



Presenting

# ILLUMINATING MINDS TOUR

**IN-SCHOOL AND ONLINE**  
**AUTHOR AND SPEAKER VISITS**

## MEET DIVERSE AUTHORS AND ROLE MODELS



**Grades  
Pre-K-12**

## IMPACTFUL AND ENGAGING PRESENTATIONS TO SUPPORT:

- Social-Emotional Learning
- Mental Health
- Bullying Prevention
- Parent and Family Engagement
- Equity and Social Justice
- Health and Wellness
- STEM
- Career Exploration
- Academic Success
- Building Community
- Achieving Goals
- Grit and Resilience

*Meet the Team!*



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# MEET OUR AUTHORS AND SPEAKERS

Our authors and speakers are available for in-person and/or online visits to schools. Please be aware that scheduling is contingent upon their commitments and availability at the time of your request. For more information on scheduling and other details, please contact your account representative or call 212-371-9199. We look forward to facilitating enriching experiences for your students.



Hakki Akdeniz



Kianny N. Antigua



Kobi Backer



Jameson Bennett



Jason "Poo Bear" Boyd



Judaline Cassidy



Diedra Cole



Quinn Cook



Liz Cooper



Jason Derulo



Solomon Dubner



Marie Ferraro



Britney Gengel Family



Shelley Goldberg



Brianna Greenspan



Jason Hightower



Raquel M. Horn



Josh Johnson



Carmen Jorda



Tori Kelly



Blake Leeper



Leon Logothetis



Stéphane Matteau



Marlon McRae



Patti Newman



Tanya Montás Paris



David Pridham



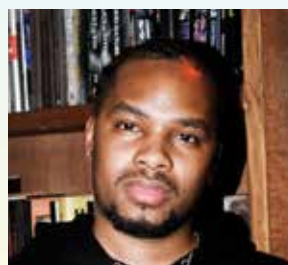
Emberli Pridham



Amen Rahh



Stephen Ritz



Tyree Rush



Jared Sams



Latoya Smith



Elaine Sussman



Aiden M. Taylor



Linda Taylor



Anaya Willabus



"Big Boy" Wills



Cheryl Wills



Domingo Zapata

# INSPIRING ROLE MODELS

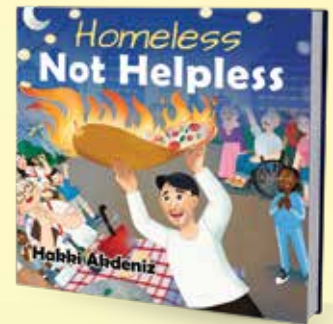
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## Hakki Akdeniz, Chef and Social Entrepreneur

After emigrating to the United States at age twenty-one, Hakki found himself homeless on the streets of New York City—with no family or friends. Through hard work and an indomitable spirit, as well as the kindness of strangers, Hakki became a well-known restaurateur. Today, Hakki is a revered social entrepreneur who has made it his life mission to inspire others to overcome challenges and fulfill their own dreams.

**Key Messages:** Self-confidence, goal setting, career readiness, mindfulness, and understanding differences



## Kianny N. Antigua, Author and Educator

Kianny N. Antigua is an inspiring author specializing in bilingual children's literature that celebrates girl empowerment, self-acceptance, and the beauty of our differences. Drawing from her experiences as a young Dominican girl, Kianny creates stories that encourage children to embrace who they are. After navigating a series of dead-end jobs, Kianny decided to prioritize her education to pursue her dreams. Her book *Greña/Crazy Hair* won first place in the Most Inspirational Children's Picture Book category at the 2018 Latino Book Awards.



