KNOCK DOWN WALLS
BUILD UP HOPE
The World Changed. We Stayed Committed.

When 2020 presented obstacles, we did not back down. We showed up. We spoke up. We expanded business lines and stuck together—staff and youth—and we became a stronger, more resilient force for hope and opportunity.

“Hope means having something to believe in. I’m finding hope in starting a new HISET program and rebuilding with an eye toward equality for all not just the privileged few.”

Howard, Youth Partner, More Than Words

“I’m ready to knock down tired excuses. We talk a great deal about change in this country, but we always frame it as an inevitability. Change is not inevitable, it is demanded by everyday people fighting for their communities. Hope means having the courage to say enough is enough and remembering that the power always lies with the people.”

Rachael Rollins, Suffolk County District Attorney

“I’m ready to knock down staying silent. I will speak up whenever I see any kind of injustices.”

Evan, Business Training Manager

“This year, I knocked down my high school diploma. I got a carpentry degree from Minuteman Tech! Now I’m finding hope in a new apartment and independent living program. I have always been locked down in secure places, and this will be a huge change for me. I finally have room for my musical instruments.”

Nick, Youth Partner, More Than Words
Dear Friends,

We are not going back to normal. Normal was racist. Normal made young people homeless. Normal locked up our youth, especially youth of color, without regard to what is effective or developmentally appropriate. Normal was not safe, kind, or fair.

We are not backing down. There were times in this hard year when it felt like enough just to survive, just to do the basics. But these are not our values. It’s not what our youth—or this world—need from us right now.

When COVID-19 shut down our retail stores and event space, we launched new online ventures. When our youth—who were eager to continue learning and moving their lives forward—were unable to come to us to work and grow their business, we went to them with food, computers, and an unwavering message that they matter. When routines were upended, we invented new remote rituals. When a bright light shone on systemic racism, we amplified our own efforts to address racial inequities.

We will not play it safe.

We choose courage in the face of fear, action in the face of obstacles. We lead with values.

WE WILL KNOCK DOWN WALLS AND BUILD UP HOPE.

You’ve chosen hope too, believing that our youth deserve better. Believing that better is possible. Thank you for your support this and every year.

Friends, we ask even more from you going forward. We need you to get indignant and committed with us—to join our movement. Please reach out (jodi@mtwyouth.org). We need you at our side.

In gratitude and hope,

Board of Directors

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* Joined the board for FY2021

Thank you

It was a hard year.
You stood strong with More Than Words.
You chose HOPE.

333 YOUTH SERVED

79% OF GRADS ENGAGED IN WORK OR SCHOOL 30+ HOURS/WEEK

$3.65M GENERATED BY OUR YOUTH-RUN BUSINESSES

In what I’ve learned. More Than Words gives me honest and true feedback. I’ve had opportunities to take a job seriously and take myself seriously. When I got suspended from school, they gave me a push to get my education, a hard push but for my own good. Now, I’m finding hope in building the life that I wish to have.”

SAMEEN, YOUTH SENIOR PARTNER, MORE THAN WORDS

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Thank you

More Than Words annual report 2020

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Crisis is not new for our young people. But this year, as a worldwide pandemic landed its harshest blows on people of color and the economically marginalized, we saw youth working hard to make positive changes get hit once again.

We committed to supporting our young people how and where they needed us, and our youth showed up for themselves and one another. Together, we stayed connected, launched a new online enterprise, and continued to strengthen our More Than Words community.

**Popular Elective Workshops**
- Healthy cooking, cardio kickboxing, poetry, mindfulness & meditation, HTML/CSS coding, markets & investing, racial disparities in COVID & HIV, LGBTQQIA 101, self-care, and The Power is Yours advocacy

**We stepped up and stayed busy**

**From April to June alone:**
- 145 young people received safe, in-person visits from staff
- 21 former youth team members regained employment despite the pandemic
- 34 youth received a laptop and 14 got a cell phone
- 700 bags of groceries distributed
- 345 virtual check-ins between managers and young people
- 3,000 individual check-ins between managers and young people
- 21 former youth team members regained employment despite the pandemic
- 3,000 individual check-ins between managers and young people

**We opened up our advocacy around youth homelessness** and expanded housing options with partners.

**We re-opened... safely**

Our youth are back on the job as of July, processing donations and online orders, learning skills, practicing accountability. Seeing that their work matters. Work sites look different now—with fewer staff, facemasks, and adjusted layouts to support social distancing—but are once again brimming with the energy of youth taking charge of business.

