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## NHS student to participate in 'White Ribbon Day' at Statehouse

- By Lynne Hendricks Correspondent - Mar 3, 2016



Courtesy Photo. Newburyport High student Charlie Lake.

NEWBURYPORT — When Gov. Charlie Baker and a slate of public officials stand up today in honor of White Ribbon Day, a Newburyport High School student will be standing among them.

Junior Charlie Lake, a budding talent in the school's literature department, has been selected to read a self-authored poem as part of the event, contributing his unique perspective on what it means to be male and stand against domestic violence.

At the heart of the White Ribbon Day movement this year is a push to reimagine manhood and help young boys learn by good example what it means to be a man. That means examining some of the messages that have dominated the lives of young men, which often support the legacy of domestic violence – messages that teach them to “be aggressive,” to not “be a sissy,” and strive to not come off “like a girl” in their pursuit of happiness. It invites men and boys to be leaders in the effort to end domestic violence by asking them to reassert the positive meaning of being a man. Lake's poem sheds light on the problem from the perspective of one whose identity depended on making sense of all the mixed messages.

“I think men definitely are encouraged to be more powerful and (domestic violence) is one of the ways, unfortunately, that that comes out,” Lake said. “We often fear femininity and see it as weaker, and that's something we need to unlearn. I guess the poem is talking about how I unlearned to see femininity as a bad thing.”

Lake's poem is about femininity from the perspective of someone born into a feminine role, and the journey of a transgender person to unearth their male identity beneath the layers of expectations and assumptions the world has placed on them.

“I'm grateful for growing up the way I did even though it was hard, because it's a way to check my privilege as a man,” Lake said. “I hope it will cause people to check their own privilege. They do have it, but we can fight against it.”

Lake's creative writing teacher at Newburyport High, Deb Szabo, is very proud to be introducing Lake when he speaks to the crowd at the Statehouse today. As his coach for last year's "Louder than a Bomb" poetry slam competition, she has seen his talent for spoken word poetry work magic on crowds. And she's excited that he's getting the opportunity to share his work in such an important context.

"I am completely thrilled for Charlie," she said. "He's an excellent writer and he's an excellent thinker as most writers are. He's extremely honest, and he's very mature so he has the necessary qualities. He's got the skill and an appreciation of the craft. He enjoys it when he finds the right words, or hears someone else find the right words. Because he's so thoughtful he has a lot of important things to say. He feels a lot of passion to express those things and share those thoughts and feelings with other people."

Szabo said the first time she heard his poem, despite the experiential and generational differences between them, she was moved to tears.

"When I hear him speak one of his poems I feel incredibly moved," she said. "I feel a massive amount of empathy. I think Charlie gets how empowering it can be to create a work of art – in this case a spoken word poem."

His empowerment, she said, becomes the audiences when they hear him read.

Szabo said Lake was the "secret weapon" of the group's slam team last year. Though all the kids were very good at spoken word poetry and worked hard to create their best work, the group understood that Lake was going to factor highest in the competition. His poem was selected to be featured during the coveted showcase portion of the competition.

"Part of the baggage of being a teenager is you're trying on all these different personalities, trying desperately to impress everybody," she said. "In (Lake's) poetry it's

a very profound level of honesty he gets to – for anybody – never mind a 16 and 17-year-old.”

When he gets up on stage at the Statehouse today, Lake will be speaking to a crowd of approximately 400 people, which is a bit nerve-wracking. His jitters also stem, he said, from the personal nature of the poem.

“I have six minutes to talk and my poem doesn’t fill six minutes so I’m going to be reading a speech after, talking about what the poem means to me,” Lake said. “Through that I’m going to get a chance to explain that it’s so personal to me. Hopefully people hearing that will respect it.”