Shelby Tisdale: An Interview by Isabel Oliver
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Shelby Tisdale is an undergraduate student at Duke University. She is a poet and activist from Pearl, Mississippi. Shelby is passionate about interpersonal activism and using words and conversations to create social change.

ISABEL OLIVER: Well, good morning, Shelby. Good afternoon, I guess, it's 2pm. Do you want to just briefly say hi, I'm Shelby.

TISDALE: Hey, I'm Shelby.

OLIVER: Okay, cool. So what we're doing here today is, I told you this is an interview for my class about Youth Activism. And we're creating an archive as our final project. And my archive is about Youth Activism through poetry. And so what we're here to do today is learn about you: who you are, who you are as a poet, who you are as an activist, it's really about you. Because, I think I mentioned this to you, history has often neglected the narratives of youth activists. And it's really important that we create that history, that archive of youth activists, because one of the most important ways we can tell young people that Youth Activism works is by telling these stories of youth activists. So that's what we're here to do today: learn about you and your thoughts and your ideas and your poetry. And I'm really excited to talk to you! I want to say some ground rules, because this is going in the archive, you can take anything out that you want to so don't be nervous about that. You don't have to answer a question. If you don't want to. It's completely your interview. It's up to you. And then also, just let me know how I can make this interview better. If you think there are things that we should add to the archive, things that we should talk about, let me know. Because I might not know to ask them. So I guess we'll just start off with you telling me a little bit about yourself. It's a broad question. But I want you to just tell me who you are.

TISDALE: Yeah, so like I said, I'm Shelby. I am from a small suburb right outside of Jackson, Mississippi. I lived there my entire life. My family lives in the house where my mother grew up. And I think a key component of who I am as being from Mississippi. That's automatically where my mind jumped when you asked me to tell you about myself. I grew up working class, of community that was largely working class. I am a Christian. The church and religion has heavily influenced my life, and especially my poetry, having that thick religious language to draw from has been a huge impact on my life. I grew up in a house without internet, without TV. So as a child, I was really forced to be creative. And that's what I attribute a lot of my identity to, is that creative impulse I have that I drew from boredom. I'm majoring in physics here at Duke. And I'm a freshman, as you know, and I want to be a teacher. I think I've hit most of the key points. And maybe I can cover more in the questions you have to ask.

OLIVER: Awesome. That's a great start. I really would love to dive deeper into your upbringing because that's such an interesting aspect of your life that you grew up without TV. Could you tell me a little bit more about how that shaped you becoming a poet? Could you bring me in to how you got into poetry?

TISDALE: We didn't have a lot of money growing up. And so I think my parents kind of saw TV and the Internet, as one, kind of frivolous things like extra money that we didn't need to spend. And two, as, I think they had a lot of religious convictions regarding what we might see on TV, what we might see on the internet. And also, they just didn't want us to be just so trapped in the digital world, me and my sister. So we grew up; I think storytelling became a big part of what I did in my free time, because when you don't have stories to take in through those digital medias, you make your own up. I recall just trying to make things with the things I had around me: reading lots of books, making books of my own as a child. And I didn't come from a great educational background. I was always bored in school, my school never really had the resources for me. And I felt that I didn't have what I needed to be really reaching my potential. I remember, the only Internet access I really had was at my grandmother's house, and I went to her house, just about every day. And I would sit on her computer and try to learn math, or I would use her computer to type and write, and I've been writing for as long as I can remember. It wasn't until I transferred to a different school, a magnet school, that I had opportunity to take classes in writing and found that people wanted to hear what I had to say. But it was really just drawing from, like I said, religious language was a huge part of my poetry, is a huge part of my poetry and just the stories––when you're not taking in media, I think you have more of this sense of listening to the people around you talk. And another huge thing is I went to an interracial Southern Baptist Church in the middle of Jackson, Mississippi, a very racially tense area. And there were no interracial churches anywhere around me. So we talked about race, a lot. And I listened to people talk about race, and talk about their different perspectives. For a large portion of my childhood. And I also consider that one of the greatest factors that has influenced my writing.

