

Writer, Poet, Performer – Mayda del Valle, Maria High School '96



Born and raised on the Southwest Side of Chicago, Mayda del Valle returned to Chicago to perform in "RussellSimmons' Def Poetry Jam" at the Shubert Theatre, where she shared the stage with several other poets.

While the poet isn't sure where she gets her boundless energy, her mother, Carmen, says she's always had it. "When she was a child, I was always chasing after her," 60-year-old Carmen del Valle says with a chuckle. "The energy is there because it comes from her heart." Though she says Mayda was a talker from an early age, she never thought it would lead her daughter to a career in the arts. "With the way she would talk, I thought she was going to go into politics," Carmen del Valle says.

Mayda credits her passion for writing to the journal she had to keep while attending Maria, an all-girl's Catholic school on the South Side. "That's where I got my start. A teacher named Mrs. Kelly made us keep a journal," del Valle says. Del Valle filled the pages with monologues and skits -- not poetry. The poems would come later, after she left Chicago to attend the prestigious Williams College in Massachusetts before she graduated and finally settled in New York.

Del Valle's older sister and brother have stable jobs as Chicago police officers, but del Valle had aspirations of being an artist. "No parent wants to hear, 'Hey, Mom and Dad: I've got my college degree and now I'm going to be an artist,' " del Valle says. Carmen del Valle says she and her husband always tried to be supportive of their daughter. "When she decided to move to New York after college, Papa was resistant, but I was hoping doors would open for her." And open they did. In 2001 she performed with the New York team at the National Poetry Slam. The team placed third, but del Valle's solo performance placed first. She was the youngest person and the first Latina to win the award.

It was at the 2001 National Slam she first came to the attention of Russell Simmons, who was scouting for talent for an HBO poetry special. The special led to her being cast on Broadway. I find the success she's had very surprising," Carmen del Valle says. "The career she chose is hard, especially for a Hispanic woman."

Still, if there is one thing she says she has taught her children, it's try and you can succeed. The del Valles witnessed firsthand their daughter's success when they attended the Broadway opening of the "Def Poetry Jam" show. "I started crying from the beginning of the show until the end," Carmen del Valle says. "You struggle to raise your kids and when something like this happens, it's great." "She was always volunteering to the community and giving herself to friends. She deserves everything she's getting," Carmen del Valle says.

GRAND 'SLAMMER' by Misha Davenport - Chicago Sun Times