

# Willful Defiance: Connecting the Arts, Liberatory Education, Research, and Movement Building

*An interview conducted by Mark R. Warren with Patrice Hill and Denisha “Coco” Bland  
from Sacramento Area Youth Speaks*

Patrice and Coco are the creators and performers of the spoken word piece “Willful Defiance,” produced in association with the book *Willful Defiance: The Movement to Dismantle the School-to-Prison Pipeline*, authored by Mark Warren, Professor of Public Policy at the University of Massachusetts Boston. In this interview, Patrice and Coco discuss the role of spoken word and the arts in empowering young people, dismantling the school-to-prison pipeline, and partnering with community-engaged scholarship to engage participants in building a movement for educational justice.

Patrice Hill is director of Sacramento Area Youth Speaks. She is a community based educator and activist scholar and serves as a steering committee member of the People’s Think Tank for Educational Justice.

Denisha (Coco) Bland is associate director of Sacramento Area Youth Speaks. She is a community based educator and activist scholar and serves as a steering committee member of the People’s Think Tank for Educational Justice.

The purpose of the interview is to provide an opportunity for community-based educators of color, particularly Black women who are mothers and embedded in extended family and community networks, to describe the connections they see between the arts, liberatory pedagogy, and organizing for equity and justice. The spoken word piece they wrote to engage people around the *Willful Defiance* book offers an opportunity for them to reflect on their day-to-day local work with young people and connect it to national movements for educational justice. We can see from this interview that the lines that are often drawn between organizing, artistic expression, and research are false; rather in the hands of organizers like Patrice and Coco, they form an integrated whole, driven by a passion for children and for justice.

This integrated vision and practice, articulated by women of color, offers a different framework for thinking about where educational leadership for social justice is grounded and emerges, and consequently contributes to the theme of this issue. “We” do not always engage “them” in research and advocacy as implied by the title of the special issue; rather, these educators demand to be heard, to be recognized as scholar activists, and to hold a seat at the table of community engaged scholarship and advocacy.

---

**Mark:** Can you tell me a little bit about Sacramento Area Youth Speaks and what you are trying to accomplish in your work with young people.

**Patrice:** Sacramento Area Youth Speaks (SAYS) is a program of the University of California at Davis. We exist to help bridge the university to the community. SAYS is a critical literacy program that uses spoken word and hip-hop poetry to help young people become authors of their own lives and agents of change. We are committed to being scholar activists, to having one foot in the university and one foot in the community, and trying to really understand what it means for the university to serve the community.

SAYS uses a pedagogy of poetry to go into schools and work with young people. We have a plethora of programs we offer to young people. We have accredited elective classes, in-class residencies, and after-school programs where young people are exposed to a culturally relevant curriculum that uses



JAY DUTHIE, 11TH GRADE

the foundations and principles of spoken word poetry, hip-hop, and literacy as something that can unlock academic success.

**Coco:** We're a social justice movement that creates a bridge between the university, the schools, and the community. We're here to give young people a safe space to share their voice and their truth, as well to create a pipeline into higher education.

**Mark:** Can you say a little more about what you do in schools?

**Coco:** We go into the schools, making sure the most vulnerable youth have the things that they need to achieve academic success. We work with the students that are considered "low achieving" and "at risk." We like to say "at promise" instead. So we make sure they understand all the tools and the things they need to be able to access higher education as well as exposing them to higher education.

**Patrice:** It takes different forms. One is a credit elective class, HEAL, which stands for Health, Education, Activism, and Literacy, where we as Black women began to work with Black girls. We see a cohort of young people now every day of the school week. It's really in-depth, and it goes on their transcript. We're engaging them with a critical, culturally relevant education that empowers them.

One of the most unique things about SAYS is that we bring community-based poet-mentors into the classroom. They work hand in hand with teachers to engage students. These community artist-educators have similar backgrounds to our students. They went through the public school system and understand the things that students might be struggling with outside of school.