OLIVER: Awesome, thank you so much for sharing all of that, that was a really extensive background on who you are, and that's really what I would love to know. I guess if we could dive a little deeper into it, I would just ask you, how you view that upbringing today? I can kind of tell with your response. But after reflecting on it, what do you think it says about you today, and, and who you are?

TISDALE: I attribute everything I am to the way that I was raised and the context in which I grew up. I know I'm at a place today, where there's no one around me who grew up like I grew up. And that's something I think about a lot. But also, I think about the idea of––in one of my classes, we've been talking a lot about cultural capital and what do you have that you can bring to specific scenarios from your culture and from your background, that may be a privilege. And I think I'm very privileged to know the world. I have an awareness that some people don't have,

because I grew up in such proximity to poverty, because I grew up and my father cleaned wealthy people's carpet, until I was 12 years old, and then he became a social worker. And so I have that knowledge of the social work world. And my mother is like a Mississippi archivist. And she has the knowledge of that history world. And so I really think about all the communities in which I've lived, and all the communities that I have knowledge of, that I know a lot of the people around me don't have knowledge of, and I feel very privileged to have that knowledge and be able to share those stories.

OLIVER: Yeah, it's very clear that you have this very influenced worldview from all these different backgrounds. And I think that's so cool. I want to get into your poetry a little bit. So we've talked about your childhood, but could you bring me to that first time that you ever wrote a poem or how you got into poetry?

TISDALE: How, okay, I told you about, you know, I would go to my grandma's house, and I would write. I heard what a limerick was one time and in second grade, I wrote two pages of limericks. Just little short rhyming poems, and I loved it. I thought it was so much fun. I thought it was so fun how I could play with words, and then I just kept writing and then I went through a deep depression, throughout middle school. And I would keep this black notebook with me. And I would only write in blue pen in this black notebook. And every day I would write a poem just to explore anything I was feeling, I would write poems in my iPhone notes. And I would just write poems and write poems and write poems, and I never shared them with people. But I kept writing, and it was just such a key piece of my identity and my connection to myself. And then I transferred to the Mississippi School for Math and Science, which was the best school in my state. And I had the opportunity to take these wonderful creative writing classes. And I remember, my first few months at MSMS, which is the acronym for it, I began winning competitions, and my teacher noticed me. And suddenly, I realized that I had really important things to say, once I started sharing my work. And it kind of went from there, I stayed really involved in the creative writing world, all through high school, and I hope to continue to write here at Duke.

OLIVER: And what caused that shift of you wanting to share your poetry for the first time?

TISDALE: Well, I kind of took that class on a whim. And I remember, I won this competition, some local competition, for a poem I had written about what my ride to church looked like, going from this white flight suburb to this interracial church in the middle of a very racially tense city.[1] And just the difference in culture between like 10 minutes over the interstate. And I wrote that poem. And I read it aloud. And my church had been such a huge part of my identity and such an important place to me. And I read it aloud in this coffee shop in front of people. And there were other adult poets there who had successful careers. And I remember watching

[1] "White flight suburb" refers to an area where White people have moved out of an urban area into this suburban area

their reactions and watching the people in the room react to my poem. And I remember just listening to them read and feeling the chills that you get when you hear a good poem. And I think I just really realized that there may be something here that I can do like that. I've had this unique background that I am aware of, and I can share these stories, and it can have an impact on people, and then I can listen to other people's stories, and they can have an impact on me. And that is just the power in poetry. You can express something without using literal language that you couldn't express using literal language.

OLIVER: Thank you for that reflection. And that story you told of your church and reading your poem to them that was so powerful. You said that your church is a big part of your identity, and I wonder, how have your identities influenced your poetry?

