prep Academy are all smiles as they accept the First Place Trophy for their performance based on Ninth Ward by Award-winning Author Jewell Parker Rhodes. The skit was performed during an Open Book Program Author Event on December 3, 2011 at Mayo Elementary School, 269 E. 37th St., in Chicago. Also pictured is Jewell Parker Rhodes.

“Always the Universe Shines Down With Love,” Author Jewell Parker Rhodes Tells Open Book Youth

“Always the Universe Shines Down With Love. If you always believe that the universe is not against you, that the universe will shine down with love, you always have hope and you always know that it’s going to get better.” That was one of the messages that young people got to hear from award-winning author Jewell Parker Rhodes during an Open Book Program Author Event on December 3, 2011 at Mayo Elementary School, 269 E. 37th St., in Chicago.

More than 200 African American inner city students, 9-14, and their teachers and parents attended the event sponsored by the Institute for Positive Living’s Open Book Program. Students from the Institute for Positive Living’s Open Book Program performed excerpts from Parker Rhodes’ book, *Ninth Ward*, and got their books signed by the author.

Ninth Ward is a celebration of resilience, love, family, and friendship, and a deeply emotional story of transformation. Twelve-year-old Lanesha lives in a tight-knit community in New Orleans’ Ninth Ward. She doesn’t have a fancy house like her uptown family or lots of friends like other kids on her street. But what she does have is Mama Ya-Ya, her fiercely loving caretaker, wise in the ways of the world and able to predict the future. So when Mama Ya-Ya’s visions show a powerful hurricane—Katrina—fast approaching, it’s up to Lanesha to call upon the hope and strength Mama Ya-Ya has given her to help them both survive the storm.

Ninth Ward is the winner of several awards including the 2010 Coretta Scott King Honor Author Award, the 2010 Parents Choice Foundation Gold Award and the 2010 Al Roker “Today Show” Book Club Selection.

In order to create their performances, the Open Book students not only read *Ninth Ward*, but also researched New Orleans, before and after Hurricane Katrina. The performance by Scott Joplin Elementary School, for example, featured film footage of New Orleans’ Ninth Ward after Katrina. The performance by Schmidt Elementary School included a moving portrayal of what it must have been like in the Super Dome during and after the storm. The Williams Prep Academy performance featured students wearing hand crafted Mardi Gras masks to give the flavor of New Orleans, and the performance by Mayo featured a voice over using the real voice of Clarence Ray Nagin, Jr., mayor of New Orleans during Katrina, as he appealed to residents to evacuate in the face of the storm of the century.

Author Jewell Parker Rhodes, told the Open Book students “I love the way you personalized Katrina.” In addition to reading excerpts from her book, Parker Rhodes who is also a professor of creative writing at Arizona State University, urged the students to contact her via e-mail and submit their own stories. “You are powerful and important,” she said.



The skit by Open Book participants from Mayo Elementary featured an imaginative scene in which Hurricane Katrina is interviewed prior to hitting New Orleans. The skit was based on Ninth Ward by Award-winning Author Jewell Parker Rhodes and was performed during an Open Book Program Author Event on December 3, 2011 at Mayo Elementary School, 269 E. 37th St., in Chicago. Mayo won the Third Place Trophy for their performance.



Open Book participants from Scott Joplin Elementary School are pictured (l-r) with Author Jewell Parker Rhodes: Deanna Kuku, 12, Angelita Calhous, 12, Jennile O'Connor, 12, Emani Bendas, 12, and Jynshia Smith, 11. The photo was taken during the book-signing portion of the Open Book Program Author Event on December 3, 2011 at Mayo Elementary School, 269 E. 37th St., in Chicago.

“You are the makers of the next world, the world that my children and grandchildren will grow up into.”

Jewell Parker Rhodes was also impressed with the amount of research that the Open Book students did. “I never encountered a group of kids who understood the book so well,” she stated. “This is a unique program.”

A panel of judges including the author graded each performance on qualities ranging from enunciation to creativity and first, second and third place trophies were awarded. The First Place Trophy went to Williams Prep Academy. Scott Joplin Elementary took second place and Mayo took third place. Other participating schools were University of Chicago-Donoqhue Elementary School and Schmid Elementary School.

The Open Book Program focuses on stimulating interest in reading quality, culturally relevant children's literature through a variety of activities including literary circles, drama, and Internet experiences. During each program segment, participants do an in-depth study of one or two books. Authors and author/illustrators have included Sandra Belton, Ashley Bryan, Debbi Chocolate, Sharon Flake, Jan Spivey Gilchrist, Nikki Grimes, Catherine Ingram, M. LaVora Perry, Harriette Gillem Robinet, Charles R. Smith, Jr., Hope Anita Smith, Glennette Tilley Turner, Darwin MacBeth Walton, Walter Dean Myers, and Camille Yarbrough.

“Author interaction is a key ingredient in the success of the Open Book Program,” states founder Marrice Coverson, president of the Institute for Positive Living and executive director of Open Book. “The talk-show format gives students the opportunity to interact with one another and to experience the books through the dramatic productions that each school has prepared.” For information on the Student/Author event or the Open Book Program, contact Marrice Coverson at 773-924-9802. Information about Open Book including examples of student work can be obtained on the World Wide Web at www.openbookprogram.org.

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Open Book participants from University of Chicago-Donoghue Elementary School get their books signed by Author Jewell Parker Rhodes. Pictured (l-r): Nayshaun Garrett, 10, Mikcah, Anissa Murphy, 10, Layrun Williams, 11 and Alexis Barker, 9. The photo was taken during the book-signing portion of the Open Book Program Author Event on December 3, 2011 at Mayo Elementary School, 269 E. 37th St., in Chicago.

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