This brings the arts into schools with a social justice foundation that allows the arts to be a catalyst for activism, inspiration, and academic success. Then, using the arts, we give young people a voice outside of the classroom, running the city youth poetry slam season of events, the Sacramento youth poet laureate program, and the MC Olympics, which is a youth hip-hop MC battle-style competition. We give young people outlets and platforms to stand in their truth without being censored and without being confined.

We want to create spaces where young people have the opportunity to thrive and succeed and be motivated. That ties back to the university because there are so many young people in Sacramento who have never been to UC Davis, even though UC Davis is just 25 minutes away from the city. The university is supposed to be a place of inspiration, of welcoming, and of honoring the place where it lives. All young people should have access to that. So SAYS brings 500 young people to the UC Davis campus every year to let them see that this is for you too.

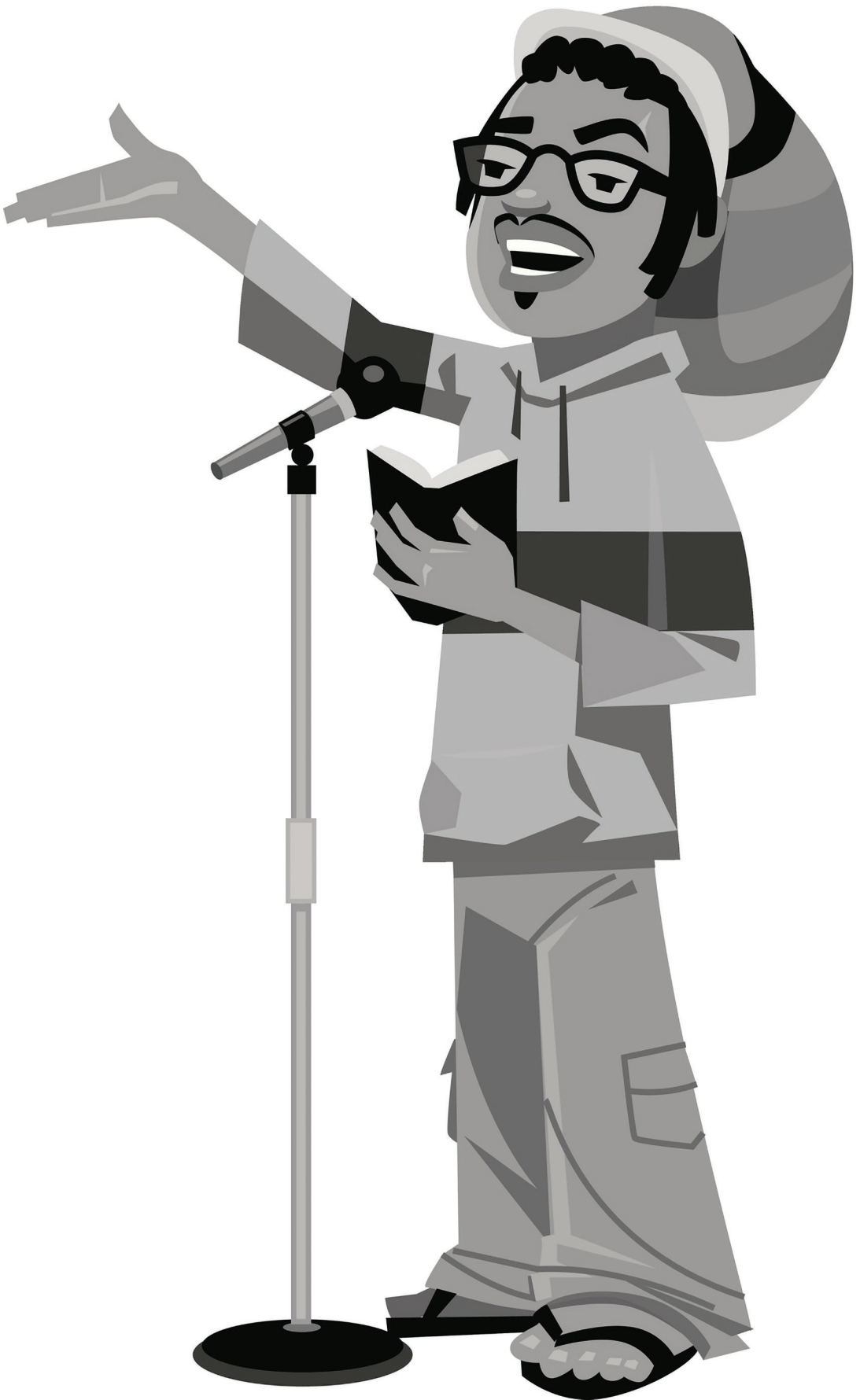
**Mark:** You both recently wrote and performed a spoken word piece — published in the Expressions section of this issue — connected to the book *Willful Defiance: The Movement to Dismantle the School-to-Prison Pipeline*, which is a book about how Black and Brown young people, parents, and communities are fighting for educational justice. Could you tell me what you were hoping to achieve and accomplish with this piece?