TISDALE: My poetry revolves around a few central themes. I write poems about faith and doubt. I write poems about what it means to be a woman in the American South, and I write poems kind of as a way of grieving for Mississippi, in my society. Mississippi is the poorest state in the nation. When I say Mississippi, people often think of conservative people, they think of people who may not care about people's rights, they think of poor people, but when they criminalize those groups and look at the state and say, "Oh, these are the people that I don't like that are in this state," they are neglecting the many marginalized communities in that state. And I was working with kids in my church and in the neighborhoods surrounding my church, and I'm just, I'm angry. What they're being deprived of just makes me––I can think of it and just start crying right now, because it's just so unfair. And so many people choose to criminalize Jackson. And in the city that I live in, which is called Pearl, there's so many sentiments against Jackson, like "Don't go to Jackson. Don't take your kids to Jackson. Don't associate with people from Jackson." And it's a racist sentiment. And they're choosing not to see the racism in that because Jackson is a city that the poverty rate is extremely high. Its residents are 80% black. And it's mostly white people in the suburbs who are saying Jackson is a horrible place to go to. And that makes me angry. So my church has played a huge role in how I see that world. Because I was navigating these two very different communities growing up, and my identity as a woman and facing this patriarchal culture. And I think a lot of my poems are about internalized misogyny. I think a lot of middle aged and older women have this internalized misogyny that they impress onto their daughters. So I really like to explore this idea of daughterhood, is that a word? And I also kind of explore my identity as a sister––all of theses intersecting female identities, what it means to be a woman, what it means to be a daughter, what it means to be a sister, and what it means to interact with all the people around you who may have different views of what it means to be a woman.

OLIVER: Thank you for being vulnerable there. I want to just take us back to that anger that you felt with Jackson and Pearl. What did you do with that anger?

TISDALE: I wrote.

OLIVER: Yeah?

TISDALE: I think my best poems come out of a place of anger. And I think anger has a negative connotation, but I think there is a good anger that a lot of us feel. I think the strongest metaphors come out of a place of anger. And especially because I believe that I am a quiet person. I've often said that I believe that poetry is the quietest way to be loud. And when you're angry, you want to be loud about the things that you care about. And so I use a lot of strong metaphors in my poetry. And I'm hoping that through that, my anger at injustice will come across and will maybe connect with people who feel similarly.

OLIVER: So could you tell me more about that––how you think poetry influences justice?

TISDALE: Yeah. When I like consider the world of activism that poetry is, it's often not standing at a podium and being able to speak to crowds of people. I think poetry is a form of interpersonal activism. I think that conversation is the greatest device for change in our society. And I think that poetry is a tool for starting conversation. When you can read a poem to someone, and they may believe something differently than you, but you can get them thinking. I have written poems about internalized misogyny, that my mother or some older women in my life have expressed, and I've read them those poems, and they begin to reconsider their actions. And it's not in a accusatory way. It's about, so you made me feel like this, you made me think like this, this is the way I see myself because of the sentiment you expressed. So it's a way to have these interpersonal interactions and strike a chord with people that wouldn't be struck otherwise, like in a large crowd of people, where there's this mass mentality, and people tend to think similarly to the people around them. And especially when it's the intimate experience of one person reading a poem alone by themselves, that's when you get the gears turning in their head.

OLIVER: And so, just now, you expressed how you express your feelings through poetry. Could you tell me more about that?

TISDALE: I think one thing they'll tell you in a lot of creative writing classes is that your poetry needs to be grounded in something tangible. So I think I often will take a story, and I will start telling the story. And then I'll see what comes out of that. For example, one of my poems, titled Ephemera, the first two lines are "The first time I wore red lipstick, my mother told me I looked like a two-dollar hooker." And I think about that, and it's a true statement. It's something that happened to me, it's something that happened in my life. It's a tangible scene. I can just remember my face with my red lipstick and going to show my mother, and her saying that, and I can think about that sentiment and be like, "Okay, what feelings will the reader get from that statement?" Will it be shock? Will it be a piece of connection? Do they have a similar

experience? And what feelings do I feel? So it's often not an explicit statement of feelings, but it's a story that evokes feelings.

OLIVER: So I'm really interested and fascinated by everything you're saying, and your motivations for your poetry. And I want to just ask you, who do you write poetry for?

TISDALE: I write poetry for Mississippi, I write poetry for the South, I write poetry for America, I write poetry for the children at home, who are not getting the justice they deserve, especially the little girls who I know I will go home next week and see and they will be ecstatic to see me and they're intelligent and they're leaders. And the society we live in doesn't want them to know that they're intelligent, that they're leaders. I feel like the society I lived in didn't want me to know that I was intelligent, that I was a leader. And I also think that we have this narrow idea of what a leader looks like. I think society doesn't want you to know that a leader can be quiet, and a leader can be quiet in the loud ways, like I was saying.

