



THE ASSOCIATED ALUMNI  
OF CENTRAL HIGH SCHOOL

Incorporated 1873

## **AACHS Alumni Speaker Series**

featuring **Quiara Alegría Hudes (254)**, **Cristin O’Keefe Aptowicz (255)**, and  
**Ms. Carole Nehez (former CHS Faculty)**  
**Chuck Steinberg (221)**, **AACHS President** and  
**Cynthia Lech (263)**, **AACHS Executive Director**

5/4/2021 at 7PM Eastern, Virtual Program | [www.centralhighalumni.com](http://www.centralhighalumni.com)  
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*Transcription of Program below; links provided by AACHS Alumni Office (Please excuse any grammar or spelling errors)*

### Chuck Steinberg, 221

Good evening, everyone, and welcome to a first for us. This is the alumni speaker series. My name is Chuck Steinberg, 221st class. I am currently the president of the Associated Alumni of Central High School. I want to welcome all the members of the alumni, faculty, students and friends to this wonderful event. This is being brought to you by the Board of Managers of the Alumni Association, and the Program Committee chaired by Josh Liss of the 247th class. We're starting this program to showcase alumni thought leaders who will discuss their work and lives since graduating from dear old, Central High. Programs such as this has been brought to you by the Alumni Association, and is supported the Leading the Way campaign. For those not familiar, the alumni has embarked on a very ambitious \$25 million program to build a performing arts center here at Central High School. And we're well on our way. If you have any interest, check our website [www.centralhighalumni.com](http://www.centralhighalumni.com), Tonight's program features award winning playwright Quiara Alegría Hudes of the 254th class, Cristin O'Keefe Aptowicz of the 255th class will act as moderator. And we are being joined by Carole Nehez, both of their former Creative Writing teacher during her 10 years at Central.

One of the things that the alumni has accomplished this year, is that we have hired for the first time our first full time executive director, and I like to introduce Cynthia Lee Lech of the 263rd class who serves as our executive director and Cynthia is doing a fantastic job! She'll go over some guidelines, provide information on upcoming events, and give a brief introduction of each speaker.

### AACHS Alumni Office

Learn about our Leading The Way Capital Campaign Here -

<https://centralhighalumni.com/leading-the-way-capital-campaign/>

### Cynthia Lech, 263

Thank you, Chuck! Welcome, everyone. All participants have been muted upon entry to limit the amount of background noise and this program is being recorded and will be placed on our website later this week. To join the conversation on our social media pages. We have placed our handles in the chat. Please feel free to use centralhighalumni and leadingtheway hashtags.

### AACHS Alumni Office

Social Media Links -

Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/groups/TheCHS/>

Instagram <https://www.instagram.com/centralalumni/>

Twitter <https://twitter.com/Centralalums>

LinkedIn <https://www.linkedin.com/groups/50760/>

#leadingtheway #centralhighalumni

### Cynthia Lech, 263

As comprehensive COVID-19 safety protocols remain in place. The AACHS just continues to find ways to interact and connect virtually with our alumni and CHS community. We hope by 2022 that we can incorporate in person events again,

but we are delighted to organize virtual events, especially ones that highlight our talented alumni and bring people together to mark their achievements, milestones, and growth. We want you to know that wherever you are, AACHS will be an email or phone call away.

### Cynthia Lech, 263

We have a few upcoming events that you won't want to miss, including the ACA HS annual meeting on Thursday, June 3 at 7pm. Eastern. We are immensely appreciative and proud of this CHS administration, teachers and students who have found ways to navigate around another challenging school year. This year's annual meeting will feature a student speaker who will share the impact the pandemic had on many areas of their life, academic year and on their personal well being. We will also have our nominations and elections of our board of managers; and the popular Disharoon Award recipient - a student who exemplifies Central's spirit and pride - will be announced; along with student musical performances throughout the program.

### Cynthia Lech, 263

To add a little fun and competitive spirit - Join us on Thursday June 17 at 7pm Eastern for virtual Quizzo. Test your knowledge of Central Philadelphia history and bring glory to your central class or friend group! The event will feature four rounds of puzzling trivia, that will be sure to leave you equally excited and salt. The event is open to all members of the CHS community and costs \$10 per person. Folks can also sponsor student to participate in a student team We hope you'll join us. Central gear preferred!

