

NTC's *The Monologue Project* Gives Students of Color a Chance to Share Their Stories
by Abby Lass, Director of Media Outreach for Newton Theatre Company

It's a sunny, relatively busy day outside City Hall, but the students inside the building's auditorium don't seem to notice. They are hard at work, clustered around a table meant for toddlers as they discuss the merits and drawbacks of different design options. Some speak with more zeal than others, but everyone in the circle communicates their ideas clearly and respectfully. The adults are slightly apart from the cluster, offering the occasional clarification only when it feels necessary. This scene, so removed from what a typical rehearsal room looks like, perfectly illustrates the ideology behind Newton Theatre Company's *The Monologue Project: Voices of Color*.

"The students come up with their own monologues, and we do very little to edit their work," Melissa Bernstein, Newton Theatre Company's Artistic Director, explains. "We want to hear their authentic voices. Then, as a group, the students decide how to start and end the performance, what they want to say with the art they are making as [a] group, and participate in the talkback after the show. The adults are there as facilitators, but the students are running the show."

Using this collaborative approach, Bernstein hopes not only to give Newton's students of color a forum to share their stories with the community, but for the people of Newton to gain a clearer understanding and empathy for these students and their experiences.

With that said, the scope of this project extends far beyond the show's three performances. Bernstein, along with Newton North English teacher Pam Pistiner, Newton's Director of Youth Services Quinn Etchie, and local artist Lakshmi Kadambi, spent months meeting with the students and fostering a sense of trust and community before the writing process even began.

"This year we started meeting in the fall in Pam Pistiner's classroom at North," Bernstein said. "We'd meet once a month, and mostly talk. The writing of the pieces came later, in the spring. Last year the students formed a tight community very quickly. This year feels like they have gotten to know each other over a longer period of time."

Indeed, many of the project's participants mentioned the sense of community as one of the project's most meaningful results.

"I liked working with everybody," Newton North junior Nadya Obeid, who was also involved in the project last year, said. "We became friends and we all heard each other's experiences, which was also nice because you got to share and kind of connect on a different level than at school. We all kind of share experiences-- not exactly the same, but the same kind of themes and the same stuff."

For students who sometimes struggle to find their niche in Newton's predominantly white schools, communities like these can be a welcome source of support. Some students, like Newton South freshman Valerie Goldstein, have even noticed changes in themselves since the project began.

"It's made me a little bit more outspoken," Goldstein said. "We had a class discussion about microaggressions and stuff and I was participating in it a lot because of this. 'Cause once I started writing about it, thinking about my experiences, it made me realize a lot of things about myself."

Still, the impending performances are accompanied by a degree of anxiety for some students.

“Choosing to read what I wrote in front of everybody was really hard,” Newton North junior Katya Obeid said of last year’s production. “Although I did do it for my sophomore speech, I feel like it was kind of different because this was [for] parents, people in the city.”

However, this trepidation is not enough to silence these students. As Newton North sophomore Zoe Kronberg put it, “I’ve never been this vulnerable onstage... but I’m kind of just ready.”

The Monologue Project: Voices of Color will be performed in the Newton Cultural Center Auditorium at 7:30 pm on Friday, June 1st, 7:30pm on Saturday, 2nd, and a matinee on Sunday, June 3rd at 2:00pm. All performances are free and will include a talk back with the students. Visit newtontheatrecompany.com or newtonma.gov/youth for more information.

Behind the scenes video interviews with students:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3bjmFtan0tI>