**Statistics:**
- 60k paid on average in youth wages per month
- 3,000 individual check-ins between managers and young people
- 110 youth engaged virtually an average of 4X per week
Through our social enterprise model, youth ages 16-24 who are in foster care, court-involved, homeless, or out of school get the opportunity they deserve to work hard, build skills, earn money, and take charge of their lives.

### Skills + Futures

**Building Up**

**Pivoting and Learning in a Crisis**

Our high-impact model grew stronger in 2020. The innovations we introduced out of necessity extended from a solid foundation, reinforcing our mission and impact. We’re not going back.

**We Show Up.** During the first phase of COVID-19, we bulk-ordered groceries, made home visits, and expanded a pilot program to house more youth. As the world opens up, we continue to address basic needs and now we keep housing a priority.

**We Stay Connected.** Youth zoomed in for their curriculum modules and met online for one-on-one case management during the shutdown. We launched new virtual electives—like COVID-19 safety and healthy cooking—to build skills, maintain community, and support mental health. We’ll continue these successful offerings going forward.

**We Build Strong Relationships.** With new safety protocols, youth are working in small and consistent on-site teams. We engage youth virtually for case management, team meetings, and workshops as well. These revised structures have become powerful drivers of connection and accountability across our programming.

### Core Social Enterprise

**Phase 1**

**6-12 months | 220 youth**

**Taking Care of Business**

Youth work a “Business Job,” approximately 20 hours per week running our book, clothing, and event ventures, which generate revenue that helps fuel our full youth program. They gain important work experience and transferable, on-the-job skills, like dependability, teamwork, and problem solving, while earning promotions to leadership roles.

**Taking Care of Life**

Youth work a “You Job,” receiving intensive case management and attending workshops as they set and achieve measurable goals for their education, career, and life. Through our structured curriculum, young people achieve important milestones, like opening a bank account, crafting a resume, and securing housing. They develop their own career pathways and build the support network they’ll need for long-term success.

### Career Services Program

**Phase 2**

**24+ months | 168 youth**

**Standing in Success**

Young people remain with More Than Words for at least two additional years as they pursue their next steps in work and education. We continue to support them as they complete high school, sustain outside employment, make plans for postsecondary education, and launch a career.

Our work doesn’t stop inside More Than Words. We stand with our youth—and prepare them to advocate for themselves—at court dates, in transition planning, and in other encounters with public agencies. For too long, these systems have failed too many of our young people, undermining their ability to achieve success in work and life. We won’t be complicit.
Our youth-led social enterprise makes us strong and sustainable, but it took a hit—when we had to shutter our retail and event businesses during COVID. We lost $350K in anticipated revenue from these high-margin ventures in the final quarter of FY20.

It was time to innovate.

We leaned hard into our online business—expanding our inventory of books, building out a new clothing and accessories resale operation, and preparing to launch an e-commerce site. We ended with our strongest year yet.

We’re working with our youth to continue this growth and innovation and close the gap on continued losses in FY21.

A small textiles pilot in 2019 gave us the opening we needed. We expanded our wholesale and boutique resale of clothing, shoes, bags, and accessories. This business offers a higher resale margin than books, while providing a green alternative to fast fashion. Our youth are gaining new skills in marketing and online sales, while learning what it takes to build a new business from the ground up.

I look at clothing so differently since I started working in textiles. I’ve learned about different brands, how to measure clothing, and skills like writing marketing descriptions. I can be more creative when I’m taking photos of the clothing, and I really like that.

