

# Teen newcomers hope powerful poem opens minds

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Escaping Syria as a child, Fawwaz (Ali) Al Hassan knows a thing or two about global conflict.

“I’ve gone through war, genocide, poverty, myself firsthand, and I know how bad and terrible it is for anyone, not just for people of my kind, but anyone across the world,” the 17 year old who immigrated to Canada 10 years ago said.

The Daniel McIntyre Collegiate Institute student co-wrote the spoken-word poem *What am I meant to be?*, along with Sami Suliman, 16, and Tobilola (Tobi) Olorunsola, 17. The trio recited it Monday at the Manitoba legislature as part of the Manitoba Council for International Cooperation’s international development week.



[Watch on YouTube](#)

The teens, all newcomers to Canada, brought their own personal experiences to the poem, a journey across the globe.

“Raising a voice and letting others know, letting those in power know about the struggles and the difficulties that’s going on in the world — it’ll help make change and make things better for the future,” said Al Hassan.

Olorunsola, who emigrated from Nigeria to Canada in 2022, said he hoped the poem would open eyes.

Through the spoken word, “somehow, my voice is able to shed light to people. People can see things through a different light and open their minds,” the Vincent Massey High School (Brandon) student said.

Suliman, a John Taylor Collegiate student originally from India, added: “we all have different experiences, but, somehow, it connects us more.”

The students received a standing ovation inside the legislature rotunda after the performance.

The students applied to the Voices for Change program, which allows Manitoba high school students to express themselves creatively through spoken-word poetry about a global issue.

Manitoba spoken-word artist Steve Locke, who worked with the teens, said the council usually chooses a topic, but this year the students made the decision to wax poetically on conflict and displacement — something they were familiar with.



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High school students Fawwaz (Ali) Al Hassan (left), Sami Suliman, and Tobi Olorunsola perform a spoken word poem they created which explores themes of genocide, oppression, and displacement, at the MCIC International Development Week kickoff at the Manitoba Legislature on Monday.

“Ali was with us last year,” said Locke. “He brought a little bit of confidence, maturity, experience. Sami is softer, quieter; he’s gentle, but in that he’s able to convey some really arresting imagery. Tobi, he’s our slam poet. He’s really bringing a lot of energy, intensity, and lyrical playfulness.”

Locke worked with the students over the course of three weekends to help facilitate the writing, rehearsing and producing of *What am I meant to be?*, which was recorded and can be viewed on the council’s website.

The Manitoba Council for International Cooperation is a non-profit that works with 38 member organizations in Manitoba that are involved in work that aims to support the development of cities abroad. Using government funding, the council provides emergency relief, rehabilitation projects, and international development.

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