**Coco:** When we wrote the piece, it was the passion of it all. I've been working in the classroom for almost 14 years, both of us, and we work with the kids that are the cogs in this school-to-prison pipeline. How do we dismantle that? By speaking to our youth, shining a light on what's happening, because sometimes our youth don't fully understand what's happening to them.

I got very passionate about dismantling the school-to-prison pipeline when I was about 20 years old. I took one of my cousins to juvenile court. And I noticed that the only youth in the court system was Black and Brown youth. And I said, "something's wrong." The way you start to put those pieces together is to start to speak out about it, to share your truth about it. I've been gifted with the talent to be able to speak my truth with poetry. So when we started putting the spoken word piece together, we just dived into all the things that we saw that was happening in these schools that sometimes gets swept under the rug. Sometimes, the best way to shine light on it is through poetry.

**Patrice:** We have lived this experience of teaching in schools where there are adverse policies and systems set up to fuel the school to prison pipeline. And we have been working at SAYS to dismantle systems of oppression that occur in schools that push our babies out, that push Black and Brown students out.

The *Willful Defiance* book gave us fuel to understand that we have to speak our truth because we're living this. We're teaching in schools where there are partnerships with the local police departments and contracts with the local police who get paid to take our students to jail. And it's disproportionately Black and Brown students who end up in the juvenile justice system. We know that that is wrong—when young people can come to school and go to jail. We know that there are issues that our young people face that sometimes cause behaviors that are not appropriate. However, taking young people to jail is the wrong answer. It needs to stop. Our young people need curriculum and a holistic education that fuels them to want to come to school and learn and to want to be more than what they see.



ISTOCK.COM/CREATIVE\_OUTLET

Our passion fuels this because we are in the schools every day. It's different when you're writing about it and you see the school system on paper versus when you're in the schools every day, interacting with young people and having to help young people navigate through the systems that work against them.

**Coco:** The book is a great resource, but we wanted to express our passion through spoken word.

The book reveals a lot of things people don't know. I didn't know how widespread are the laws allowing suspensions for willful defiance. To be able to go back into school to show kids what happens when you get kicked out of class is powerful. They sometimes think, "Yeah, I'm happy I got kicked out of class." But we tell them that they're building a case on you, this is going to transfer with you into your adulthood.

I didn't know about this when I was in the K through 12 system. I thought when a teacher kicked me out of class, it was good because I didn't have to do the work. But, no, I was playing in this system that impacted me. As a result, I didn't graduate from high school. I graduated from a continuation school and went back to college in my mid-twenties. At SAYS we don't want our students to have to go down these same paths. We expose them to these things early on. If you can't read or write, you're being pipelined to the prison. If you're getting referrals all throughout your high school career, you'll never go to a university. Many of our students don't even know that!

So, to be able to have that information and give it back to the students front-hand, like "Hey, it's a book, me and Mama P [Patrice] is doing a poem to it. Let me expose you to some real game that's happening in America." That's why we were so excited to be a part of the book and the movement to expose the system not only to our kids but to our parents—what this "willful defiance" is all about.

**Patrice:** When we started writing the poem, we started doing a lot of additional research. We had already done a lot of research on the school-to-prison pipeline because this is one of the core pedagogical components of our curriculum: trying to get young people to understand the school system and how it connects to the prison industrial complex.

