

**Content Area:** Health/Life Issues**Text Type:** Profile**Source:** *Kids With Courage*  
(Nonfiction book)

# Dreams, Threats, and Sweaty Palms

By Barbara Lewis

**Part 1** → Norvell Smith grew up in a Chicago neighborhood that was ruled by gang violence. She and her friends lived in fear of being shot on the streets. The students at her school, John Hope School, had little hope that things would get better.



Norvell Smith gets a hug from an admirer after her courageous speech.

Then Project Serve, a community service program that works with teens, arrived at John Hope and changed Norvell's life forever. Police officers organized the project and taught students about drugs, gangs, violence, and AIDS. They announced a speech contest in which the best speech would win a medal. Although the thought frightened her, Norvell knew she was going to write one of those speeches.

Fifty kids from John Hope acted as the judges for the speech contest, but only ten had the courage to speak, and Norvell was one of them. Of the ten speakers, she was chosen as one of the three finalists.

Later, she found a note pushed through the vent in her locker. It said simply, "You'd better shut your mouth." Norvell laughed, because whoever wrote the note didn't even know how to spell "shut."

**Part 2** → It hadn't been too hard to speak before a select group of 50 kids. But when Norvell learned that the three finalists would have to speak before the entire school—all 950 students—she almost swallowed her tongue.

On the day of her speech, Norvell recalls, "I was afraid of being booed, or getting things thrown at me. All the gang members would be in the audience, and I was afraid of what might happen after school. My mother couldn't get off work to listen to my speech so I had no one with me."

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### Resource Links

**1** RDI Book 1: p. 559

**SAM** Keyword: Stretch Text W5



## Dreams, Threats, and Sweaty Palms *(Continued)*

The more Norvell thought about it, the more her stomach flipped around. Her palms grew sweaty, and her cheeks felt hot. Should she back out? Everyone would forgive her—and probably congratulate her.

The other two students spoke first. One spoke about drugs, and the other talked about interpersonal violence. Their speeches were good, but not especially earthshaking.

Part 3

Then Norvell heard her name called, and her heart skipped. She stood up and left her fear lying there in the auditorium seat, like shed skin. She spoke into the microphone with a steady voice for five whole minutes.

“I’m sick and tired of every time I come out of the building getting shot at, harassed, beat on. We really want things safe for all the kids. The only thing you can get from a gang is a hole in the head or six feet under. Take your choice. Either way, you end up dead.”

And then Norvell noticed the two thousand eyes staring at her. It was so quiet that the whole audience seemed to be holding its breath. She looked straight at some gang members and went on talking, meaning every word.

“Your parents have so much hope for you. What are you doing? The best way to get out of this is to get a good education. It’s your only passport out of this neighborhood.”

Part 4

When Norvell finished, there was a pause, and then the clapping began. It grew louder, and kids stood up and cheered. She looked out at the white eyes, the white teeth, the smiles, and she swallowed the thickness in her throat. “I looked at a gang member,” she recalls, “and he smiled at me.”


The applause grew louder. The kids clapped and cheered for five minutes. “I felt like I had just saved the whole world,” Norvell says.

Soon after Norvell was handed a gold medal, TV and newspaper reporters surrounded her for interviews. Her story was flashed around the state and the nation. Norvell received hundred of letters from other children who said, “It’s time someone stood up.”

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