**Key Messages:** Self-acceptance, girl empowerment, and understanding and appreciating differences

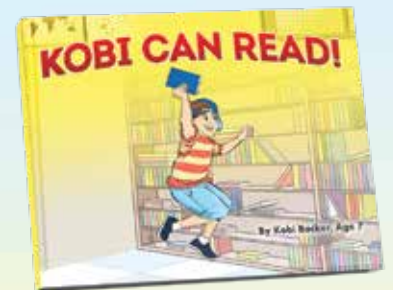


## Kobi Backer, Author



Despite facing learning challenges in kindergarten and first grade, Kobi Backer was determined to thrive in second grade and beyond. Through his writing, Kobi hopes to share his message of resilience and empowerment, showing that with hard work and support, anything is possible. Kobi lives in Miami, Florida, with two brothers, two sisters, and a lively chihuahua. Kobi loves sports and the outdoors, and he excels in riding and jumping ponies, consistently ranking as the top rider in his division at horse shows.

**Key Messages:** Literacy, perseverance, self-motivation, overcoming challenges, self-regulation, and setting goals



## Jameson Bennett, Author

Jameson Bennett, a Louisville, Kentucky, native, is an award-winning radio producer and technologist. Through his writing, Jameson hopes to inspire children to cultivate strong relationship skills, introduce them to technologies such as virtual reality, enhance their decision-making abilities, and guide their career development, leading them to a successful future. Honored at the 2022 NYF Radio Awards, Jameson brings a wealth of media expertise to his work.

**Key Messages:** History/social science literacy, relationship skills, responsible decision-making, social awareness, and career development

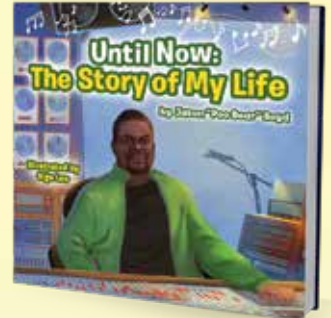


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## Jason “Poo Bear” Boyd, Songwriter

Jason Boyd, aka Poo Bear, is a singer, songwriter, and record producer best known for his unforgettable melodies and collaborating with singers and songwriters from all genres to create anthems that resonate with fans all over the world. Through his work both in and out of the recording studio, Poo Bear works to inspire children to develop a positive mindset, even when faced with the toughest of obstacles. In this way, he hopes to help you achieve your dreams. Poo Bear hopes that his music helps people feel as if they are being seen for who they really are and gives them that extra positive outlook on the day. This is why he greets everyone by saying, “Happy Bearthday,” because he thinks that every day should feel as great as your birthday does.

**Key Messages:** Perseverance, self-motivation, overcoming challenges, relationship skills, responsible decision-making, and goal setting



## Judaline Cassidy, Plumber

Judaline impacts lives and inspires women around the world, offering her own story of someone who overcame her challenges as a minority woman in a white-male-dominated industry. After becoming a successful plumber in New York City, Judaline founded Tools & Tiaras, a program that teaches girls how to use tools and shows them how they can get involved in trade jobs.

**Key Messages:** Overcoming bullying and discrimination, financial literacy, finding mentors, perseverance, girl empowerment, career readiness, and entrepreneurship

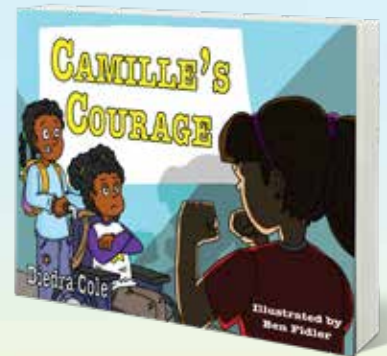


## Diedra Cole, Author



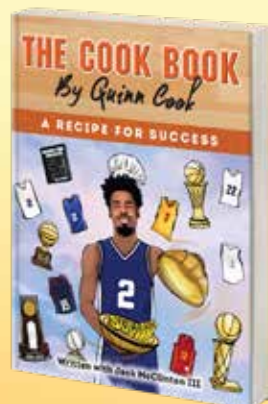
Despite being diagnosed with cerebral palsy at the age of three months, author Diedra Cole had dedicated herself to showing that through perseverance and positivity, great things can be accomplished. Diedra's work shows her belief that regardless of differences, challenges and obstacles can be overcome.

