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## **Teens Publish Book about their Lives Beyond School**

Students describe broken hearts, conflicts, self-discovery

February 12, 2012 | By Lolly Bowean, Chicago Tribune reporter

His heart racing and his lips slightly trembling, Damon Washington sat on the stage at Open Books bookstore Friday and read an essay about discovering his sexuality.

He read that he was 9 years old when he acknowledged he liked pretending he was a girl, but that it took much longer to admit to his family he is bisexual.

"I started having confusing emotions," Washington, 16, said as he looked around the crowded room. "I asked myself, 'What's wrong with me? Am I nuts?'"

Washington was one of 22 honors English students from Chicago Talent Development Charter High School on the West Side who over three months wrote their memoirs and put them together in a book titled "Life Beyond School" that was then self-published.

The book came together through Communities In Schools of Chicago, a nonprofit group that matches community organizations with public school students. In this case, staffers from Open Books met with students and developed a project designed to encourage them to read and write.

On Friday, the students gathered to read from their newly released collection and celebrate their new status as published authors. Their book is for sale for \$10 in the store, 213 W. Institute Place, and online.

The writing project was intended to boost the students' self-esteem and self-awareness, said Paul Fagan, a student support manager at the high school. But the writing program is a part of a unique way the school is preparing its students to compete to get into college, he said.

The process doesn't just strengthen their writing, their voices and their sense of self, he said. Publishing a book also gives them another achievement to add to their academic resume.

"Now they know what a memoir is, and they have something they can open up and keep," he said. "They have a topic they can talk about."

On Friday at Open Books, the teenagers came to share their stories for the first time and to sign copies of the book.

Many of the tales were about teenage crushes, broken hearts and discovering new talents. But some of the students wrote about deeper issues.

Tashayana Mitchell, 16, said she wrote about her first heartbreak because it was traumatic, yet something readers could relate to.

"At first, I didn't want to tell anyone," she said after her reading. "But it was a relief that I let it out."

A 16-year-old girl said she wrote about terminating a pregnancy because it was the first time she could explain how she felt about the emotional, life-changing experience.

The girl said she was hurt because none of her family members came to the reading. But she was still determined to revel in her accomplishment.

"I got to finally speak out and let people know how I feel about what I went through," she said.