

# MISSISSAUGA'S POET LAUREATE WALLI SHAH TALKS ABOUT GRADUATING, HIS PAST AND WHAT'S TO COME

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At 15-years-old Wali Shah's future was muddled with uncertainty until poetry came along. Fast forward to eight years later, Shah is now Mississauga's poet laureate, a proud graduate of the University of Toronto, and a strong advocate for anti-bullying, mental health and toxic masculinity with plans to do so much more.

Wali Shah moved to Toronto when he was just three-years-old and like many immigrant youth, Shah had a tough time adjusting to his new life and managing his family's expectations growing up.

A lot of youth, particularly minorities struggling with cultural differences, Shah says, don't have the right mentorship and parents might have a strong disconnect from their children, leaving them vulnerable to the wrong crowd.

"When I was in high school I got arrested for assault," Shah said. "That was the really big turning point for me - having those cuffs around my wrist and being in the back of a police cruiser, going to the cell - I realized I need to make better choices and make better friends."

Shah says one of the things that helped him change his life around were his teachers.

"They were there for me before school, after school, on their lunch hour," he said. "They pushed me to find my outlet and my passion - and for me, that was poetry."

He recalls his Grade 11 teacher - Ms. Riley - as one of his "greatest believers" in him.

She handed him the book that started him on his journey as a poet - Tupac Shakur's *The Rose That Grew From Concrete*.

"Through that book I was able to find my own voice," Shah said. "I wanted to share my own story."

Shah wrote and performed his first poem in that class and after seeing his peer's reaction to his poem, he decided he needed to keep on writing.

"I was lucky to have the right teachers and mentorship, a lot of kids unfortunately don't," he said.

"Through my poetry and my speaking, I want to give that back. Without it a lot of kids turn to drugs, drinking and self-harm to cope with the pressure and mental health issues."

Since graduating Shah says he wants to make performing poetry and speaking a full-time commitment.

"Performing at schools, colleges, universities, having conversation about mental health, diversity and really promoting the arts for our ethnic and ethnically diverse community," he said.

Shah added that he wants to combat the stigma around art and its importance in ethnic communities.

"Art is a form of expression that a lot of young people need when they feel disconnected from family, people at school, feeling disenfranchised," he said. "People really need a chance to share their narrative and talk about their stories of what they're going through, maybe they don't have a lot of friends, maybe they've seen their parents be abused, maybe they've been abused. Art can help them share experiences and that can inspire others to do the same."

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Wali Shah, who recently had his poem installed on the steps of Confederation Square as a public art piece.

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