### Cynthia Lech, 263

To register or learn more about either events, the links have been provided in the chat box, or can be found on our social media pages or website. Now let's get back to today's program.

### AACHS Alumni Office

AACHS Virtual Annual Meeting, Thursday, June 3 -

<https://centralhighalumni.com/all-news/aachs-2021-virtual-annual-meeting/>

### AACHS Alumni Office

AACHS Virtual Quizzo, Thursday, June 17 - <https://centralhighalumni.com/all-news/join-aachs-for-a-virtual-central-themed-quizzo-event/>

### Cynthia Lech, 263

We have a great crowd of alumni and friends from Israel, Great Britain, and all over the United States, ranging from the 182nd class to the 283rd class to former and current faculty. Moving right along, it is my pleasure to welcome our speakers: a member of the Central High School Alumni Hall of Fame - Quiara Alegría Hudes from the 254th class. She is the winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Drama for *Water by the Spoonful*. She wrote the book for the Tony Award winning Broadway musical *In the Heights*, along with other plays and musicals that have been produced around the world. Quiara also wrote the screenplay adaptation for *In the Heights*, which is set to debut in movie theaters and streamed simultaneously on HBO max this summer. She also has a new memoir, *My Broken Language*; the links to purchase her books has been placed in the chat.

### AACHS Alumni Office

Quiara's Books: Philly spot Harriet's Bookshop

<https://bookshop.org/books/my-broken-language-a-memoir/9780399590047>

Word Up <https://www.wordupbooks.com/book/9780399590047>

### Cynthia Lech, 263

Also joining the virtual stage for the evening is moderator Cristin O'Keefe Aptowicz from the 255th Class. "255" She is a New York Times best selling nonfiction writer and noted poet and she has published eight books of poetry most recently *How to Love the Empty Air*, as well as two books of nonfiction,

most recently, Dr. Mutter's *Marvel's: A True Tale of Intrigue and Innovation at the Dawn of Modern Medicine*. The links to purchase her books have been placed in the chat.

### AACHS Alumni Office

Cristin's Books: Local independent bookstore, BookPeople, where folks can get signed / personalized copies of all of Cristin's books

<https://www.bookpeople.com/order-signed-copies-cristin-okeefe-aptowiczs-books>

Books can also be purchased at the Mutter Museum:

<https://www.muttermuseumstore.org/collections/books/products/dr-mutters-marvels-paperback>

### Cynthia Lech, 263

When we connected with Quiara and Cristin, we learned that there were many influences and mentors at Central that provided a foundational experience that shaped their lifelong passion as artists. We think it's apropos to note that this week is Teacher Appreciation Week. And today, May 4, is recognized as National Teacher Appreciation Day. So we are delighted to have Miss Carole Nehez. with us. Carole was a teacher for 33 years. Before Central she taught in inner city schools in Detroit as well as worked in a number of school within a school programs in Philadelphia. She also co-wrote a plan for an alternative program for kids at risk of dropping out of school. That program was funded for eight years, and brought kids together from disparate schools, including Germantown, Martin Luther King and Roxborough high schools. Carol taught in the MG program at Central for 10 years. In addition to creative writing, she co-taught a philosophy and literature course with Dr. Sylvan Boni, who himself taught at both Central and LaSalle. She also co-taught and American experience for us with members of the Social Studies Department. At the age of 68, she went back to school at Bryn Mawr and got an MSS degree in psychiatric social work. She spent another eight years studying and doing Psychotherapy at the Philadelphia School of Psychoanalysis. She presently works in private practice in Center City.

Cynthia Lech, 263

Let's welcome amazing individuals as we sit back and enjoy the conversation to ensue. Comments and questions are welcome during the program. There will be a dedicated Q&A session. So please submit any questions to me using the chat feature by finding my name in the participants list. We may not be able to get to all of the questions tonight. So feel free to email us after the program at [alumnioffice@centralhighalumni.com](mailto:alumnioffice@centralhighalumni.com). Thank you.

