

# Q1 2025 Newsletter

Richmond's writing and communication non-profit for youth



## WELCOME TO OUR 2025 BOARD OF DIRECTORS AND YOUNG PROFESSIONALS BOARD

BY VICKI YEROIAN, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

We're thrilled to welcome back 11 members to our Board of Directors in addition to two new directors, Alawna Ozaka and Ronke Lawal, PhD. We're also excited to welcome back returning Treasurer, Paula Harris, and to celebrate our new Board Chair, Kerry Whitacre, and Vice Chair, Lorraine Blackwell! Thank you to Armani Hall for returning as our Chair Emeritus! Interested in Board service? Check out more: [podiumrva.org/board-of-directors](http://podiumrva.org/board-of-directors)



**Ibironke Lawal**

Ph.D., Virginia Commonwealth University



**Alawna Ozoka**

Certified Professional Coach

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Podium is also thrilled to welcome back Jillian Olson, MSW, as its Young Professionals Board Chair and Kayleigh Crandell as its Vice Chair. New to the YP Board, we're happy to welcome Sofia Malin as our YP Board Treasurer and Anna Jane Johnson as our Communications Chair. With six new candidates, our Young Professional Board is focused on growth and capacity building this year! Learn more about our YP Board: [podiumrva.org/young-professionals-board](https://podiumrva.org/young-professionals-board)



Sofia Malin, Treasurer  
Virginia Commonwealth University



Anna Jane Johnson  
Communications Chair  
QMHP & MSW

Want to learn more about the impact you can make serving on one of Podium's boards? Read our 2024 Annual Report here: [podiumrva.org/annual-report](https://podiumrva.org/annual-report)

# Podium 2024 ANNUAL REPORT

**Mission**  
Empowering youth ages 11 - 19 as confident and capable writers and communicators with the skills to succeed in school, career, and in life.

- Community Services**
- Weekly after-school and summer youth workshops in English and Spanish.
  - Quarterly youth publications, regional showcases, and family writing nights.
  - Annual teen professional internships, conferences, and workshops.

Dear Podium Community,

You are instrumental to empowering young people through writing and communication skill development. Podium programs provide life-changing opportunities for children and teens to build their confidence, develop critical thinking and interpersonal skills, and to grow as future planners and community leaders. Your commitment to our work has a lasting impact, not only on our youth, but on the future of our entire community. Thank you for your generous support of our mission.

In 2024, we continued to expand our programs, reached more students, and provided them with the resources they need to succeed. I'm most excited to share that two-thirds of our team are made up of alumni of our programs and schools. They lead our programs, communications, events, and are the mentors of our children. That says more about Podium's impact than I ever could. **Here's the difference your dedication will make in 2025:**

1. Help us serve 1,000 youth in Greater Richmond and the Tri Cities,
2. Expand our regional showcases to Petersburg, and
3. Expand our Teen Professional Conference to Henrico and Hopewell.

The team is proud of the progress we've made and excited about the future. Together, we will make greater strides toward creating a world where every young person can find and use their voice. Elevate youth opportunity and education with Podium by donating securely today at: [podiumrva.org/donate](https://podiumrva.org/donate) or by PayPal to [info@podiumrva.org](mailto:info@podiumrva.org).

Sincerely,

Vicki Yeroian, MSW,  
Executive Director



# WINTER RECAP & SPRING FORWARD WITH PODIUM

BY CHARMEYA MCMURRAY, PROGRAMS DIRECTOR

## ***Winter Recap: Growth, Resilience, and Creative Expression***

Winter had its twists and turns, but like any great story, our students met each challenge with creativity and resilience. Through it all, Podium remained a constant—a space where young voices could grow and storytelling could thrive. We were especially excited to welcome Brookland Middle School into the Podium family, where students dove into writing with enthusiasm and curiosity. Across our middle school programs—including The WELL, Petersburg Boys & Girls Club, Next-Up, and Higher Achievement—students explored social advocacy, storytelling, poetry, and using visual storytelling to craft narratives that reflect their perspectives.



## ***Looking Forward: A Season of New Beginnings***

With spring comes fresh ideas, warm weather, and exciting opportunities for our students. We're eager to introduce new, dynamic workshops that align with their writing goals and spark their creativity. Beyond the classroom, we're looking forward to planning field trips and special events where students can showcase their work and engage with their communities. Most importantly, we are dedicated to creating more leadership opportunities, empowering our young writers to take ownership of their voices and their futures. As we step into a new season, we can't wait to see our students continue to flourish!