**Key Messages:** Perseverance, self-motivation, antibullying, overcoming challenges, and goal setting



## Quinn Cook, NBA Basketball Player

Quinn Cook is a professional basketball player and motivational speaker with a career built through hard work and discipline at every level of competition—from his backyard all the way to the NBA! As a leader on and off the basketball court, Quinn has impacted his community while also winning basketball championships at every level: high school; Duke University; as well as in the NBA with the Golden State Warriors and the Los Angeles Lakers. Inspired by his beloved father who passed away at an early age, Quinn has dedicated his life to teaching students to overcome challenges and to purposefully and actively pursue their own dreams in sports, and in life.



**Key Messages:** Perseverance, self-motivation, grieving, overcoming challenges, relationship skills, responsible decision-making, and goal setting



## Liz Cooper, Author

Liz Cooper is a former nurse, elementary school teacher, and school language-arts supervisor. Liz is passionate about promoting literacy, disability awareness, and kindness because as an elementary school teacher, she noticed that differently abled students were ignored on the playground. Through her writing, she aims to foster inclusivity and empathy in funny books that children will enjoy reading.



**Key Messages:** Relationship skills, overcoming discrimination, self-awareness, compassion, problem-solving, and social awareness

## Jason Derulo, Singer

Jason Derulo is a singer, songwriter, and performer who has sold over 250 million singles worldwide and entertained audiences around the globe. Born to Haitian immigrants, Jason developed an early interest in music after being exposed to a variety of musical genres from pop to kompa, twoubadou, and R & B. Now, with his first books for children, Jason wants to highlight to young readers how creating routines, taking risks, dedication, and self-confidence can help them achieve their dreams even in the face of adversity.



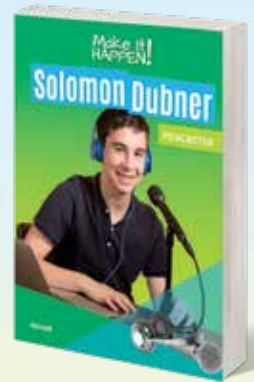
**Key Messages:** Self-management, perseverance, social awareness, overcoming challenges, relationship skills, responsible decision-making, and goal setting



## Solomon Dubner, Podcaster

Solomon is a teenage podcaster who worked hard to overcome learning challenges in order to succeed in school and life. Following a trip to England with his family, he fell in love with soccer. Solomon then started his own podcast that features him and his dad, Stephen, coauthor of the popular *Freakonomics* books. Solomon's work encourages students to be more tech savvy and explore social media in a safe format.

**Key Messages:** Overcoming learning challenges, resiliency, career readiness, and entrepreneurship



## Marie Ferraro, Author

Marie is inspired by her family's history of helping people to overcome great challenges and to build better lives. Her children's stories focus on messages that promote self-acceptance, diversity, and equity. Her presentations inspire readers to understand the power of friendship and generosity and to respect the differences between people.

**Key Messages:** Friendship, understanding economic differences, social justice, equity, and expressing gratitude





## Britney Gengel Family, Author/Community Builders

Britney “Brit” Gengel was born and raised in Massachusetts with dreams of changing the world. During her sophomore year of college, she traveled to Haiti, hoping to make a difference. Soon after arriving, Brit decided that she would stay in Haiti and build an orphanage. Unfortunately, she lost her life during the destructive earthquake that devastated Haiti. The Gengel family took over Brit’s mission and built an orphanage in her honor. This book inspires children around the world to learn to be compassionate and kind towards others.

**Key Messages:** Social awareness, perseverance, self-motivation, grieving, overcoming challenges, relationship skills, responsible decision-making, and goal setting



◆ Be Like Brit! ◆

## Shelley Goldberg, TV News Reporter

Shelley Goldberg was the Parenting and Family Reporter for NY1 News, where she spent over twenty years sharing valuable insights. Her work emphasizes social awareness, community building, health and wellness, nutrition, and career readiness, empowering students and parents alike. Through her engaging presentations, Shelley endeavors to give students the confidence to develop essential career skills while prioritizing their health and well-being. Her dedication to promoting nutritious lifestyles and informed decision-making inspires readers to take charge of their futures while fostering a healthier community.