Cristin O'Keefe Aptowicz, 255

Thank you Cynthia, thank you so much. Thank you Chuck as well. Thank you Quiara and Ms. Nehez. Please forgive me, I will never call you by your first name. And welcome everyone from Central. Oh my gosh, hearing that Philly accent is like a bomb to my heart. And I'm so excited to be here with these two amazing and influential women to me - Ms. Nehez and Quiara. And tonight we are celebrating Quiara. Amazing book - My Broken Language - which you should absolutely purchase the links that Quiara provided are to local independent bookstores including Philly's own Harriet bookstore, and I'm excited to talk to you about it tonight. Quiara. Welcome!

Cristin O'Keefe Aptowicz, 255

So like as anyone who was went to Central during Quiara's time there, she was a figure of almost a legend while she was still there, very self assured. Very She moved the world with such power, you were very careful how you spoke, she made you think about your positions. And what I always admired most about her was even though she was incredibly, you know, confident and urgent, and sure of the things she wanted to push out into the world, she also had this curiosity and this malleability that she was always learning, you know, she was willing to have her opinion changed or a new element of information, you know, affect how she moved through the world. And it's just such, such a brilliant example.

Cristin O’Keefe Aptowicz, 255

So my first question is actually from your book. In your book, you write that, "In Philadelphia, I noticed that opposites found each other litter stagnated alongside new skyscrapers, homeless folks made cardboard cities a block away from the Liberty Bell, and so on and so forth." And the book in itself, which everyone should purchase is about contradictions, opposites. And whether or not those contrasts complement each other, or whether the contrast, you know, force growth. So, could you speak a little about the sort of opposites that you found both in Philadelphia, and in central that informs the writing life that you have made for yourself?

Quiara Alegría Hudes, 254

Sure, thank you for that amazing characterization of who I was in high school, I feel like kind of nervous and almost a little bit embarrassed to, I don't know, to reconnect, and remember who that girl was, all these decades later. You know, about those opposites. I think that they started internally. So I was always keen to them. And they started internally, because I came from a biracial and bicultural home, originally, my mother, being a brown, Puerto Rican woman, my father being a white Jewish man, which never struck me as opposites until I was about five years old. And then the world started informing me that those things were in contrast to each other. So that's when I learned that, you know, there were, who I was, was comprised of sometimes warring factions, and sometimes, you know, really good dance partners, depending on the day. And so maybe that just informed my lens of how I walked through the city. But, I always noticed those contrasts when I was, you know, you would take the, the subway or the bus, and you would just feel neighborhoods shift over time. And sometimes you'd feel neighborhoods shift from one block to the next, like, there was an invisible wall that the world had agreed on. And something happened on this side of Girard Avenue. And something happened on that side of Girard Avenue. You know, so I did see it as a city of invisible walls. And I remember, in my central years, they were doing a dig underneath, they were starting to dig for the new Constitution Center. And there were all these headlines about the stuff they were digging up, you know, unmarked graves, these sorts of things and thinking like literally the ancestral history of Philadelphia, was 10 feet - 20 feet beneath our footsteps as we would hang out after school as we would go see movies at the Ritz at the

Bourse, you know, so, and central held all of that, too. We were just talking about an in the tech check before we actually got on the event that Central apparently, is, has been declared one of the most diverse schools in the nation and one of the school that best reflects its city's demographics. You know, being a New York mother now to public school children. I know, that's no small feat. You know, so it was both diverse, but little did I know in that time, it was also one of the fourth most it was the fourth most segregated city. So you have those kind of built in contrasts and contradictions and difficult realities but, but may be being mixed, maybe just be going to a bang-up school gets you out of your neighborhood. But I always explored all over the city and I loved finding out about you know, the different neighborhoods, the different histories, the different components.

#### Cristin O'Keefe Aptowicz, 255

I think growing up in Philly, you definitely have the sense of like histories all around you, you know, but as you grow older, I think you become more aware of what you know, the agenda of the history that they that they choose to share with us. And the history that they don't I think that you know, sort of digging up and saying, Oh, we found these things we didn't even know were here is such a great metaphor and you sort of mentioned that sort of what stories get told; what stories don't get told. In your book, when you write about Central being a magnet school, you said, enroll kids from all over the city? Why did classmates from other zip codes have a lower funeral cap than me? How can the Birkenstocks set from Mount Airy and the South Philly headbangers shook their head when I asked if they had seen an open casket. So in terms of Philly, in terms of Central, you know, that diversity that we talked about while still being such a segregated city, and its practice -- How did that also inform your journey as the mother and a playwright that you've become?