# OBSERVING EXCELLENCE: TWO DAYS WITH PODIUM IN ACTION

BY KIM ELEY, BOARD OF DIRECTORS EVENTS CHAIR

Recently I had the privilege of spending two days immersed in the incredible work Podium does with young writers. Meya, our Programs Director, kindly invited members of the Board of Directors to follow her and attend sessions with students at their schools. It was an eye-opening experience that highlighted for me both the power of creative expression and the magic of an engaged, adaptive educator.

## ***Day One: Petersburg***

My first stop was in Petersburg, where I spent the day with Kavin, Podium’s Communication & Events Director; Meya; Jacob, a volunteer; and a co-ed group of students. Together, we embarked on a fun and engaging writing exercise—an acrostic poem. I’ll admit, at first, I had a moment of hesitation: What exactly is an acrostic poem? Soon I realized it’s a simple yet creative way to use the first letter of each line to spell out a word or phrase.

The students dove in, crafting meaningful pieces.

Next, we moved on to storytelling using picture prompts. Meya had selected images—characters, a fairy kingdom, a mysterious witch, and more—and shared them. I asked the students if I may participate with them, and they graciously agreed. All of us wrote our own unique narratives and then shared them aloud. It was inspiring to see how differently each student interpreted the same set of prompts, bringing their own voices and creativity into the mix.



## ***Day Two: Hopewell***

The following day, I joined Meya at The ‘Well in Hopewell, where she worked with a fantastic group of young girls. We continued the acrostic poetry exercise and then moved on to another storytelling challenge, this time using word-based prompts. The room buzzed with creativity as the students crafted their stories, each bringing a fresh perspective to their writing.

## ***The Magic of Meya***

While the writing exercises were fun and engaging, what stood out most to me was Meya herself. She balanced professionalism with warmth, making every student feel at ease. Her ability to meet each student where they were—whether they needed encouragement, guidance, or just space to express themselves—was nothing short of genius.

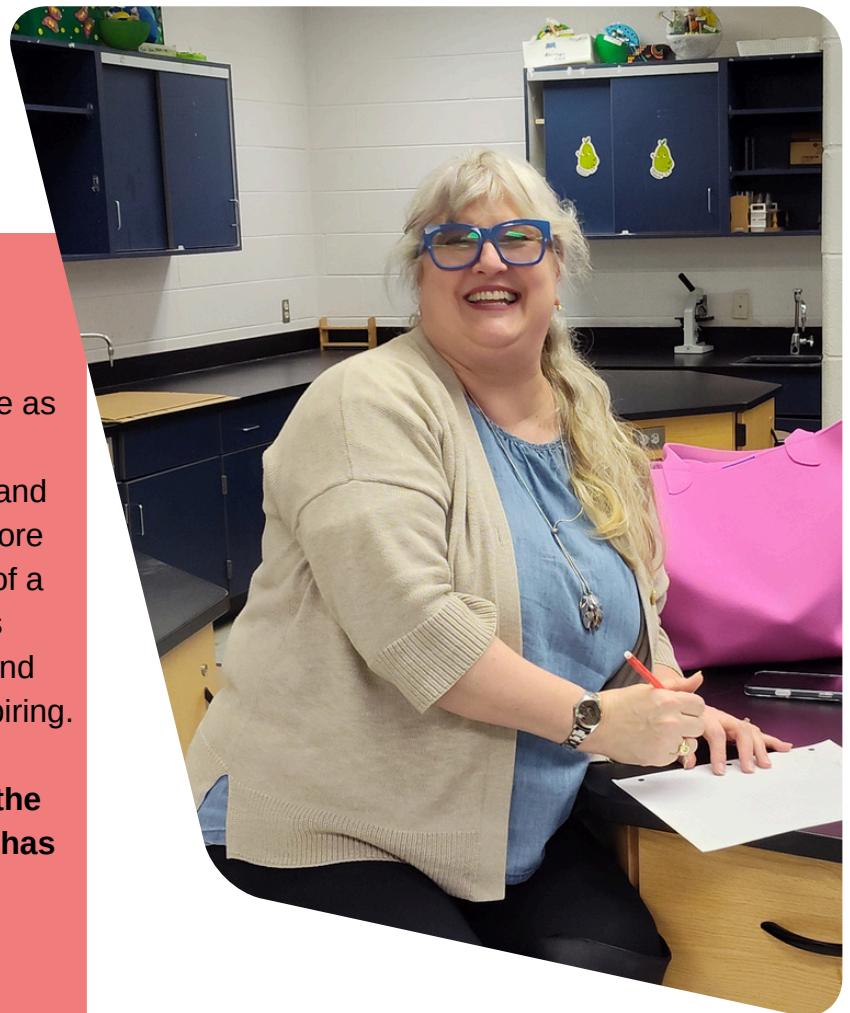
I watched as she seamlessly adjusted to each student's needs, helping them navigate their assignments with patience and insight. But her role extended beyond writing instruction. She introduced concepts like social currency—the idea that success is often about who you know as much as what you know. She handled moments of uncertainty with grace, like when a student unintentionally created an inappropriate avatar. Rather than admonish, Meya gently guided the student toward a more suitable yet still creative vision.