OLIVER: And I noticed in that answer, you didn't say that you write poetry for yourself. Why is that?

TISDALE: You know, some people say that they write poetry, and they don't need anyone to hear it. I want the words I'm writing to move someone. Initially the impulse may be for myself, but I don't think what I felt and what I've experienced are things I need to hold on to. I think poetry is this incredible tool for distancing yourself from something. If you're taking a piece of yourself and putting it on paper, then you can look at it. If it's inside of you, it's like, unless I have a mirror, I can't look at myself. I can't look into my eyes with my eyes. And that's how it feels like when you're holding on to something like that, but when you put it on a piece of paper you can't––like I can look at a mirror, I can look at a photo of my eyes. Art is this process of tangiblising something that is intangible. And when you put it into a tangible form, there's this wonderful opportunity for it to be shared.

OLIVER: And with that sharing of your art, your poetry, how have you seen the reception of it?

TISDALE: I think the reception of it has been positive and in many ways that surprised me. My grandmother passed away this summer, but before she passed away, she wanted to hear anything I had written, even if it was a poem calling her out. The people in my community, in my church, I'll speak boldly about things that are affecting our world, and it may be things that they think are not issues, but I'll say them and then you'll see them turn their head a little bit or start to notice something. And even if they disagree with me, they'll applaud the art. It's just really incredible, coming from a place where no one really leaves, no one really goes anywhere, except if you're really intelligent, a state school, but most people, you'll go to the community college, you'll enter the workforce, and you'll stay in the city your whole life. To be able to be

out here experiencing different places and perspectives and sharing my work, I think in my community, it's overall been received positively. It's been just a really surreal experience.

OLIVER: And I guess I just want to know about your thoughts about the importance of sharing this art? Could you tell me, more on a bigger scale, why you think this is important?

TISDALE: Why I think sharing poetry in general is important?

OLIVER: Yes and art and your ideas and your thoughts about the world.

TISDALE: I think, especially when you're writing poetry about issues in society and issues like sexism and issues like racism and things that affect so many different people and things that have affected you in a particular way, it is something that––you can really move someone, by putting it out there. You would think, "Oh, if I use broad language that can apply to everyone, I'll connect to people more." But it's in those specific instances you share, where you can really hit a nerve with someone. If something is very specifically applicable to you, even a small detail, which is why detail and poetry is so important, if a small detail is particularly applicable to you and it's also applicable to another person, they're going to pay attention to what you're saying. So when something is so important in society, like the issues that make me angry, deep in my core angry, and when you feel that passionately about something, it's just not something you should keep to yourself. I want other people to hear this, and I want to hear what other people have to say in response.

OLIVER: Yes, I think that sentiment that you just shared, where you say the small little detail that's personal to you can be personal to someone else and can move them, can communicate something, I think that's so powerful. And that gets me so excited about you and your work. And so I think that brings us to the activism side of poetry. So, we've talked about you as a poet, but I really want to learn about you as an activist. And we've talked about this as well, but more explicitly, how do you see yourself as an activist?

TISDALE: I think one of my primary tools for activism is poetry. As I mentioned, I am very interested in this interpersonal type of activism: activism through connection, activism through shared experience. Going back to what I said, I'm not a loud person, I'm not going to I can't get up on a podium. I don't see myself attending big protests with lots of people, but I see myself bringing up the issues in my community n conversations with everyone I interact with is something that's constantly on my mind. And I believe that just sitting down with someone and having lunch and telling stories like, "This is why you should care about these people. This is why you should care about this issue." And really tying it back to narratives from my own life, but also narratives from the people that I've met, that may not have the opportunity to be in the places I am, are really important. And I'm also a visual artist. And I also use that as a form of interpersonal activism. But I think that is more self-oriented than my poetry is. My poetry is

more community oriented, but my visual art is more personally oriented. And I've done a lot of work in educational rights and advocacy, because it's a cause I feel very passionate about. And while I'm like advocating for children, it's very important for me to stay connected with children. So opportunities in which I can work individually with students––I think I keep this in the back of my mind, making systemic change is not addressing symptoms of an issue. And I think it's like the big reason that I went out of state for college; I didn't think that I could improve issues in Mississippi with the resources that Mississippi already had, when what I'm trying to change is the resources that Mississippi has. And so I'm here at Duke, and I'm learning everything I can, so I can bring it back to my community. And I think this idea of activism is, in my life, it's the role it plays is a longer process and a process of having conversations with as many different people as possible. It's a process of creating the art, I can tie everything back to what I believe is my purpose.