KAYLA, YOUTH PARTNER, MORE THAN WORDS

FASHION IS OUR NEW PASSION

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KAYLA, YOUTH PARTNER, MORE THAN WORDS

A ONE-STOP SHOP ONLINE

We’ve launched a new e-commerce shopping site, run exclusively by More Than Words! Hosting our own platform means:

• a cleaner, curated shopping experience
• all of our products—new and used books, clothing, shoes, accessories, gift items—in one place
• a larger % of sales going straight to More Than Words

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KAYLA, YOUTH PARTNER, MORE THAN WORDS

Support our youth in their new ventures by shopping at:
shop.mtwyouth.org
Growing up I struggled with housing and school, not because I wasn’t smart, but because of lack of support, lack of challenge, discrimination, or whatever. I felt like I was getting older without a plan. The jobs I worked didn’t care about my goals, and the schools I went to didn’t connect to my life.

I was trying to get back into high school, but I couldn’t enroll because I didn’t have an address. Instead, they referred me to a social worker who referred me to More Than Words.

At first my attitude was: More Than Words isn’t ready for ME! I thought I knew everything and had time to goof around. But Leanne, my Youth Development Manager, knew I could be more responsible. I would dodge her a lot and she would track me down and make me spit out whatever was going on. Sometimes you just need that person to tell you, even if you know, that you can do better. Leanne is someone in my life who I still dread to disappoint.

Being at More Than Words was the life-changing experience I was missing. I was acknowledged when I did good work or took initiative, and that helped me be a better leader. Amanda, my Education Manager, helped me get my diploma from Boston Day and Evening Academy. I graduated both high school and More Than Words in 2015!

After graduation, I was good at finding part-time jobs, but I found that it was too easy for me to leave them as well. If I admit it, I still wasn’t fully stable and responsible. But at least I was working, and Leanne would STILL track me down!

In 2019 I returned to More Than Words to work as a Maintenance and Facilities Manager—a part time role for alumni. Going back was a way to show my progress. It confirmed that I wanted more meaningful work experiences. From there, I spent a year as an AmeriCorps member with City Year.

Now, using my AmeriCorps education award, I’m enrolled as a full-time student at Southern New Hampshire University. I love learning and education. I’m also working full-time at a hospital, and I’ve been stable and living in my own place for a year. It’s tricky remembering to pay bills, but I have to OWN my responsibility. I’ve knocked down the fear of doing it for myself.

I don’t know exactly where my career will take me, but I know that as long as I’m moving forward I can accomplish anything.

Hope means not looking at yesterday, or even the second that just passed by—it is looking at where you want to go. Hope is about moving forward.

Ty, More Than Words Alumnus

Age 27

Ty

More Than Words Alumnus

Ty MORE THAN WORDS ALUMNUS

AGE 27

I want to knock down the things that prevent justice for my community. I want to see people become more aware and be held accountable for their actions. I will hold myself accountable, too. I am building a better life for me and my family, working hard to meet my goals, and having a good mindset. I find hope in knowing I’m doing the right thing.”

RAQUAWN, YOUTH PARTNER

MORE THAN WORDS

Right now, I’m finding hope in the extraordinary energy of people—across generations, backgrounds, and positions—coming together to ensure that all youth have a fair shot at wellbeing.”

KATYA FELS SMYTH,
CEO & FOUNDER,
THE FULL FRAME INITIATIVE

PHOTO COURTESY OF EBAY

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BE THE CHANGE

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Over the past 16 years, More Than Words has built an effective trampoline that helps propel our young people over the significant walls that have been placed in front of them. Our youth—all youth—need and deserve support in addressing the barriers they face.

The walls are racist.
The walls are unfair.
The walls are deliberate, built by design.

We've listened to our youth and witnessed firsthand the outside forces that undermine their success. We've begun tackling those forces together. We train youth to meet with legislators, attend public hearings, and advance policies on issues that affect them. We deepened our youth-driven advocacy through "The Power is Yours" workshops that helped young people develop tools for civic leadership and driving systemic change. Our youth are leading the charge, with a focus on two key issues: raising the age on juvenile justice and ending the child welfare cliff.

We are holding up a mirror to advance equity within our own walls, too. For over two years, our Race, Equity, and Inclusion Team has met monthly to offer workshops, racial identity caucus groups, and opportunities for our staff to listen, learn, and act. We have dialed up the engagement of a Chief Equity Coach, a consultant who has worked with us for over two years and who is now embedded to support our team more deeply. And, we have expanded opportunities for our young people to engage in authentic conversations about race and identity and to help inform More Than Words policies.

