

WRITING

Today's Leaders

by Gisel J., 826LA

TYPE

MEMOIR
NARRATIVE

GENRE

GRADES 11–12

Throughout my life, I have had the opportunity to express myself through public speaking. In high school, I was privileged to speak on the public announcement system and lead assembly teams on stage for pep rallies. Today, I am a high school junior speaking at LAUSD Board of Education meetings.

Though I have four years of experience to support me, getting here wasn't easy. It all started in class when no one stepped up to present a project and neither did I.

But with time, I realized no one could explain my projects or tell my stories better than me.

When in the spotlight, I feel empowered. In the beginning, I was not very articulate. Over the years, I've learned to listen, stop, think, and respond. At 14 years old, I led my first assembly on stage. It was my first day in leadership class and I was a sophomore surrounded by seniors. They were looking for a vice president. The teacher was waiting for someone to step up, but no one would, so I said, "Okay, I'll do it!"

I immediately regretted it because I was already freaking out about the responsibility. I felt like I had to though, because no one else would.

With the vice president position, I had to give a speech at our school assembly. Not only that, but on just my second day in the role, I had to work with the assembly team to plan the entire assembly. For a first assembly, it went great, though I wasn't paying much attention because I was nervous about my speech. I tried not to stutter, and went very slow, especially because I had to translate it into Spanish as well. I was so relieved when the audience didn't boo me off stage. In fact, I got a round of applause. It felt good to walk off the stage knowing I did a good job.

On another day in leadership class, I was presented with the opportunity to give announcements on the public announcement system. I wasn't sure at first, as I had to commit to making sure I got to school early, but I said yes anyway. After the first week of hearing me over the PA, my teachers would tell me that they loved my energy. Friends would tell me that they would make sure to get to class on time to hear my announcements. In class, they would say, "Everyone quiet down, Gisel is about to speak." It made me feel good to know that I had made their day before it started.

Eventually, my leadership teacher came to me about an opportunity to join the Youth Advisory Council. As part of the Council, I would meet with students from other schools about updates and projects to improve the School District. At one of the meetings, I

presented on internet issues students were dealing with on school campuses. I was approached by a representative from the LAUSD School Board to present a student's point of view about the problem. I prepared and gave a speech to the Board. Other students also shared their experiences, and I felt supported and empowered to be a part of a group of students trying to find solutions to a problem that affected all of us.

Public speaking has given me the opportunity to influence decisions, create connections with my community, and hold myself accountable. It has given me more confidence when speaking in front of crowds and speaking in general. It has given me more self-awareness and confidence to ask questions or speak my mind. I have had the opportunity to join organizations and groups at school and in my community that I would not have had access to without developing my public speaking skills. With these skills, I want to help the underrepresented and disadvantaged have a voice of their own by setting an example through leadership and community service. I plan to pursue an education in communication and a career in local government, and to continue to use my voice to change the way young people are perceived. We are not naive. We are not tomorrow's leaders. We are already leading today.