

I Do It Afraid

Chaotic shouts and loud voices all over. The little room in my community library buzzes with nervous energy, whispers, stammered introductions and the occasional awkward silence. I stand at the front, clipboard in hand, trying to project the confidence I desperately wish I felt. I stare at a crowd of students, their numbers increasing every weekend, the same as the level of my anxiety and self-doubt. These are seventh and eighth graders from my community who are eager to find their voices in the weekly public speaking forum I moderate. My sessions have not always been smooth.

In fact, when Mr. Efan, the program coordinator, visits me on the first Monday of every three months to assess our new cohorts of students, he always expects progress. As a moderator, my role is to guide these students and push them beyond their initial hesitation, often starting with a mumble until they find the confidence to articulate their first words. It is a responsibility that feels immense, especially when fear sits heavy on my shoulders. There have been moments when doubt overwhelmed me. After yet another session where the students left in near silence, I found myself standing before the community board.

“Am I really making a difference,” I admitted, my voice heavy with doubt.

Twice, I asked them if they truly thought I was the right person for this audacious task. Their response was always clear, “Kofi, you have a clear mission, and we trust you to deliver.” Their faith in me became the foundation I needed to rebuild my own. When I agreed to take up this role, I had one thing clear on my mind, I wanted to change the narrative for other children in my community. I believe that public speaking is never just about words, it was about empowerment from people who have tried it and continue to improve at it. In my community, fear of public speaking is not just an individual hurdle. It’s a reflection of a broader culture of silence that has been imminent in my country for the past decades through intentional censorship by people in power.

By helping students speak up, I hope to inspire a generation unafraid to share their ideas and claim their place in the world. My passion for this mission stems from a deeply personal journey. As a child, I struggled with speech. My words were incomprehensible, I murmured to communicate basic ideas to friends and family. My classmates teased me mercilessly, and for a long time, I saw myself as an outsider, defined by what I couldn’t do. Yet, it was in those quiet moments, in a library corner with a book in my hands or in front of my grade five teacher Ms Anita, who wouldn’t give up on me, that I discovered the power of persistence. I learned that growth doesn’t happen in my comfort zone. It happens when we dare to try, even when it’s hard.

It is that belief I bring to my students every day. I’ve seen Amanda, who barely whispered during her first session, end the term leading a debate with poise and conviction. I’ve watched Kwame, who’d never spoken in public, recite a speech about his dreams for our community, earning him a standing ovation. Every transformation I see every day in my students reminds me of my younger self, fumbling for words but refusing to give up. The spotlight still feels like a furnace sometimes, but now I walk into it knowing fear isn’t my enemy. It’s just my first step

toward something greater. Through this experience, I have learned that courage isn't the absence of fear, it's acting in spite of it. I do it afraid because the mission is worth it, and so are the students I'm privileged to lead.