Our work at More Than Words is more than youth development, social enterprise, and social justice. It is about racial justice. We owe it to our young people, who are disproportionately Brown and Black, to say that out loud.
I see hope when organizations come together in support of young people. Together, we can knock down barriers that keep young people from reaching stability.

Elisabeth Jackson, Executive Director, Bridge Over Troubled Waters

The transition to adulthood is hard, and it’s especially precarious for youth in state care. There is a dearth of housing placements for older youth. Those that are available often contribute to the accumulation of trauma and toxic stress. When unaddressed, these experiences can produce complex behavioral issues that make it hard to succeed in group settings and foster homes. And when youth “age out” of Department of Children and Families (DCF) custody, the few supports they had left may disappear with little warning or planning.

We’ve built a training program to empower youth with these exact experiences and vulnerabilities. Our model goes a long way, but there’s a point where we have to look at our broken system and say: enough is enough.

Building Self-Advocacy Skills

More Than Words works with and for our youth to ensure that the child welfare system is providing them with the support they deserve. We empower our young people to take the lead in conversations with social workers, attorneys, public officials, agency leaders, judges and more.

Building Stability with Housing

Youth have told us, again and again, that stable housing is a primary factor in their ability to move their lives forward. Given the lack of solutions, we designed and tested a new model ourselves—with the support of Liberty Mutual, we launched a pilot program with Bridge Over Troubled Waters and Caritas Communities—two leaders in addressing homelessness in Boston—to provide five young people experiencing homelessness with stable housing in single room occupancy units (SROs) as well as comprehensive wraparound services.

The model has proven effective. We’ve leveraged its success to secure state-subsidized rental vouchers for an additional cohort of young adults experiencing homelessness during COVID-19 and are preparing to serve more youth in FY21. We’re in collaborative conversations with DCF, encouraging them to take a risk by supporting youth through this model when they are out of other options.

Even before COVID, the Commonwealth was embarrassingly complicit in creating young adult homelessness...This crisis is a perverse opportunity to shine a light on this failure of our system. We must get this right for our youth now, and then maintain that commitment when this storm passes.”

Jodi Rosenbaum and Elizabeth Jackson, Shut down DCF’s homeless pipeline, Commonwealth Magazine, May 17, 2020

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I SEE HOPE when organizations come together in support of young people. Together, we can knock down barriers that keep young people from reaching stability.

ELISABETH JACKSON, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, BRIDGE OVER TROUBLED WATERS

build the child welfare cliff

The Child Welfare Cliff

The most vulnerable youth in our communities are made homeless or trapped in the criminal justice system. Or both.

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CHILD WELFARE CLIFF

30-50% of the youth homelessness population in Greater Boston has previous involvement in the child welfare system.

Incarceration In Lieu of Support

72% of Massachusetts youth in juvenile detention are also involved with the Department of Children and Families (DCF).

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Our criminal justice system doesn’t generate justice for all youth. Instead of surrounding our most vulnerable young people with the support they deserve, our systems criminalize them based on the color of their skin, economic status, mental health challenges, and unresolved trauma. Making matters worse, the juvenile justice system—which includes more services and greater opportunities for diversion than the adult system—has a hard cutoff at age 18. This, despite a large body of research indicating significant, ongoing brain development into the mid-twenties.

THE RESULT: Our court-involved young adults face a greater likelihood of criminal penalties and less opportunity to bounce back and build a positive life. Within our own walls, we support youth to make smarter decisions and offer healthy, hopeful alternatives to violence and other risky behaviors. We expect the same from our systems.

EXTREME RACIAL BIAS
70% of young adults in Massachusetts state prisons are people of color, despite making up only 25% of the total population.

DEVELOPMENTALLY INAPPROPRIATE CONSEQUENCES
Teens and young adults incarcerated in Massachusetts’ adult correctional facilities have a 55% re-conviction rate, compared to 22% of those incarcerated in the more appropriate juvenile justice system.

BUILDING A MOVEMENT FOR JUSTICE
Through our work with youth, we have seen that if actors in the justice system come together around shared knowledge of research, diversion strategies, and the needs of young people, they make very different decisions. With support from the Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative (JDAI), we partnered with the Suffolk County District Attorney, the Committee for Public Counsel Services (CPCS), and the Massachusetts General Hospital Center for Law Brain and Behavior on a training series for prosecutors and public defenders. Each session focused on adolescent brain development and was followed by small group discussion led by our young people. The Unified Way has now stepped in to fund this training partnership to move toward action.