**Key Messages:** Social awareness, college and career readiness, nutrition, health and wellness





## Brianna Greenspan, Author

Brianna Greenspan has been using the power of positive affirmations for the past thirteen years to overcome physical challenges brought on by being born with a chronic invisible illness. When Brianna decided that the labels and limitations of her medical team did not align with what she believed to be possible for her life, everything began to change. Instead of being held back by neck braces, surgeries, and countless doctors' visits, Brianna completed her first 10k and hiked Half Dome at Yosemite National Park. An accomplished children's author, Brianna is living proof that the power of positive affirmations coupled with extraordinary faith and immense effort really can enable a person to overcome the biggest obstacles.

**Key Messages:** Mindfulness, resilience, wellness, empathy, and setting goals



## Jason Hightower, Author

Jason Hightower is a producer/director from Houston, Texas. He has directed two shorts with his long-time collaborator, Amber Iman (Steve, Blackberry Winter). With nearly twenty years of experience in film and television, Jason has also worked on a multitude of shows, such as *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*, *Good Time*, and *Fallout*. Jason's presentations help students better understand technology, such as virtual reality, to enable them to consider career opportunities in STEM-related fields.

**Key Messages:** History/social science literacy, relationship skills, responsible decision-making, social awareness, and career development



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## Raquel M. Horn, Author

Raquel's *Dusko* series fires the imagination of children, leading them to explore the world around us. With a focus on STEM and social emotional skills, Raquel's engaging and beautifully illustrated stories enable readers to develop a mindset of confidence and curiosity about the natural world. In addition to her writing, Raquel has made numerous appearances at schools and community events, sharing her passion for storytelling and education. Raquel M. Horn is a photographer, designer, painter, writer, and mom. She lives in Florida with her son Dusko, her dog Governor, and her partner Damon Dash.

**Key Messages:** STEM, setting goals, self-motivation, collaboration, and understanding differences

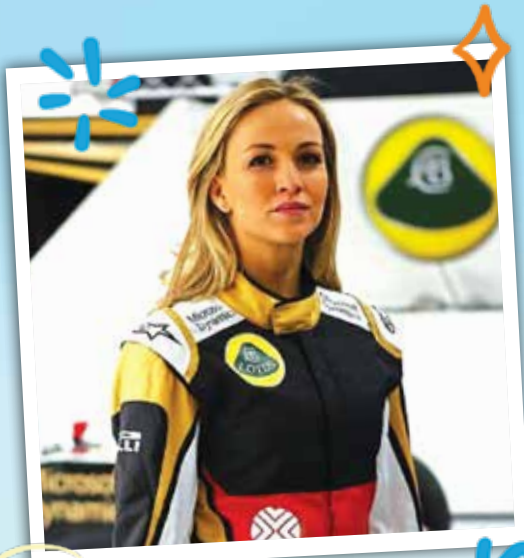


## Josh Johnson, Tap Dancer

As a high school student in New York City, Josh dreamed of becoming the first person in his family to attend college. Uncertain on how he would pay for his education, Josh developed a plan to make money by performing on the subway. With discipline and focus, Josh soon realized his dream of graduating from college. Today, Josh inspires children and adults to set goals and have self-confidence. His appearances worldwide include NBC TV's *Dancing with the Stars* and *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*.

**Key Messages:** Self-confidence, goal setting, career readiness, STEM, understanding differences, and social awareness





## Carmen Jorda, Race Car Driver

Carmen Jorda is a Spanish race car driver, working as a Formula 1 development driver. Through hard work, determination, and teamwork, she has competed in GP3, Indy Lights, and the Le Mans series motor racing competitions. Off the race car track, Carmen works tirelessly to inspire girls that they too can overcome any obstacle and fulfill their dreams.