OLIVER: I think this is such an interesting concept that I would like to stay on, this change at an individual level. And you told me about that story of telling your poem to your church and receiving a reaction that inspired you. So I want to know , how you've seen this change on an individual level work, and maybe even the first couple of times you've seen it, and how that led you to keep doing it.

TISDALE: Yeah, I think it started very small. I would write a poem about something my mother said, that affected me deeply. And I'd read it to my mother. And my mother is autistic, so sometimes she just really doesn't understand the true meaning of what she's saying to me––intention often doesn't match impact because it's a social disorder. She has trouble communicating. And I saw changes in the way she talked to me, positive changes. And we really started a dialogue about what it meant for me to be a daughter, and what it meant for her to be a mother and what it meant for both of us to be women in the community we lived in, and it starts there. And then there were broader things like I'm telling a story about the culture difference between Pearl and Jackson, and people who haven't thought about it begin to think about it. I went to a boarding school in Mississippi. It was about two and a half hours from where I lived. And so I'm talking people from different parts of the states, and they're relating to me about issues in their community. And then they're thinking more deeply about those issues, because they realize it's somewhere else too. And so many of my poems have focused on this topic of womanhood, on this topic of cultural differences and what it means to live in a suburb and confronting that part of yourself, the part that lives in the suburb and what a privilege it is to live in the suburb and what it means to live in the city as well. And especially in the case of reading a poem to people, and letting them hear it, and just watching you––they will come and talk to you afterwards and be like, "This is something that I've seen in my life. This specific detail that you mentioned is something that affected me too." And so it's all about starting dialogues, because you can't make change until you recognize the issues at hand.

OLIVER: Thank you for sharing that. I just lost my question... yeah, this is so important: you sharing your stories on what it means to be an activist and how, activism, you've seen it impact people. And it's really cool to document. This is so important that you see it played out, that you see that it works. And so I want to ask you if you could tell me any more stories where you've seen your activism work or you think you've been an activist?

TISDALE: I have to think a little deeply about this one,

OLIVER: Please do.

TISDALE: I wrote this poem about this cultural standard of female identity. And I remember, I think, reading it to a group of students at my school. And in the poem, there's a line that says, "My mother laughs when I call myself woman, as if womanhood is signing your dreams into a will, for the son or daughter, you promise you will bear." And so it's this idea of like, my grandmother had dreams. And she became a mother. And then she told my mother about her dreams. And my mother dreamed of being a mother. And so it's all of these ideas that the women who came before me thought they couldn't act upon because they were women. Like my grandmother, she could play the piano by ear. Her father wrote poetry, and she respected him. And then when I wrote poetry, she was living her dreams out through me. But you know, sometimes I would look back and say, "Why couldn't you write like your father did?" So I was having this conversation with some of the young women at my school, and, and they all were connecting with that. There's such a pressure––your biggest dream should be to have kids one day, to have kids one day, and you could have other dreams, but they'll come before that. And if you don't achieve those other dreams, you can pass your dreams onto them. And I was kind of just trying to bring up this question, why can't we defy this standard and act upon our dreams now, in this day, in this age, we don't have to be mothers. Because it's exalted as this standard for what a woman should be. But we don't have to do that. We can put ourselves first in some scenarios. And so it was just this really awesome experience of having a conversation with these young women, who, some of them wanted to be mothers, some of them were just deciding not to have kids, and maybe various controversies that had sparked in their families. But everyone seemed to connect with it on some level. And I learned from them, from having a conversation with them, about that. And I'm hoping they took something from the poem that I share. And it's really cool to see something that you wrote turn gears in someone's head and make them think about something on a deeper level. And that's what you're really trying to do. When you write poetry that evokes those kinds of feelings is to get people to dig deeper into what they know of their own identity.