You sent us the proofs of the book *Willful Defiance* and as I was reading it, the data is what infuriated me. I'm working in this system where this data keeps showing me that Black and Brown students are being disproportionately funneled out and pushed out. I didn't even know "willful defiance" was a legal term that they used. We were finding things out like Black girls are over five times more likely than white girls to be suspended at least once from school. "Huh! How is this possible in America?" The data speaks for itself, and we're so honored to be a part of something that's so informative.

When we bring this curriculum to our young people, and we ask, "What is the school-to-prison pipeline?" So many times people don't even know it's a thing. We have to be able to spread awareness and access to what is going on in our schools and in our school systems.

**Coco:** We're in California, the prison state. We have almost 40 prisons in this state, privately owned. We have more prisons than we have universities. We're prison heavy. The California prison system is one of the biggest prison systems in the United States. How do we dismantle that from the inside? Why not be on the front lines to break that?

**Mark:** Why does the educational justice movement or social justice movement need the arts, like spoken word and other artistic forms of expression?

**Coco:** Art speaks truth to power.

**Patrice:** Our founder and former director, Dr. Vajra Watson always says there's no protest without poetry. The arts have always played a vital role in movements. In the Civil Rights Movement you had various artists that contributed their artistic power and their artistic voice to help bring light to the suffering that folks were going through. In this country, we have the blues as one of the oldest art forms for Black folks. It was born out of oppression, out of suffering, out of abuse and longing and wanting to have an outlet to speak your truth, to sing your sorrow, to speak your pain, to fight

for your liberation through something that couldn't be taken from you. One of the oldest things that Black folks have kept with them is art and song and celebration through music and poetry.

So, I believe that the arts have a valuable place in social justice movements. Art can connect us in ways that sometimes academia can't. I think that art speaks to people's souls. Art connects people. Art is rooted in truth and is rooted in our humanity and who we are. Art can break through those barriers that divide us. Art connects people because it shines light on people's stories.

**Coco:** Hip-hop started out as political protest: young Black and Brown boys telling people what's happening in our neighborhood and the injustices we faced. People connect through movement, dance, and graffiti. So the best way to get information out, to connect us, is through music and rhythm. We can't have a movement without arts like poetry, like a Harlem Renaissance, a Black Arts Movement, Langston Hughes, Maya Angelou, all these great people that shined light on what was happening. Artists encouraged and motivated people in the movement.

**Patrice:** I think about Billie Holiday and "Strange Fruit." I think about James Brown, "Say it loud, I'm Black and I'm proud." I think about artists who have continuously used their platform to inform folks of the disparities and the injustices that folks have been put through. It's my duty as an artist to name what is happening, to give a lens on what is happening, to spread awareness to what is happening. In my profession as a teaching artist, as an educator, I've been able to touch way more young people through art and poetry and spoken word and hip-hop than in any other way. Art helps us get past the barriers and we can start speaking to each other's souls.

**Mark:** Do you have an example of how you see the impact of the work of SAYS in the arts on young people and the community in Sacramento?

**Coco:** SAYS has become the predominant youth voice program in the city. SAYS curates the citywide youth poetry slam scene. If anyone is looking for a youth poet, or a youth artist, they turn to SAYS. They ask for SAYS youth to help facilitate their programs. Alexandra Huynh, our youth poet laureate in Sacramento, is now the 2021-2022 national youth poet laureate. She came out of a SAYS class at Mira Loma High School.

**Patrice:** Prior to COVID, we had more than our fair share of police killings. Young people responded in myriad ways, through art, through organized protest, through school walkouts. We saw that the young people who were empowered artistically took a lead in the youth resistance to police killings in Sacramento and led actions and protests. I see the young people that have been given places and stages to speak their truth unapologetically through the arts take the reins on civic engagement and youth political response to various injustices that have been happening.

Also, a lot of the young people that have been given spaces for their artistic voice have made careers out of using their art in social justice movements. I see art empowering folks and contributing to their agency in ways that hadn't happened before, because there weren't these outlets and spaces where young people can go and have access to a mic and be able to say whatever they want to say.