### Key Messages:

**Girl empowerment, STEM, career readiness, self-awareness, self-management, and responsible decision making**



## DRIVEN TO WIN:

THE CARMEN JORDA STORY

## Tori Kelly, Singer

Tori Kelly is a two-time Grammy award winning singer, songwriter, record producer, and voice actress from Wildomar, California. She has written and produced countless hits, performed in front of sold-out crowds, and was the lead voice of Meena the elephant in Disney's *Sing 1* and *Sing 2* movies. Tori hopes to inspire self-confidence, kindness, and individuality with her music and books. Tori has proudly embraced her own unique history; her father is Jamaican and Puerto Rican, and her mother is of Irish and British descent. In the face of negativity and self-doubt, Tori aims for young readers to find and cherish their uniqueness and celebrate what makes them special.

**Key Messages: Social awareness, self-confidence, empathy, and self awareness**



## The Curly Girl Blues



## Blake Leeper, Track Athlete

Blake Leeper is an eight-time, Paralympic, track and field athlete; world record holder; and three-time American record holder. Despite being born with both legs missing below the knees, Blake has shown the world that a positive attitude, determination, and dedication can lead to achievements both on and off the track. Blake continues to break down barriers as a sprinter and works tirelessly off the track by giving motivational speeches that inspire others that no dream is out of reach.

**Key Messages:** Goal setting, social awareness, self-discipline, self-confidence, empathy, and perseverance



## WHY NOT ME?

## Leon Logothetis, TV Personality

Leon Logothetis is a global adventurer, TV host, motivational speaker, and best-selling author who is known through his series *The Kindness Diaries*, which streams on Discovery+. For over a decade, Leon has traveled the globe to over one hundred countries to constantly inspire students with his message of kindness and hope. Through his inspirational school presentations, Leon shines a light on the good in humanity and on how children of all ages can impact their lives and the lives of those around them.

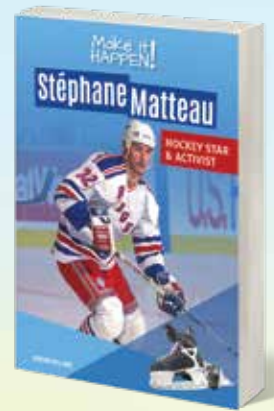


**Key Messages:** Kindness, compassion, mindfulness, and connection with others

## Stéphane Matteau, Hockey Player and Activist

Stéphane is a former New York Rangers player who scored a Stanley Cup-winning goal for the team in 1994. He has battled anxiety and depression. Today, he travels around the world, mentoring and teaching kids to overcome their fears in order to achieve their own goals in life.

**Key Messages:** Overcoming anxiety and depression, gaining compassion, and setting goals



## Marlon McRae, Author

Marlon McRae is a former journalist who has been featured on ESPN, CBSsportsline.com, and the *New York Amsterdam News*. As a teacher and parent, Marlon writes stories that inspire students to develop self-awareness and compassion for people of all backgrounds and perspectives.

**Key Messages:** Relationship skills, overcoming discrimination, self-awareness, compassion, problem-solving, and social awareness



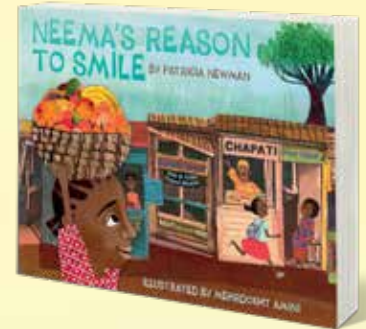
## Jabberin' James



## Patti Newman, Author

Patti draws inspiration for her work from real-world problems, big and small. Her presentations empower children to believe in themselves through explorations of topics, including the environment, girl empowerment, global citizenship, and social justice. Her book, *Neema's Reason to Smile*, features a young girl in Kenya who developed a plan to pay for her schooling. It is a Parent's Choice Foundation Recommended Picture Book.

