

I Will Take My Voice Back

by Quique Aviles



Rick Reinhardt

Poet Quique Aviles is the founder of Sol & Soul, a group combining art, performance and social activism. His own work includes several one-man shows and a collection of poetry. Aviles also mentors emerging artists and helps young people find their voice.

“In a world of zero tolerance, talking like this about my addiction -- even saying it out loud on the radio -- may mean artistic suicide. But by telling my story here and on stage, I will take my voice back.”

Morning Edition, July 31, 2006 · I believe that addiction can kill me, but that writing and performing will save me.

I am a poet and an actor. I am also a crack addict and an alcoholic, and that's how a lot of people see me: a pipe head, a drunk, a problem, an epidemic, a disaster area.

I came to Washington, D.C., from El Salvador in 1980 at the age of 15. When I told my mom I wanted to be an actor, she said, "You mean a clown." But I make a living -- although meager -- through my poetry and performances.

In the early '80s, crack came to D.C. I saw my city change and me with it. Crack is a killer. Crack turns a ladybug in your house into a hungry rat. Crack transports you into paranoid obsession. You don't sleep. You don't eat. Your high lasts 10 to 15 seconds so you need to keep pumping your brain with this poison over and over again.

Mine has been a life of duality. I can function on drug street corners and at wine-sipping theater receptions. In 1995 I was part of a show at the Kennedy Center, but I was sneaking beers into my dressing room before the show and getting high after. I often feel a sense of pride when I put my book and loose poems in my bag before going to do a reading. And yet, I am also this other person -- this shadow, this vampire.

I've just turned 41 and have finally realized that crack will kill me if I keep on shoving it up my brain. The alternative is death and I don't want it. I want to get old.

About a year ago, I completed my third rehab. I decided that I would use writing and performing as a catapult for rebound. I decided to stand on stage and share stories from my notebooks that have born witness to my nightmare.

1992

I want to keep playing with verbs

Write letters to old friends

And ask them to keep writing

I want to hold on to the lives of consonants and vowels

In a world of zero tolerance, talking like this about my addiction -- even saying it out loud on the radio -- may mean artistic suicide. But by telling my story here and on stage, I will take my voice back. People will bear witness to my life. I believe that crack can kill me, but that in the end, that communication and direct human contact will save me.