We are also training young people to advocate for criminal justice reform through legislation. Young people’s testimonies have become central drivers of our Raise the Age campaign, which seeks to move youth out of the adult justice system and into the more developmentally appropriate juvenile system. Youth are making the case that this move aligns with research, increases public safety, and advances equity.

Right now, I’m finding hope in the passion, activism, strength and power of young people. Their voices are reminding us that the time for change is now!”

SANA FADEL, DEPUTY DIRECTOR, CITIZENS FOR JUVENILE JUSTICE

When people are young they make mistakes. Turning 18 doesn’t make you an adult. You are still developing. We need to Raise the Age so young people can get services. That’s what makes things safer. When you go to adult jail, it is traumatizing. You are no longer thinking like a teenager, locked up with people so much older. You haven’t helped them.

SAMIR, GRADUATE, MORE THAN WORDS

EXCERPT FROM TESTIMONY TO THE JUDICIARY COMMITTEE OF THE MASSACHUSETTS LEGISLATURE

More Than Words knows that supporting a court-involved young person requires commitment from many people. If one of our youth is arrested or arraigned, we speak with the lawyers involved. We also speak with the assistant district attorney handling the case to provide context about the young person’s life and their work at More Than Words. We simultaneously support our youth in knowing their rights, so they are able to identify and voice up against injustices. We stick close throughout the process, as a parent would, to ensure that every adult involved is accountable for outcomes that are fair, equitable, and developmentally appropriate.

BANGING ON THE (IN)JUSTICE SYSTEM

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BUILDING A CULTURE OF SUPPORT
Hopeful Pathways

Even in a time of crisis, our youth are learning, earning, and building pathways forward.

That’s because everything we do—from our on-the-job training to our carefully constructed curriculum to our intensive advocacy—puts youth in a better position to take charge of their lives.

Our Youth Are Learning
Our young people are securing the credentials they need to advance in life.

- **92%** of graduates earned or were on track to earn a high school diploma or equivalent
- **51%** of graduates pursued postsecondary education
- **50%** of foster youth attain a diploma by age 18**
- **27%** of foster youth have completed at least one year of postsecondary education by age 21

Our Youth Are Changemakers
Our youth formed a data team called Changemakers to improve internal systems at More Than Words. Participants learned evaluation practices and developed and analyzed their own peer survey. Their first project focused on accountability for punctuality. They used what they learned to revise several program structures and policies—including what “clocked-in” looks like and how to communicate with a supervisor in an emergency—to be more consistent, equitable, and widely understood. The successful Changemakers pilot will continue as a 12-week program at both sites, addressing new data questions moving forward.

Our Youth Are Earning
Prior to the COVID-19 crisis, our graduates found—and kept—jobs at extremely high rates. The pandemic has made our support more critical than ever. Our Career Services team is hard at work, supporting young people looking for work in a difficult job market.

- **80%** of graduates worked in 2020
- **79%** of graduates were engaged in work or school for 30+ hours/week
- Only 51% of former foster youth work over the course of a year**

*“On track” refers to youth who earned a diploma or equivalent or who are enrolled in and passing classes through the end of FY20.

**Does Extending Foster Care Beyond Age 18 Promote Postsecondary Education Attainment? (Chapin Hall, 2010)
Our social enterprise model has always been a source of strength and stability, but the pandemic took a toll on the business side of our bottom line.

Our event rental space and retail bookstores were closed indefinitely beginning in mid-March, with a projected funding gap of $350K in the final quarter of FY20 alone. By building up and diversifying our online businesses, we kept critical revenue flowing. That success coincided with an incredible response from our community of supporters who wouldn’t let us fail.

We have not retracted any programming, and we don’t intend to pull back now. A loan accessed through the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) will keep More Than Words from sustaining a substantial deficit in FY21 as the result of the pandemic, but we continue to face uncertainty with regard to the future of our suspended business lines, as well as the philanthropic and government funding landscape. We are weathering the financial impacts of the COVID-19 crisis, and will continue to innovate and grow to keep More Than Words, and our young people, thriving.