**Key Messages:** Social justice, understanding differences, financial literacy, girl empowerment, environment, and STEM



## Tanya Montás Paris, Author

Tanya is a Dominican writer and poet. She has also been a classroom teacher for over two decades. Tanya lives in the Boston area with her husband and their two teenagers. She is passionate about using literature and poetry to inspire students to understand and appreciate people's differences. She is also the cofounder of Las Margaritas Foundation, a nonprofit organization working to educate underserved children in the Dominican Republic.



**Key Messages:** Self-acceptance, girl empowerment, and understanding and appreciating differences

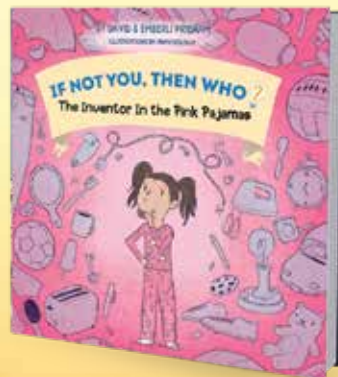
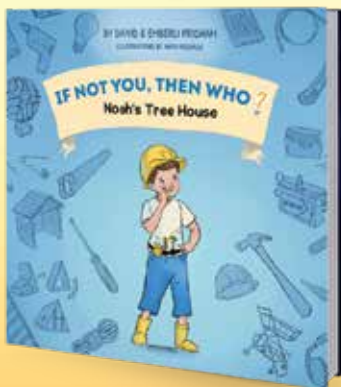




## David and Emberli Pridham, Authors

Coauthors Emberli Pridham and her husband David are dedicated to inspiring children to imagine and create their own inventions. Inspired by her grandmother and the many books in her home, Emberli fell in love with reading at a young age. Combined with David's commitment to sharing the important values associated with invention-creativity, teamwork, and trademark protection, the coauthors have motivated children around the nation to embrace the power of STEM education.

**Key Messages:**  
Entrepreneurship,  
STEM, career  
readiness, and  
teamwork



## Amen Rahh, Activist



Amen Rahh is a nationally recognized educator, writer, and speaker dedicated to advancing social justice, resilience, empathy, and teamwork within the educational landscape. Amen's engaging presentations empower students in diverse urban settings to cultivate self-motivation and set meaningful goals. Through his work, Amen inspires young minds to embrace their voices and collaborate for positive change, highlighting the importance of empathy and teamwork in achieving social justice.

**Key Messages:** Social justice, self-expression, empathy, resilience, understanding differences, career readiness, and teamwork



## Stephen Ritz, Urban Farmer

Stephen is the founder of the Green Bronx Machine, a K-12 program that inspires students to achieve academic success by growing, eating, and loving their vegetables. As an urban farmer and teacher, Stephen grows healthy students and healthy schools to transform communities that are fragmented and marginalized into neighborhoods that are inclusive and thriving.

**Key Messages:** Health and wellness, community building, urban farming, sustainability, STEM, career readiness, achieving success, entrepreneurship, inclusiveness, and equity



## Tyree Rush, Author



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Tyree Rush is a writer, director, and producer hailing from Atlanta, Georgia, with a rich background in producing hit shows like *The Read with Kid Fury and Crissle*, *The Nod with Brittany & Eric*, *The Amber Ruffin Show*, and *Yo! MTV Raps*. Through his writing and presentations for students, Tyree blends storytelling with valuable life lessons to encourage personal growth and informed decision-making, helping students realize their potential both in relationships and career development.

**Key Messages:** History/social science literacy, relationship skills, responsible decision-making, social awareness, and career development



## Jared Sams, Comic Book Author

Jared is a self-taught artist who creates impactful graphic novels and channels his hip-hop and punk music influences to help children develop unique skills, passions, and creative expressions. Jared advocates for the voiceless through his art and strives to infuse his work with lessons in developing empathy, compassion, and self-expression. His graphic novel *Black and Blue* explores the tension between two brothers as they struggle to find common ground in the face of growing tensions between the police and Black Lives Matter protesters in their community.

