
TALES FOR MIGHTY WRITERS

AN INTERVIEW WITH ROCHELLE MELANDER

How did you start Dream Keepers?

In 2005, I attended a church in the inner city of Milwaukee. I knew the statistics about children in my community—four out of five black children in this city live in poverty. The reading and math scores for black children in Milwaukee rank near the bottom in the country. The city also has the largest achievement gap between black and white students in the nation.

But the young people had their own stories to tell—about their passionate love for their families and what they wanted to be when they grew up. I couldn't eliminate the challenges these children faced. Giving them food and clothing would only increase their feelings of helplessness and diminish their ability to build self-agency. I wanted to create a relationship with these young people that would allow them to use their strengths and build their confidence. I hoped to offer them tools to tell their stories and articulate their dreams.

We welcomed anyone who showed up. In the 15 years since Dream Keepers began, we have held writing workshops at most branches of the Milwaukee Public Library, in the Milwaukee Public Schools, at the Milwaukee Art Museum, and in a local CDF Freedom School. We have served hundreds of children (ages 4-18) from a wide range of races and cultures.

From the beginning, I hoped Dream Keepers could be a place where children who were overlooked by parents, teachers, and schools or who were labeled “not smart enough” or “not creative” could discover their unique voice and creative spirit and use writing and art to express themselves and change the world.

What inspired you to write this book?

One of the students I worked with didn't like to write, and his skills lagged behind his 4th grade peers. Every week, I invited James to join the Dream Keeper's table. After telling me (again) that he hates writing, I encourage him to just play with words for a bit, maybe creating a graphic story.

When we were studying the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech, I asked the young people to create a story or a statement on how they could make a difference in their family, school, or community. James drew a graphic story about how the police could collect guns from criminals. One girl wrote about how she watches the trash bin at school, making sure no one tosses recyclables. A young boy wrote about the community garden and how it helped his family eat better. The children were clearly inspired by King's message. Their dreams and stories have the potential to change the community.

I've watched children like James blossom and wanted to support more young people. I designed **Mightier Than the Sword** to empower the children I teach through Dream Keepers and those beyond my own community. Every child deserves to be heard—and to know that they have the ability to create art that impacts the community.

What was one of the surprising things you discovered while researching this book?

Many of the people I researched started writing at a very young age. For example, Rachel Carson won a short story contest when she was 10. These people often wanted to become writers when they grew up. But it wasn't until they discovered their passion or mission that they became determined to write and publish their work.

For Rachel Carson, it was falling in love with the natural world and the ocean that ignited her purpose. Later in life, as she investigated the effect of pesticides, she became a tenacious advocate for the earth through her writing.

Ida B. Wells discovered that she could protest injustice through writing and, in some cases, help people get the justice they desired. She was relentless, pursuing and researching dangerous stories so that she could help people and see justice win.

For other people, they had a story to tell and no outlet until they discovered a new medium. When Sonita Alizadeh learned how to write poetry and rap music at a community center, she suddenly had the tools to speak out against child marriage.

What do you hope readers will learn or discover from reading your book?

My hope is that readers will be inspired by the tales of people just like them who used writing to transform their lives or their communities. I hope that they will be encouraged to play with the exercises in the book and develop their own writing practice. Finally, I hope that young people will use their voices to change the world—within and around them.

About Rochelle Melander



Rochelle Melander is a coach and teaching artist who believes you can find the answer to your questions and the questions that deserve answers in a book or at the tip of your pen. **Mightier than the Sword** is her debut book for children. Visit her online at rochellemelander.com or writenowcoach.com