#### Quiara Alegria Hudes, 254

Well, I should say, for everyone out there tonight, Central is literally all over this book, and I was in class of 254. I think some of my classmates are out there tonight. That was the graduating class of 95. So we started in 91, and ended in 95. And what was going down in the city at that time, as you know, as I came of age, was I had a big extended Puerto Rican family in North Philly. And those were



hard times they were really hard times now Central what my life wasn't all suffering. Central was a very strong point of joy for me a really exuberance and open doors. And then I would go to North Philly and there was also tremendous joy there we would dance we would merengue; Juan Luis Guerra put out this important album, Bachata Rosa, everyone was just like, everyone was doing bachata and merengue again, and these were joyous times. But the backdrop of that was also the AIDS epidemic was still ravaging the community. Crack-cocaine was still ravaging the community. And these are, these are close communities. So if the neighbor on the corner feels it; you feel it. You know, there's not picket fences around these homes, separating the families. And so I, I had this kind of increasing awareness. And that was that was in addition to things like educational segregation, because, you know, we got the best of it at Central! We got the best the city had to offer, you know, if any, if there's anyone Masterman related here, you know, sorry to make that assertion, but it's true.

#### Quiara Alegría Hudes, 254

But, you know, if you had other family members that went to other neighborhood schools, you saw, the education we got was a lot different than the education some of our cousins got. So I had beloved family members who were very smart, graduate from high school and unable to read, uh, you know, all - all of those things kind of were kind of this background home in my head. And during my Central years, I attended a few AIDS funerals in my family. I was devastated. I didn't understand it. I didn't, I didn't understand why, at Central, I found a way to start to understand it. But, I also noticed, okay, well, I have a lot of friends from a lot of different neighborhoods here, and, you know, a lot of different ethnic backgrounds. And they don't seem to be facing these particular challenges in the same way. So what's going on in my community? And I had to educate myself to find those answers.

#### Cristin O'Keefe Aptowicz, 255

And, and in doing so, you helped found PEACH: Peer Educating Against Contracting HIV. which I think was, I dare say, like, a foundational moment, and so many kids, students of Central, I definitely remember my experience and having my peach educator Cory Caswell, 255. And it was, it was, you know, you

really felt like you were being treated like an adult to have a peer and she was like, 13-14, you know, put a condom on a banana and, you know, hold it firmly at the base. And, you know, and I came into that being like, oh, I'll be able to handle it and came out of it like this. I, you know, so like, wow, I'm a kid still. But that informed the rest of my life and how I saw important sex education was and the information and that came from you. So I wanted to thank you. And if anyone wants to read more about PEACH and what happened to it, which I did not realize, feel free to pick up Quiara's book, which I cannot recommend enough.

Quiara Alegría Hudes, 254

We have some. I think we might have some PEACH members here.

Cristin O'Keefe Aptowicz, 255

Oh, yeah.

Quiara Alegría Hudes, 254

Yeah. Debbie Cesario says that she still has her PEACH handbook. You know, I thought we had some PEACH participants here in the audience. PEACH was, it was a club. It was like an after school club. But what we had in common was we cared about the AIDS epidemic. That's it. That's what we had in common. And how we acted on that was we got trained by the Red Cross, yeah, and went into health classrooms and rolled condoms onto bananas and said, you know, here's how you protect against pregnancy, but you don't protect against HIV or STDs. Here's what STDs are, you know, and some classmates didn't want to hear it. And some classmates just couldn't stop giggling. But it was empowering a sense that peer education also was valid at school. You know, we went and did the AIDS Walk, we raised a lot of money. And there was a sense of - it was really a relief to me to feel I was not alone in that.

Cristin O’Keefe Aptowicz, 255

And it and it had wings because through PEACH, it inspired us to create SAGA, the Straight and Gay Alliance, which turned into Glisten, the Gay Lesbian, Straight Student Teacher Network, and then the acronyms kept evolving. But it made a presence. We were one of the first high schools in the country to have a straight and gay Alliance. And that was born from the education that came from PEACH, that sort of destigmatize talking about not just heteronormative sex, so thank you for that.

