

Making room for young voices matters more than ever before

We are fresh off celebrating ten years of Streams, which means we have spent a lot of time lately looking back. At the stories, the milestones, the kids who grew up with us and the people who helped build this place.

And almost immediately after all that remembering, we find ourselves in Word of Mouth Monologue Competition season.

Which feels fitting. Because after ten years of trying to create space for young people to grow, express themselves and be seen, here we are again doing one of the simplest and most powerful things we know how to do: giving them the floor.

There is something particularly vulnerable about standing alone on a stage.

No chorus behind you. No castmate beside you. No one else to carry the silence if you forget the next line. Just you, your story, and a room full of people listening.

Every year, I am struck by the courage of the young people who choose to do exactly that.

We spend a lot of time teaching children how to speak. Use your words. Say thank you. Ask politely. Speak clearly.

But I wonder whether we spend enough time teaching ourselves how to listen.

Not just waiting for our turn to talk. Not listening long enough to correct, redirect, or offer advice. Actually listening.

Young people have full inner worlds. They are carrying questions, observations, humour, grief, imagination, anger, hope, and insight that adults do not always make enough room for. And sometimes, all they need is a room that does. That is one of the things I love most about Word of Mouth.

Yes, it is a competition. There are categories, performances, judges and prizes. But beneath all of that is something more important. A young person stands up and says, in one way or another, Here is something I want you to hear. And for a few minutes, the room belongs to them.

As Thanksgiving approaches, I find myself thinking about the people who made that kind of room for me. The ones who listened before I had everything figured out. The ones who did not require polish before offering attention. The ones who took me seriously enough to hear me out. That is a gift. And maybe gratitude is not only about noticing what we have received. Maybe it is also about becoming the kind of person who passes the gift on.

So this Thanksgiving, perhaps one of the things we can be grateful for is anyone who ever made room for our voice. And perhaps one of the best ways to give thanks is to make that room for someone else. Especially a young person. Especially when they are still figuring out what they want to say. Especially when their voice shakes a little.

That is when listening matters most.

This week's Community Voice column was written by Juli-Anne James, executive director of Streams Community Hub.