**Key Messages:** Social justice, self-expression, empathy, resilience, understanding differences, and STEM

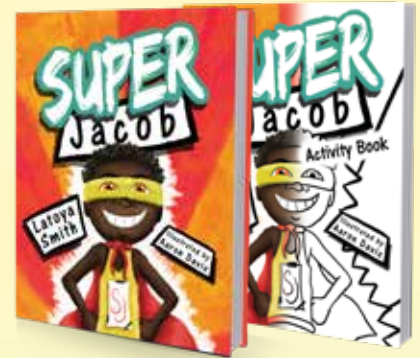




## Latoya Smith, Author

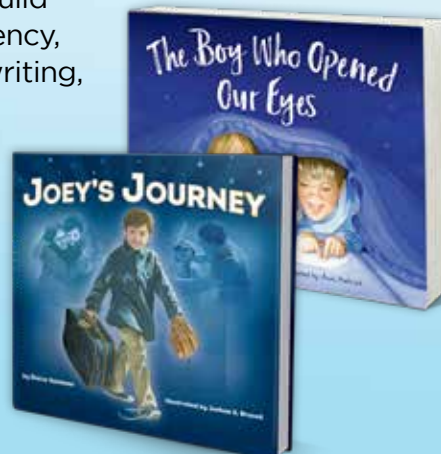
Latoya Marie Smith M.Ed. is a certified school counselor and the founder of Devoted 2 Restoration, Inc., a non-profit organization that provides emotional health education to children who have been affected by violence. Latoya has more than ten years of experience assisting children with emotional discovery and coping skills. Her books are designed to entertain and educate children on emotional health topics such as self-esteem, anger management, jealousy and much more.

**Key Messages:** Perseverance, empowerment, self-regulation, and mindfulness



## Elaine Sussman, Author

Elaine spent decades as an educational company executive before deciding to fulfill her dream of becoming a children's book author. Her first book, *The Boy Who Opened Our Eyes*, is the poignant story of her blind brother Mark and how he overcame his unique challenges. *Joey's Journey*, is the inspiring story of a young boy who overcomes great family hardship to build a life full of courage, resiliency, and hope. In addition to writing, Elaine presents to thousands of school children around the country every year, inspiring them to have empathy for others.

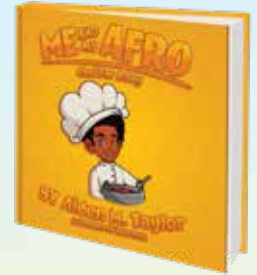
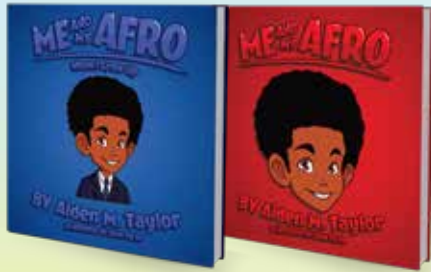


**Key Messages:** Empathy, resilience, understanding differences, STEM, and compassion

## Aiden M. Taylor, Author



Aiden M. Taylor is a sixteen-year-old writer, actor, and model who is passionate about inspiring self-confidence, goal setting, and career readiness in young readers. With a remarkable presence in television commercials and print advertisements, Aiden's face has been seen by millions, including on one of the largest billboards in New York City's Times Square. His debut book, *Me and My Afro*, garnered attention on *ABC Eyewitness News*, *NBC Nightly News with Lester Holt: Kids Edition*, and in *People Magazine*. When he's not writing, Aiden pursues a variety of interests, including basketball, video games, poetry, and math. As a proud "Little Brother" in the Big Brothers Big Sisters of New York City program, he actively encourages his peers to embrace their passions and prepare for their futures with confidence.



**Key Messages:** Self-confidence, goal setting, career readiness, mindfulness, and understanding differences

## Linda Taylor, Author



Linda taps into her twenty-five years as a school teacher to write books that inspire students to acknowledge their feelings and work together to solve problems. Her two published series, *Amazing Annabelle* and *Daring David*, provide students with valuable life lessons about unity and justice.