Cristin O’Keefe Aptowicz, 255

But in this part of the discussion, I kind of want to shift over to bring Ms. Nehez, who was both of our creative writing teacher, and I think, for me, and maybe you can also echo this Quiara. One of the things that Miss Nehez brought so much into the classroom in terms of the reading materials that we were given, that were challenging and nuanced, and adult. But she also helped us see outside of the classroom, I know Miss Nehez has personally put applications for Young Playwrights. She put applications for me for the Pennsylvania Governor's School for the Arts, and made it evident to me I didn't just need to rely on whether or not I got into that latest issue of the Mirror, our literary Journal, about whether or not my work and value but then I can get out and mix with other students across the city and with the state. So as we introduce Miss Nehez in this conversation, what are some of your foundational memories of what you learned, both in her class in specific in English and creative writing classes in Central.

Quiara Alegría Hudes, 254

I came to Central late I came in 10th grade and I took the writing my first year with her so she was my creative writing teacher. And you know, maybe in some ways she put that kind of peer education bug in me because thinking about what happened in that class, it was really set up like, honestly, like a writing workshop that an MFA student would go to, we read, both classical and also notably contemporary writing, which you didn't get to do a lot in high school. And we would write it and we would critique each other's work, but with a tremendous amount of respect. And I wouldn't say delicacy, but respect and rigor, not to

point out its flaws, but really to bear witness to each other as writers. And I still have that approach. I mean, I have taught at Wesleyan, I have taught at Brown, and I still have that approach of I'm not, you know, if we're forming a community of writers, I'm not here to tear down and tell you everything that's wrong. I'm here to reflect back to you what I see that you've created to make sure it's what you intended to create, you know, and it was amazing! I made such good friends in those writing circles because she would put us together and say, critique each other's work. Listen to each other's work. She had a very kind of energetically curious but gentle way of pushing the students. I got into Young Playwrights because of her - Philadelphia Young Playwrights - and I met my boyfriend, who then became my husband, Ray Beauchamp. You know, and we were flirting, and we were dating and then he showed me the short stories. He had written a different year in Ms. Nehez's class and I was like, Oh, he's, he's a really good writer. So that kind of sealed the deal. So I, I hope her is foundational in a lot of regards.

Cristin O'Keefe Aptowicz, 255

You've created two children now Ms. Nehez through the vessel of your writing exercises. So please welcome to the discussion, Ms. Nehez. Ms. Nehez, Do you remember having Quiara in the classroom? I know I do want to say that you passed me her play for Young Playwrights because we were doing short plays. And I remember Quiara, did it take place on two ladders.

Quiara Alegría Hudes, 254

It was an alleyway and the two bedroom windows that were opposite.

Cristin O'Keefe Aptowicz, 255

Yes. And so they would come they would talk down here and come out that

Ms. Carole Nehez

You only came back visibly to me.

Cristin O'Keefe Aptowicz, 255

Yeah, I remember you said look at Quiara

Ms. Carole Nehez

It was years and it brought me back there.

Cristin O'Keefe Aptowicz, 255

Yeah, like look at how she doesn't it's not just a short story that you've put on a stage. She uses the whole space and the creativity and intimacy that comes with that like bring into your own work. I was a tall order but what, what memories do you have teaching Quiara?

Ms. Carole Nehez

I just remember her as being in that circle. And I felt that I learned so much from just listening to Quiara and the other kids talk about each other's work. Their just way of being with each other. I want to say that I'm thrilled to be with the two of you. You know, you're writing - both of you - is superb. I'm just so proud of you. So proud. I've got to be careful.

Cristin O'Keefe Aptowicz, 255

You're going to make us all cry; I have been stuck in the house for 15 months, this is a lot.

Ms. Carole Nehez

I want to ask Quiara some questions.

Cristin O'Keefe Aptowicz, 255

Yes, the stage is yours.

Ms. Carole Nehez

I actually, the first one. I love the title. And everybody should read this. I hope next time, Cristin that I will be able to concentrate on your work, which blows me away. And I said before we started - the best love poems I've ever read burn right off the page. They were amazing, amazing, wonderful stuff. This book is wonderful. I really loved it. It made me It made me laugh. It broke my heart. Um, I love the title "broken language." And I wondered Quiara if you would just talk a little bit because there's so much possibility in that title. So much of you in that title.