Even when technical difficulties arose, she remained unshaken. She adapted, flowed, and made sure students stayed engaged. It reminded me of Bruce Lee's famous quote: "Be like water." Rarely have I seen someone embody this so effortlessly, especially in the challenging environment of middle school education. Watching her work was like witnessing a master conductor leading an orchestra—bringing out the best in each instrument, blending them into perfect harmony.

## ***Final Thoughts***

These two days with Podium reaffirmed for me as a member of the Board of Directors the power of creative writing as a tool for growth, confidence, and self-expression for students in our community. More importantly, they showcased the invaluable role of a facilitator who understands, adapts, and elevates every student's experience. Meya is a true pro, and witnessing her in action was nothing short of inspiring.

**I left with an even deeper appreciation for the work Podium does—and the lasting impact it has on young writers.**

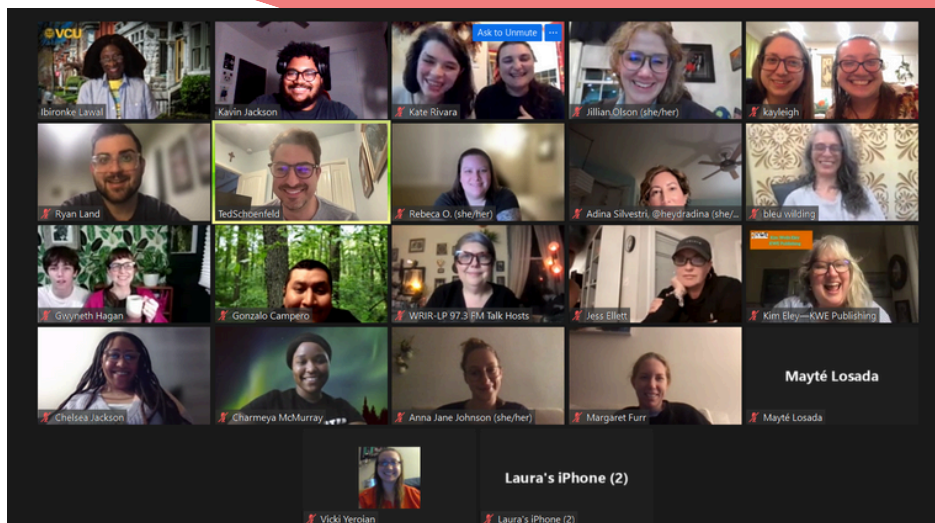


# FEBRUARY FLASH FICTION COMPETITION

BY KAVIN JACKSON, COMMUNICATIONS & EVENTS DIRECTOR

In February, Podium hosted its 4th annual Flash Fiction Competition. This online event contains an hour-long writing competition, where writers are randomly assigned a prompt based on the theme for the year. With this year's theme, *Myths, Monsters, and Magic*, we received many incredibly rich stories writing mystical myths, spreading the rumors of monsters, and telling the tales of magic. Thank you to our event sponsors, [BloomED Group](#), [KWE Publishing](#), & [Design to Learn Consulting](#), and to our outstanding judges, Chelsea Jackson, Melissa Vaughn, Jessica Ellett, and to our Head Judge, Kim Eley. With 12 writers competing, congratulations to our second-place winner Kayleigh Crandell and to our first-place winner Rebeca Ortega!

We hope you'll join us next year for this incredible event!



Click the link [here](#) to read all of the stories from this year. If you'd like to hear the winning stories, check out the link [here](#).



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