

OAKLAND

Alice Walker urges teens to write from hearts, change own lives

Renowned author will judge 500-word essays by students

By Jill Tucker

CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

The class of Skyline High School students sat entranced Friday, their eyes barely blinking, as author Alice Walker talked about her life.

The world-renowned writer described growing up poor on a farm in Georgia, and later heading to college with \$75 in her pocket that neighbors had raised for her education. She told the Oakland teens of how she soon got pregnant and how she felt suicide might be the best way to escape the choice between unwanted motherhood and the shame of an abortion.

"I could have babies the rest of my life, which is what girls did in my hometown," Walker said, or face the hellfire her faith attached to termination of pregnancy.

The Oakland students didn't speak or squirm as they waited to learn the decision that the 63-year-old author made decades ago.

Walker told them her internal compass guided her decision to have an abortion.

"I have not ever regretted that," she said.

Walker, author of "The Color Purple," had just set the scene for the sophomore English students.

She challenged them to finish their own life story, making every decision based on what their heart

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tells them.

"The freedom that you have today to do the things you do are freedoms that many of us suffered so that you could have," she said.

And then she gave them another challenge: Write a 500-word essay titled, "How I Changed My Own Life."

"At this time in your lives, you tend to think you can't change your own lives very much," Walker said. "Inside you, there's a space that knows what is good for you. You have to develop a way to pay attention to that."

She is giving students at all Bay Area middle schools and high schools the same challenge. Walk-

er will select and critique the winner from the top 10 finalists chosen by a panel of judges.

DaVantae Farlow couldn't wait to write an essay after Walker spoke to his class Friday.

"It really inspired me to write something straight from the heart," he said.

He said he might write about his own poems or the decisions he makes every day on the flatland streets of Oakland.

"I have to be smart," he said. "I could turn the left corner and get into something, or I could stay home and do my homework and go to baseball practice."

Too many of his peers turn left, Farlow said.

"But I think I've got something to live for," the 16-year-old said.

All the students in English teacher Jennifer Dannenberg's class will be required to write the essay. Entering the contest is up to the students, Dannenberg said.

Former "American Idol" runner-up LaToya London, who graduated from Skyline High, joined Walker in Dannenberg's class Friday.

London will play the part of Nettie in the stage production of "The Color People" opening in San Francisco next month.

While the Skyline students appeared starstruck by London's appearance in their classroom, many said they were more nervous and awestruck by Walker.

"I want her to correct my paper," Farlow said. "I want to know a beautiful soul touched my paper."

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Online resources

contest, go to:

❖ www.colorpurple.com/essay

For information about the essay



DAVID PAUL MORRIS / *The Chronicle*

Alice Walker (center) takes a moment with Ayannah Jones after speaking to Skyline High students.