Quiara Alegría Hudes, 254

Sure. Um, you know, it probably stems most kind of baldly, from the fact that I come from two parents who have two different mother tongues. My mother's first language was Spanish, my father's was English. And I as my first language was English. And so I was always aware, I grew up with fluency in a different language than my mother, and so I noticed the way she talked about things, and I kind of loved it. But I was aware of it too. I was aware that sometimes it might get her into trouble or like single her out in places. I was also ashamed being half Latina, I was like, I'm not enough. I had this like, kind of mixed identity, all these questions surrounding that, including the language question, like if I was significantly better in English than in Spanish, then was I not Puerto Rican enough? Was I not boricua enough? Was I not Spanish enough? These were questions that stayed with me that you know, being naturally curious. And being a writer, I was always kind of following the threads of them and then there were so many other languages at Central I dove headfirst into music. Music was one of the main languages I grew up with and this was many styles playing Bach and Beethoven playing Chopin. Chopin was a lifesaver because I was a very depressed and melancholy teenager, and that just helped me express that side of myself. There was body language. We were a very physical family; we would literally heal each other. When we were sick, we were each other's caretakers, but we danced too, and we slapped each

other's butts and we kissed each other's foreheads. And you know, so there were all of these languages, then plus the visual languages I grew up in I would go to the Philadelphia Art Museum. It was free on Sunday mornings, and I would go there, and I would look at their art collection week after week after week. I would look at the thrones. My mother was a priest in lukumi, which was more kind of widely known as Santeria. And our living room itself was like a piece of installation art, it was stunning, the thrones that she had made from hand, just staying up night after night at the sewing machine. So, all these languages that I was around, none of which I was fluent, except for English. But English didn't have all the vocabulary to describe all of who I was. So, I really needed those languages, those other languages that were more broken for me, I had to still use them, even though there was discomfort, and a lack of fluency. And I put them together at the end. The book goes beyond Central High; it goes to college and then to graduate school, and I'm able to find a way I think. Central was a big steppingstone, I think your class was a big stepping stone, to find a way to put those broken languages together and tell my story and make my own language out of that.

Ms. Carole Nehez

Thank you.

Cristin O'Keefe Aptowicz, 255

And that's a that is one of the things that I loved most about the book, Quiara, is that it it shows all of these different strands of your life and how you were forced sometimes to weave them together and how joyously sometimes weave them together and that curiosity that I talked about, you know, how it's inspiring. By the end to make you want to share your own stories, I imagine that after reading this book, people are gonna want to have conversations with their family members with their parents, who they want to know more stories about, or their children who they want to pass their stories to simply because of how much you honored the people in your life and how and the gifts they gave you. One of the things, there's two things I want to mention, one is sort of a bit of housekeeping, which is, you know, we're so grateful to Ms. Nehez, for the foundation that she provided to both of our careers as writers, but also as people, I think the way that, you know, she approached writing and the diverse voices, both moderate

and classical that she brought into our lives, informed how we went out into the world.

### Cristin O'Keefe Aptowicz, 255

And that right now Central is doing a fundraiser for improving their arts at school. So, I really strongly encourage you to check the chat and look at the link and help donate to make the next generations at Central to have the experiences that we have even more enriched. I donate \$255 today, 255. So, feel free to use your own graduating class as a guide to how you donate.

### AACHS Alumni Office

Consider making a gift today to honor our traditions and standards of excellence that support the students of today and the alumni of tomorrow.

<https://centralhighalumni.com/leading-the-way-capital-campaign/>

### Cristin O'Keefe Aptowicz, 255

And the other thing I wanted to mention, as we sort of close out the moderated discussion. And again, please feel free to put questions in the chat or send them to Cynthia, for asking in our Q&A, is that one of the things I really love so much and resonated so much with is the respect and honor that you paid to women throughout the book, you know, I feel like so much of the book, ask the question of why don't we know these stories? Why aren't these sorts of women, these even archetypes of women respected more in, in our society, and in our literature, one of my favorite parts was an exchange you had when you first came to Central talking about Death of the Salesman where you're like, what is the tragedy of this man's life that he can, you know, like, that he didn't end up being like a superstar, like he's healthy, he's got children and a house and a life and everyone's healthy and living like, does he is he aware of how the other world works? And I thought that was, you know, such a wonderful exchange, in contrast with the honor that you paid to so many women who suffered so greatly, but triumph so greatly in their own way, raising beautiful, vibrant families and creating such memorable moments. So would you speak a little bit about that, especially



considering Central did not have women for so long, specifically, teaching talking to the women here, um, you know, how important was it to resurrect the stories of women.