We generated $1M in earned revenue in the final quarter of FY20, despite the barriers posed by the COVID-19 crisis. We raised $320,000 in COVID-specific support, enabling us to head into FY21 from a place of financial strength.

We raised $320,000 in COVID-specific support, enabling us to head into FY21 from a place of financial strength.
In a time of crisis, More Than Words was able to show up, build up, and stay true to our values. Because you had our back. It was not an easy year, but you still dug deep for our youth. You still said: our young people matter. Thank you, from all of us.

TRAILBLAZER ($100,000+) 
Liberty Mutual Insurance

CHAMPION ($250,000-$499,999) 
Boston Corporate Finance Community

LEAD ($100,000-$249,999) 
Anonymous

VISIONARY ($50,000-$99,999) 
Anonymous

CATALYST ($15,000-$49,999) 
The Renewal Awards Sponsored by The Atlantic and Allstate Insurance

ADVOCATE ($5,000-$14,999) 
You Built Us Up

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MORE THAN WORDS ANNUAL REPORT 2020 | 2020 SUPPORTERS

You Built Us Up

Thank you from all of us.
More Than Words is a proud winner of the 2020 renewal award— one of five nonprofits selected by The Atlanta and Atlastate from a pool of 13,000 for their innovative approaches to solving local challenges.
Hope is a powerful thing.
Hope means believing anything is possible.
Hope means continuing to follow your dreams even when life throws challenges at you.
Hope means having something to motivate you, keeping a positive mentality, and believing in something that is bigger than yourself.

Hope means that we have faith in our ability to fight injustice.

It can be found in many places.
In a future as a cosmetologist, in this job, in going to college, in finishing school, in a future as a writer, in community and small things that bring us together, in future generations, in the youth at MTW and beyond.

And when enough people with a feeling of hope come together, there is no wall we cannot knock down.

Together we can knock down racism.
Together we can knock down COVID.
Together we can knock down self-doubt, insecurities, bad attitudes, procrastination, anger, and depression.

Together we can knock down the foster care to prison pipeline, the school to prison pipeline, and youth homelessness.

Together we can knock down the status quo. Just because that's how it's always been, doesn't mean it's how it always has to be!

This poem was written collaboratively by More Than Words staff and youth: Aliyah, Aaron, Bryan, Deandre, Eli, Evan, Greg, Hyannis, Jake, Jazz, Jazzy, Kaelya, Kim, Manny, Mark, Osanya, Sara, Sheila, Sithia.
Tough times require strong community, and we’re thankful for all who’ve stood with our youth in this challenging year. We’re not letting up, and we invite you to do the same. Join us to make a bigger difference for our young people.

**HELP US KNOCK DOWN WALLS**

**LEARN**
Commit to learning about criminal justice reform and the Raise the Age initiative.

**ENGAGE**
Talk to your legislators to ensure they are speaking up for the youth they represent.

**SIGN UP**
Subscribe to our advocacy emails for updates on emerging issues and opportunities affecting our young people.

**HELP US BUILD UP HOPE**

**SHOP**
Visit our new website and find books, fashion, and accessories for everyone on your list.

**DONATE**
Contribute used books, clothes, shoes, and accessories to fuel our youth-led businesses.

**GIVE**
Make a direct gift to More Than Words to keep our social enterprise going strong in the year ahead.

JOIN THE MOVEMENT: [MTYWOUTH.ORG](http://www.MTYOUTH.ORG)

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“**I’m ready to**

knock down

complicity in systems that undermine our youth. I see hope in our young people when they voice up, owning their right and power to speak their truth, realizing they matter, and holding leaders of systems accountable.”

**JODI ROSENBAUM, FOUNDER & CEO, MORE THAN WORDS**

“I’m finding hope

in young peoples’ voices being heard. I believe our generation’s voice is the answer to what’s going wrong in this world. We have great ideas and want to see change on a large scale. Through my advocacy work with the Raise the Age bill, I have seen and understood how legislation can make big changes. Change is needed, and More Than Words has helped me to use my voice to make a change.”

**EMILIA, YOUTH SENIOR PARTNER, MORE THAN WORDS**

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REPORT CREDITS

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