Singing What’s Left Unsung: Post-Adjudication Students Place in National Songwriting Contest

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When Kyle Duffer first learned about BreakFree Education’s national songwriting contest *Unsung* earlier in the year, he never thought he would set up a mini-studio.

“This is a brand-new thing,” said Duffer, who is Sherman ISD’s Post-Adjudication inclusion teacher. “A lot of these kids are wonderful kids, but learning how to produce music was not in their repertoire.

I didn’t know it was in mine, but we made it happen.”

He, along with English and reading teacher Felecia Garvin, were up to the challenge as they guided four students to place in the contest’s top 10, something that was both a surprise and not a surprise to Duffer.

*Resident Cummings records a song.*
“Strangely enough, it was a lot of belief,” Duffer said. “Ms. Garvin and I were here when he [first place winner Resident Cummings] recorded it, and we were tired. Cummings was the first one to record, and when it was over, I looked over at Garvin and she mouthed the word wow.”

“It was just magical,” Garvin said. “You just could tell the heart in it.”

The students created their own beat and lyrics with some guidance, and then they had to record their own song addressing issues related to juvenile justice reform. Resident Sybonheuang, a sophomore, placed 10th. Resident Johnson, a sophomore, and Resident Tobin, a freshman, worked together on a song and earned sixth place. Cummings, the 10th grader who placed first, won a Chromebook, and Duffer gifted him one of the microphones used in the recording sessions.

Cummings wrote “R3M3MB3R” and tied it to his stay in the juvenile justice system.

“When you get in there, you think about all the things you should have done, all the things you could have been doing,” he said, adding that he wrote and recorded his award-winning song in about 15 minutes because the words just started to flow.

“I got a piece of paper, I wrote the first line, and it just came together,” he said. “The lyrics, the beat and the song were like a three-piece puzzle.”

Cummings had dabbled in songwriting before Unsung, and the contest offered an opportunity to move closer to a full professional production.

“I didn’t expect to win,” Cummings said. “I feel like I have songs that are way better. That song is just something I did for fun.”

Tobin and Johnson co-wrote “Poverty,” which Tobin found to be a unique experience. Before, coming up with a song would have been off-the-cuff, but producing music was “just different,” he said.

“We were both trying to make a story about ourselves,” Tobin said. “We both said some stuff that happened in our life, and we had to come up with some rhymes with it. Eventually it started coming all together.”

Johnson said the beginnings of the song came to him while he was running, and although he initially had no interest in Unsung, Johnson began to write down the lyrics and asked Tobin to work with him.
Resident Tobin holds up a copy of his certification. The original was with his counselor.

“The first words out of his mouth were, ‘Man, I don’t know how to do that stuff,’” Johnson said. “I said I’d teach him, help him.”

While Johnson was surprised by how high the song placed, Tobin said he felt like if they had had a little more time, the pair could have come up with a better beat.
Resident Johnson points to his award.

Duffer thanked Grayson County for carving out time in the students’ schedules to let them participate, and the teachers had done a great job of hyping the project. He also gave a nod toward BreakFree Education for their continued feedback and communication.

“It took them a whole month to get the full feedback,” Duffer said. “It was really funny, when it was almost time to announce it, BreakFree called me to tell me to let Cummings know that he is huge in Canada. I did that, and he thought it was hilarious.”

Duffer said he also plans to invite post-adjudication students to participate in BreakFree Education’s poetry contest, Words Unlocked, next year.