### Quiara Alegría Hudes, 254

In some ways, it was an accident of my birth, because I just happened to be born into a very female-heavy, large family. So that's just the statistical reality that I was born into. But beyond that, it really is a conscious choice. And I tell you, like, I've written a lot of plays, and a lot of those plays have male protagonists and female protagonists. But with this book, it really was a conscious kind of curated decision, which is I'm gonna, I'm gonna tell my woman's world. And it was one of the most liberating writing experiences I have ever had. Because there's so much to tell, there's so much to tell! And the problem with a lot of our matriarch stories, you know, getting forgotten through oral history not being recorded as much is that actually like, okay, the women lose out, but so do the men and so does the nation, so does culture at large because we have such a special sauce, we have so much richness and diversity just amongst ourselves and each other. And so, the world is also not benefiting from those generations after generations of inherited wisdom; of healing practices; of different methods and practices of how to be strong because you know, so many of us have been conditioned against basically being strong in a masculine sense. So, we find other ways of strength - other modalities of how power works and how power isn't necessarily at the expense of others. You know, it's kind of like an anti-marketplace vibe. It was just a wonderful space to live while I was writing the book, I have to I was so nervous when people started logging on to this because I've been doing this book tour for two weeks now. And it has this is probably not a great sales pitch at the present event, but it has mostly been women coming to talk about the book. And I was like, there are so many on this Zoom and I, I want men to read this too. And I want men to immerse themselves in these wonderful women's stories. And when we were even doing tech check, and I just got to see your face and got to see Carol Nehez's face. It just it felt so exhilarating and right, and energizing to be again, you know, in in this these company of women and amazing women. So yeah, it's I take it to heart that that was something that you felt about the book.

Cristin O’Keefe Aptowicz, 255

Yeah. And I like to tell people because I write marginalized stories in my nonfiction books. And I like to tell people, they're not marginalized, because there was like an important story that pushed them out. They were like, purposely excluded. You know, there's a narrative that people like to tell themselves and our country is no different. And, and they'll exclude things that challenged that. And so, you know, your story is such a wonderful Philadelphia Story. And anyone that loves Philadelphia, should read it because they were denied it. Because it has never been celebrated in the way that it should have. And you've done this great service and bringing it into the center again. So, I want to thank you for that.

Ms. Carole Nehez

I have a question too. It seemed to me that I know your mother really reminded you of your writing life and encouraged you in that direction. But she also gave you I think a permission to write your family and your people here in Philadelphia to write that story. And I come from a big Sicilian family also matriarchal. My father was killed young, so I knew his family less than there's a similarity. But I really understood when you talked about the silences in the family and the secrets. And that's, that's a huge responsibility to handle that and to write it. And I wondered what that was like for you? How did that feel to have that on your shoulders?

Quiara Alegria Hudes, 254

So for thank you for asking that. And for those people out there. Just to give a little context here, some of those secrets include things I've already mentioned, like HIV and AIDS, different literacy levels in the family. I also mentioned the history of coerced sterilization in the island of Puerto Rico that my grandmother was one such recipient. She was sterilized coercively by the government, um, these were, these are things that there's a tremendous amount of shame around and we just plus the, it's just so heavy, it's like, it's not dinner table talk. You know, we couldn't we couldn't face it. It's like, if you stare directly into the sun, you go blind. And I also think that things like secret governmental campaigns against women's health, and things like confusion around HIV and AIDS. facts, just

