

## **Civic Keynote by Aaliyha Johnson**

**Delivered March 25, 2018 in Joe's Pub at The Public Theater**

Hello everyone, my name is Aaliyha Johnson. I am a fifteen-year-old sophomore, attending John Jay School for Law. Thank you for inviting me to speak at this event and to share my ideas on issues impacting young people. I joined the Youth Organizing to Save our Streets program in October and have been organizing around the issue of reducing gun violence, de-escalating conflicts and healing from individual and community trauma. Being a Youth Organizer makes me feel like I can actually make a change. There are so many youth who experience problems - I want to help them fix the issues they are going through. In YO S.O.S. we meet every week to talk about these issues and come up with projects to make a difference. In December, we canvassed the community as part of our campaign called "Kingston Winter Windows" and spoke to local business owners about what we do and how they can get involved. Then we painted their windows with messages about peace and safety. Some of the messages were "Snack and Have Fun, Don't Pack a Gun" at a corner store, and "Cut Out the Violence, Shape Up the Community" at a barbershop. I felt like by doing this, we would impact the neighborhood so that when people walk down the streets, they will see these messages and start thinking differently.

A few months into the YO S.O.S. program, the Parkland school shooting happened, and it was a tragic situation where young lives were taken by someone who was also young. On both sides, families and friends were devastated and hurt; feeling the impact of the mass shooting.

As a youth organizer, I am constantly thinking about ways to reduce all forms of violence and how to target oppressive systems that keep it going. I am constantly thinking about my community, and how a large percentage of young people are stopped and frisked; sent to prison at sixteen and seventeen years old and are victims of gun violence. I think about youth who go to prison at sixteen and come home at forty.

I think about how does this happen? Why does it happen? But mostly, what can we do about it?

I honestly believe that instead of sending young people to prison for a long time, we should:

- Send them to programs that would help them understand the consequences of their decision making

- Educate them on so they make better choices in life

- Send them to camps for some offense, instead of sending to prison for the rest of their lives

Let's educate, not incarcerate.

Educators and community leaders can build deeper bonds with younger people.

- Teachers and educators should spend more time talking to us more; to find out how we are feeling because we could use someone to talk to.

- Instead of focusing too much on stop and frisk, law enforcement could make efforts to connect more with the community and build deeper bonds with the youth

- Community leaders could support more of our ideas and actions; help create more opportunities for us to lead and raise our voices against gun violence

This issue of gun violence is important to me because it impacted my life.

When I was 13 years old, my best friend's brother was shot. This incident impacted my friend. It really changed him. His grades went down. He started making decisions that got him trouble. He was really hurt and would not express it. In response, I also felt hurt. I didn't want to see my friend and his family in this situation. I didn't want to see him experiencing pain. He was only 13.

Even before this, when I was only 10 years old, my sixty-nine-year-old grandmother was shot while protecting us from gunshots that came through the windows of our home. She heard the shots and while trying to get us out of the living room, a bullet shattered the window and hit her in the neck. When this happened, she started calling my other family members while bleeding holding her neck. During the entire time, I was scared and didn't know what to do; I didn't want my grandmother to die, but she was hurt and she was bleeding. Fortunately, my grandmother survived and is alive at seventy something years old.

When these two incidents happened, I was really young. Too young to know what to say and what to do. Today, I am still young, but the one difference is that I am addressing the issues of gun violence. I am raising my voice against social injustices. Today, I am a youth organizer with a mission to make communities safer for everyone. Thank you and have a great day.