

assume the format and content are driven by identity politics. Instead, she says, "It's an immediate and vibrant art form that allows for a lot of variation that people don't expect."

Performer and poet Anna Voelker says she loves new audiences for that reason — "I get the honor of exposing them to a totally foreign form of art. Poetry that is spoken, whether on the stage or on a library floor, allows me to not only share what I love, but I get to watch other people learn that they love it, too."

It is inherently narcissistic, though — and Ramirez says that can be a downside because, "People don't always think of other people's lives as important."

## SPEAQ Up

Increasingly the inner and outer lives of LGBTQ youth are being seen as more important — in the gay community and the wider world. The last Monday of each month at the Shadow Lounge, the SPEAQ series supports that reality.

"Really, it's to perform anything you want to share with people. It's to give a voice. It's really just about sharing something that you have to give," says coordinator Luke Niebler.

The program is a spinoff of Web Poets, an online poetry forum for queer youth and allies. And it's the brainchild of Dreams of Hope performance troupe founder Susan Haugh and renowned artist Vanessa German. A series of workshops morphed into a relaxed, non-competitive open mic event. Slam, poems with guitar accompaniment, and hip hop have all had a turn at the mic. Niebler says the offerings may expand to videos or staged readings.

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It's all driven by a Young Poets Advisory Board—currently four young women aged 17-25. They brought in hip hop artist Chiney Mayne as a guest artist. Poet Soham Patel will headline on January 28, one day after Dreams of Hope premieres its 10th anniversary season. And of course, about ten young performers will also go on.

Niebler says for him and the other young performers, the pure terror leading up to that moment in the spotlight is strangely a draw.

"Every single time the sign up list stays real empty until about halfway through the

performance, then people are slowly building up courage, they're seeing other people put themselves out there."

Michelle Reed, a member of the Young Poets Advisory Board, is compelled to get up on other grounds. She says, "I perform because I like being on stage and to get recognition as a writer. You have to start somewhere." But for her, excitement is still a big part of it—"Like when I hear a particular melody or voice in the music world that causes my adrenaline to rise...that's the feeling I want people to have with the things that I say."

Many slam and spoken word poets say their aim isn't to be taken too seriously — it's to entertain. Adriana E. Ramirez, who performs all over the country, says providing a voice, an outlet, is invaluable. She and her teammates would also like to grow Steel City Slam, get more support from the city, and nurture partnerships like the one they have with the Shadow Lounge and their new programs with the Union Project. But in the end they just want people to know, through experience or word-of-mouth or the Pittsburgh Literary, "We're doing this rad thing, and it's really fun," she says. **EQ**

For more information, visit [pghpoetry.org](http://pghpoetry.org), [dreamsofhope.org/speaq](http://dreamsofhope.org/speaq), [webpoets.dreamsofhope.org](http://webpoets.dreamsofhope.org) or [Calendar\[sampson\]away.org/pittsburghliterarycalendar/index.php](http://Calendar[sampson]away.org/pittsburghliterarycalendar/index.php)