**Mark:** As you know, the *Willful Defiance* book is a project of the People's Think Tank on Educational Justice and we have a whole program to use the book to engage educators, communities, and the public around the critical importance of centering the people most impacted by injustice in efforts to transform schools towards equity and justice. The think tank is dedicated to producing knowledge that supports educational justice movements. You both have made a commitment to be on the steering committee of this think tank. Can you tell us what you feel you are contributing to this form of community-engaged research and knowledge production?

**Coco:** This is so important to me because it gives us the opportunity to be able to connect with people across the nation. Sometimes we get so siloed in our own state. It's so exciting when we get to come together and just sit down and get the information on what's happening across the country. We find out things like, "Oh my gosh, I did not know that was happening in Baltimore too, or I didn't know that was happening in Boston too." This is not just California. For so long I thought California was the only prison state and doing this school-to-prison pipeline thing. To be able to



have our voice on the panel to talk about what's happening in California is an honor. And it's a great opportunity to sit with like-minded people from across the country.

**Patrice:** This work can be very draining sometimes. Being part of a group of folks that are doing this work across the nation feels so empowering. It just shines a light on the educational system as a whole. To work with folks like Jonathan Stith from the Alliance for Educational Justice, folks that have dedicated their lives to this work, it makes us understand that we're so much more powerful together than we are apart.

The things that we've been able to do in so little time have shown the impact of movement-building and national organizing. We know that to change public education is going to take everyone coming together.

Everyone in the think tank is focused on a different aspect of the disparities in the school system, from immigration rights to police-free schools, and we come together to see the interconnections. The concept of intersectional organizing builds my spirit. The term intersectional organizing is one of those "aha" moments for me. I feel honored and privileged to be in constant communication with a group of individuals that is really living out this work.

Nobody talks about it. Everybody is being about it. Mark is writing books. Everybody is doing different types of grassroots social justice work in their respective cities and in their respective organizations. It's so important for us to understand how the different types of injustice in our schools are playing out across the nation, how we help each other, how we bring light to that, how we contribute to the movement, how we convene and then bring other folks together to convene with us, how we plan and do the research. All of that just is so empowering and also is building a legacy for national educational justice movements to come together and understand how we can shift this narrative and shift this reality that's happening in our schools.

**Patrice:** The books from the People's Think Tank, like *Willful Defiance* and *Lift Us Up Don't Push Us Out!*, are legacy writings that are documenting the work that's happening right now across the nation in regards to educational justice. So, I'm just honored to be doing this work alongside you and other folks and able to contribute in these small artistic ways. The folks on the People's Think Tank are like family. You've got to have a family because this work can be so draining.

I want to say a shout out to young people, especially our young people in Sacramento and our young people that helped contribute to the video. The young people always got our backs. When we say, "Me and Ms. Coco need to shoot a video today," they step up to the plate and have our backs.

To the folks that are doing this work, I say keep pushing, keep going. We know it's hard. It takes a lot to move a mountain, but just stay in this fight because our young people need you. Our babies need you. We're all in this together.

**Coco:** Education is one of the oldest systems. We all have to send our kids to school, no matter what shape, color, or size. So why not come together to transform education. It's a new America after COVID. It's a new time, so why not finally bring justice to the most vulnerable community, which is our children. As we say in SAYS, "futures forward," because the future is for us.

---

*Mark R. Warren is Professor of Public Policy and Public Affairs at the University of Massachusetts Boston and author of Willful Defiance: The Movement to Dismantle the School-to-Prison Pipeline, which can be found at <http://peopletthinktank.us/willful-defiance/>*

*Patrice Hill is director of Sacramento Area Youth Speaks. She is a community based educator and activist scholar and serves as a steering committee member of the People's Think Tank for Educational Justice.*

*Denisha (Coco) Bland is associate director of Sacramento Area Youth Speaks. She is a community based educator and activist scholar and serves as a steering committee member of the People's Think Tank for Educational Justice.*