OLIVER: Yeah. I'm really curious about those conversations, because you've mentioned them multiple times, those conversations that you have after you read your poetry and you share those experiences. Could you tell me a little more about them?

TISDALE: Yeah, I think people are interested in vulnerability. It kind of shocks them. Sometimes I've told stories in front of groups about forms of emotional abuse, maybe that I've experienced, and very deep, complex issues like that. And people notice when you're being really vulnerable; it's just not socially acceptable to share in like a format other than poetry and sometimes not even in poetry. And I'm really passionate about engaging in dialogue with people because poetry in itself is––it's a moment. It's a moment where you can grab someone, but what happens after that moment is what's important. Because my favorite poems, I'm not saying them over and over again in my head throughout the day, but sometimes, something will happen and I'll take a really gripping line that I really held on to, it will come up agai, and I'll think about that. So when you have these conversations after the fact, you know that your poetry has made something that lasts. Because, like I said, poetry is a moment that you live in briefly. You can read a poem and then forget about it and go on with your life. Or you can decide, "Hey, what was that emotion that that poem just hit for me? What is that feeling that it located?" When poetry is in an intimate setting, like at a reading, and when you can go talk to the poet people want to communicate that shared experience, and when you communicate shared experiences, you're sharing your humanity, you're gaining a deeper appreciation of perspective, and the people around you. And I think it's just really beautiful that we can all have such different lives, such different experiences, such different stories, and still, on these deep levels, connect. And that's been the really cool thing about the dialogue that poetry sparks and the conversations I get to have with people afterwards.

OLIVER: That's really cool. Thank you for sharing that. I wonder, then, what are your thoughts on poetry for the masses?

TISDALE: Your poetry takes so many different forms. You have poetry readings that are small and intimate, you have poetry on a page, you have poetry that's spoken loudly at big events. And what I never want to do is change my writing to make it more palatable, more digestible, less emotion provoking, shorter and simpler to read. I want it to be accessible, but not necessarily easy. And so when I'm thinking poetry for the masses, what you're seeing in modern day is there are a lot of poets who do want to make their poems digestible, vaguely touch on emotions, and often, that's what sells. But I think if you're going to be thinking about the activism side of poetry, like we've been talking about, you shouldn't be making your poems just––you shouldn't simplify them to appeal to a broader audience. And so I don't know if that's what you meant by poetry for the masses, but I also like think in terms of sharing your poetry with broader audiences, that's something that, it's harder to do. You've got to work your way up to that point, and I don't think I've gotten there as a poet quite yet. I don't know if I ever will. But even when you're not doing poetry, like as a career, you have access to these intimate settings, and that's what sparks dialogue.

OLIVER: Yeah, that answers my question. Thank you. So I want to know, then, what poets do you think are doing this work? Maybe "correctly," if you would use that word, or just talk about the poets that that you like, that are your inspirations?

TISDALE: Olivia Gatwood is a really great feminist poet. And even, so many issues, I disagree with her on; however, she wrote this book called Life of the Party, which is talking about the romanticization of female death in true crime shows. And it really changed the way I saw true crime, for sure. And what makes it so effective is that she's just telling stories from her life, or from the lives of people she loved. And I think she's a really great example of that kind of activism. She speaks in front of crowds, but it's not what you envision when you think of activism.When you're initially thinking people protest with signs, there's so many different ways to make that difference, that don't involve huge crowds of people and being loud, sometimes like you're just not a loud person. And I think she's a really good example of that. Ashley M. [Jones] is an incredible poet. She's been a guest editor for Poetry Magazine for a while now. I think she actually visited my high school creative writing class. and I got to sit beside her in class, and she is an incredible poet, taking a stand against racism, and she's from Alabama and so you know, a Southern woman, and she's incredible. I think she's doing well. She's also a great example of activist poetry. Aside from activist poetry, one of my favorite poets is a poet named Christian Wiman, who really explores this relationship between faith and doubt. And some of my favorite lines of poetry, I can pull from his poems, and I just really liked the way he uses really unorthodox language. And it's so fun when you speak it out loud and when you when you hear it. There's a line of his, it's been on my mind lately, and it's like, "I'm come a whirlwind wasted things, and I will ride this tantrum back to God." And he has all of these really gripping lines, so he's one of my all time favorites too.

