



Quote of the week

"At the time I thought it was the right thing to do, but I now know it was wrong."

— Lil' Kim, who was sentenced to one year and one day for lying to a federal grand jury about a 2001 shootout outside a Manhattan radio station.

POET
ENCOURAGES
STUDENTS TO
CELEBRATE
THEIR
INDIVIDUALITY

Word-of-mouth Success

By **TENLEY WOODMAN**

Poet Omekongo Dibinga tells his students at Alvin Ailey Camp Boston that the world is their soapbox.

"I believe we're in a society where they want kids seen but not heard," said Dibinga, 29, who teaches the "Creative Communications" class at the arts camp.

The Roxbury native said his goal with teaching poetry and spoken word is to have the students understand the importance of celebrating their individuality.

"They don't have to blend in and be part of the crowd," said Dibinga, who is first-generation Congolese-American. "Be proud of it (being different)."

Dibinga meets with about 60 kids a day. He opens class by reciting one of his own pieces, then challenges the students to debate the topic. The class ends with students sharing their own work.

"I like how you can express your feelings in different ways," said Aura Ortiz, 12, of Dorchester.

In Dibinga's class, poetry is not just a tool of expression, it's a release.

"Some people go to gym to relieve their stress. I write poems to relieve my stress," Dibinga told the class.

Dibinga holds a bachelor's degree from

Georgetown University and a master's degree from Tufts University, and currently is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Maryland. But none of them is in the fine arts.

"I've never taken a poetry class. I've never taken a speech class. I try to blend my academics with poetry," said the international affairs and education policy scholar.

Dibinga, a 1995 graduate of Boston Latin High School, wasn't always such a hit in the classroom. He had to repeat the seventh grade.

"Why are other people excelling and I'm not? I realized they had a strong cultural center," Dibinga said.

Dibinga's class at Ailey helps kids use words and poetry as empowerment.

"This is my first time doing anything with poetry," said Amauris Ortega, 12, of Dorchester.

But Dibinga's class provides more than words. Ortega and other students look up to Dibinga as a role model.

"Omekongo thinks it's (poetry) fun, and he wrote a lot of books," Ortega said.

Shannon McGarrell, 11, of Hyde Park said



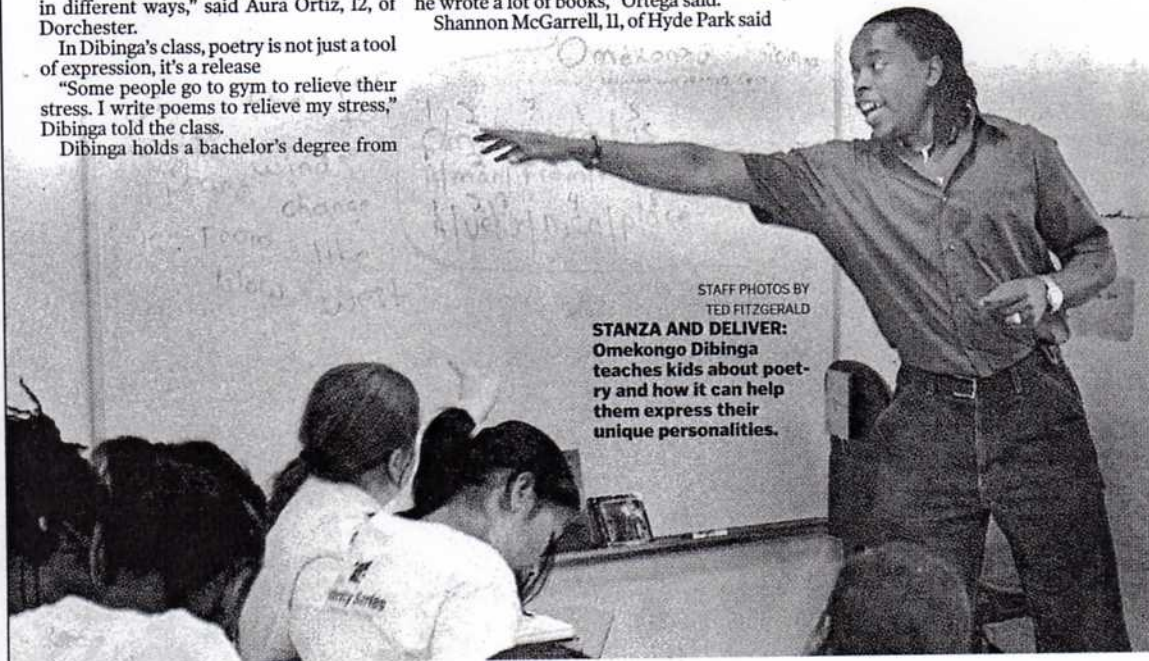
DIBINGA

Dibinga makes class more enjoyable than regular school.

"It's the way he does everything," she said.

The students will perform a final showcase of their work on Aug. 11.

To learn more about Omekongo Dibinga, go to www.omekongo.com. To learn more about Alvin Ailey Camp Boston, go to www.alvinailey.org



STAFF PHOTOS BY
TED FITZGERALD

STANZA AND DELIVER:
Omekongo Dibinga
teaches kids about poetry
and how it can help
them express their
unique personalities.