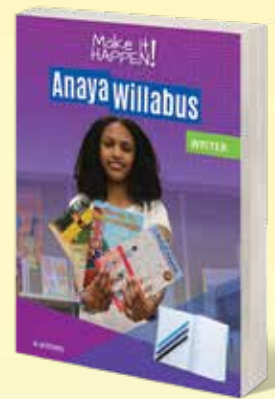
**Key Messages:** Overcoming bullying and discrimination, social justice, compassion, problem-solving, and entrepreneurship



## Anaya Willabus, Author

Brooklyn-based Anaya was one of the youngest published authors in the nation. She has written three books and wrote her first book at age eight. Anaya strives to mentor children and to inspire them to develop a life plan and to never give up on their dreams.

**Key Messages:** Overcoming bullying and discrimination, financial literacy, finding mentors, perseverance, career readiness, and girl empowerment



## “Big Boy” Wills, Activist/Cartoonist

Clarence “Big Boy” Wills is a cartoonist whose work has been displayed in art galleries and at events around the country. Diagnosed with autism as a child and unable to read until he was ten years old, Big Boy has had to overcome many challenges to build a successful career. His presentations inspire students to understand that every person has his or her own unique measures of success.

**Key Messages:** Overcoming obstacles, understanding differences, fostering creativity and self-expression, resourcefulness, determination, and career readiness

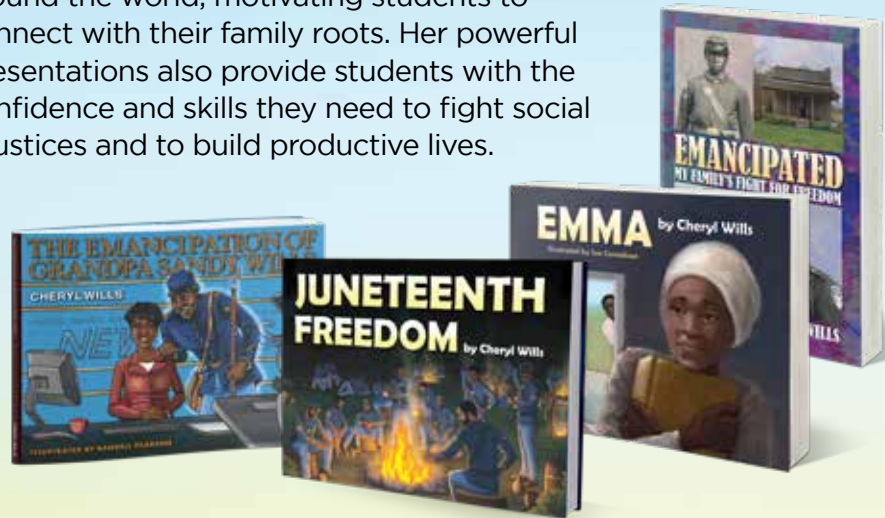




## Cheryl Wills, News Anchorwoman and Author

Cheryl is an award-winning Spectrum NY1 News TV anchorwoman and popular children's author who is inspired by her family's 150-year-old fight for freedom since the Civil War. Cheryl travels around the world, motivating students to connect with their family roots. Her powerful presentations also provide students with the confidence and skills they need to fight social injustices and to build productive lives.

**Key Messages:** Exploring family roots, equity, leadership, initiative, perseverance, girl empowerment, and social justice



## Domingo Zapata, Artist

Domingo is a Spanish artist who as a young boy was happiest sneaking into the studio of the famous artist Joan Miró to admire his art. With discipline and commitment, Domingo found a way to turn his childhood passion into a fulfilling career as a world-renowned artist. Today, he travels around the world, creating art and teaching children to achieve their life goals.

**Key Messages:** Overcoming obstacles, STEAM, understanding differences, developing creativity and confidence, and gender identity





# ILLUMINATING MINDS TOUR

**IN-SCHOOL AND ONLINE  
AUTHOR AND SPEAKER VISITS**

## Impactful and Engaging Presentations to Support:



- Social-Emotional Learning
- Mental Health
- Bullying Prevention
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- Achieving Goals
- Grit and Resilience

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