OLIVER: So you just mentioned him, and you said "aside from activist poetry." What do you think is activist poetry?

TISDALE: Well, I think the distinction there is––I think Olivia Gatwood's poetry and Ashley M. Johnson's poetry are all about sparking dialogue for social change. Christian Wiman's poetry, on the other hand, is about exploring a concept and maybe not about social change at all, but about, again, the shared human experience.

OLIVER: Interesting, thank you. I think, since I want to be sensitive of your time, I want to talk about you as an activist. And I want to ask if you had any moments of confusion, of hopelessness, or burnout, because that's something that can be common, and it's important for us to hear these stories. So I wonder if you had any periods of time where that happened to you? And how did you get out of it? If so.

TISDALE: Absolutely. I feel like, especially during the pandemic, it was a really dark time for me. And I wanted to be turning all of my efforts towards helping the kids in my community,

but I remember feeling like there's virtually nothing I can do. And then all of my efforts, I felt like this is not actually changing anything, I'm just doing this to feel like I'm making a difference. And I remember having to confront that attitude in myself and really strategize and think about, "Okay, what are the next steps I can do to actually listen to what people need and hear people and advocate for this world?" And I've really felt like I'm in this constant state of grief over what's happening in my home. And it's really hard too because I'm very far away from home right now. I don't know what's going on. And the last thing I want to do is be advocating for a world that I am not connected to. So I'm here and I'm having conversations with people, but the dialogue I'm having is the last news I know of Mississippi before I left and the people who I haven't seen or talk to in months. And I think it's just very important to hold to the connections you have in the community you care about. And, yeah, in any times of burnout or feeling like my inadequacy will meet me, will prevent me from making an actual difference in the world, I really think back to what I'm fighting for. And there's just a few specific scenarios I had with children, and what they communicated to me, that really changed me. And I always like replay those in my head. And anytime I'm feeling unmotivated, I go back to this and I'm like, "This is why I'm doing the work I'm doing."

OLIVER: Thank you for sharing that. And then I have a couple more questions. What do you think would be helpful for young people to know to get involved in activism?

TISDALE: I think what would be helpful for young people to know is that activism does not have to fit a specific mold. I believe that art is activism. I don't know how activism is technically defined, but I believe that doing something that other people are doing usually draws attention. And if you're making art that is distinct and personal to you, it can be used as a tool for social change. You just have to find what you care about and really analyze why you care about it, and really look into yourself, look into what your biases may be, explore your true motivations behind making that work, or behind doing that work. And then just do it. Just take action on the things that you care about. When you really, really care about something, you can't shut up about it. And that's like, sometimes I just need to write a poem. Activism starts with that initial conviction, that initial passion, like the thing that I said gets you angry.

OLIVER: Thank you. Yeah, thank you for saying that. That was really powerful. And then the last thing I want to know is, where are you at now and what comes next for you?

TISDALE: I'm really in this place of trying to figure out how I want to maximize my time in college and what I want to do. Like I said, I'm majoring in physics. I want to be a physics teacher. I think physics and poetry are innately intertwined. And I really want to look into being more involved with creative writing extracurricularly here, because I'm not. And I'm not sure if it's something I'll be able to pursue academically. I'm trying to figure out what the poetry world looks like here in Durham and ways that I can connect to it. And so I'm also in the

space of trying to figure out if I just want to continue doing poetry as an interpersonal thing, or if I can see it playing a role in my career in the future. So we'll see.

OLIVER: Awesome, thank you so much for sharing your time with me, sharing your words with me. This conversation was really productive. And I'm so glad to know more about you and who you are. And I'm really excited to have this go in the archive so that people can learn about who you are, and get inspired, and soak up all those good words that you gave me today. So, thank you so much for your time. And that's it. Anything else you want to add? By any chance? Anything we didn't cover?

TISDALE: I think we're good.

OLIVER: Okay, good. All right. Thank you!

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