like we've experienced this year, we don't know all of the facts of COVID. And we've had to stumble our way towards more understanding and knowledge this year. Well, we didn't always have that knowledge. I remember a neighborhood friend, and he wouldn't, he didn't go to his brother's funeral. Because if you go into a room with the disease, you get the disease. And he didn't go to and they were close. And it's the biggest regret of his life because he could never take that back. Once he found out that that was not true that that was not how transmission worked. But I didn't see my I didn't say goodbye to my brother. So, to take these kind of secret things, these things that were just too painful to talk about, that we were that there was shame surrounding. It's hard, I'll admit it's not, um, fun. To get word to them, I was really scared. And yet, I trust that enough time and distance has passed that I can do so safe, I can do so without compromising the safety of my family. Um, and that it's time, you know, at a certain point, the truth has to step into the light. You know, and maybe it's too hard when when you're just in survival mode, but we're not in that survival mode. We got new problems to solve. The world has thrown new obstacles our way. So, let's look back and say, What was it like then honestly, and that can help inform how we're going to solve the next wave of issues and challenges that the community faces. But it's hard. You know, I mean, I wrote a really private book. And I know that some members of my family wish I hadn't written such a personal book, you know, and I did, I did, I did it with no intention to cause any pain or anything, it was really in the name of healing and honesty.

#### Ms. Carole Nehez

Yeah, in that last chapter in the book, when the women in your family are just walking around, and they're naked, valiantly, and they're scars, but they're beautiful. And it, it to me was the story, you know, just bearing it and it was beautiful.

#### Quiara Alegria Hudes, 254

I can't believe you mentioned this moment because, um, I don't want to give too much away about that for for anyone out there who knows my writing and who likes my writing, I will say that the beginning of the last chapter of this book is actually my favorite thing I've ever written. And I wrote it and I said, if that's if

that's the last thing I ever write, I'm just fine with that. I'm so happy to have put that into the world because it was about to me what women's bodies really look like, which is far more interesting and kind of gorgeous and sensual and wild than anything we see in you know, consumer, culture media.

Ms. Carole Nehez

And Cristin echoes in those amazing love poems.

Quiara Alegría Hudes, 254

No Cristin's writing is, you know, we were there's similar topics that that we're interested in.

Ms. Carole Nehez

Yeah.

Cristin O'Keefe Aptowicz, 255

Yes. Ah, no, it's it's a word. I cannot express it enough how much everyone should pick up this book. And and, again, if you want to support local independent bookstores, which is great, a great way to help support arts in general, instead of buying it from an Amazon, you know, I strongly encourage you to do that. And Quiara has been lovely enough to include the independent bookstores of her preference. So please feel free to pick up this book. I do want to leave room for Q&A. Cynthia, did you have any questions that you want to bring it from our larger community into this discussion?

Cynthia Lech, 263

Absolutely, so I will go ahead and begin that - give me a moment, I've got to just scroll up here.

Cristin O’Keefe Aptowicz, 255

Can we purchase the Central High School background for our Zooms?

Cynthia Lech, 263

We would gladly provide it.

Cynthia Lech, 263

So, to begin, this question is for Quiara. It's from Madi Burns of the 273rd class. For the new In the Heights movie, there were some updates made for a modern audience. For example, some lines and names were removed from 96,000 and a subplot of Dreamers were added. What was that discussion like to try to update for the world in the political environment today, but maintain the emotions and message of the original show?

Quiara Alegría Hudes, 254

So, In the Heights is my Broadway musical that I wrote with Lin Manuel Miranda, and then that was playing between like 2009 and 2012ish on Broadway. And then since then, we've been working on adapting as film, which is coming out in June. And yes, there were a lot of changes made to it, which were mentioned/ The main impulse to make any change was to really honor that theater and film are completely distinct mediums -- what they have in common is like characters and dialogue, but it just they function in totally different ways. And I just didn't want In the Heights, in the movies to feel like it was some sort of like trying to be a museum piece about a stage show. I wanted it to feel like it was its own cinematic experience. And so, for instance, there's a very technical answer to that question like, on stage, you really kind of need dialogue, unless there's like a fight scene or a kiss some very obvious action, you really need dialogue to mark what's happening. And a lot of the, the lyrics, for instance, from songs of In the Heights do that; they do the emotional work to say, this is how I feel right now. The thing is, it might take you two and a half minutes to sing that on stage, but on screen, you know, a five second closeup of someone's face literally does that entire work; it's very visual medium. And so, you have to start really looking at well, which

lines and which lyrics are telling and not showing, and you have to get those out of there because then the audience is going to be way ahead of you. So that's, it's almost a technical answer. And you know, that look, the Central nerd in me, I love this, I could do this stuff all day, you know. The different genres are so fun to write in. But I also I got to be honest, um, you know, it was it was a hard time for me and for my family and my fellow artists in the previous administration, and especially with the family separation stuff that was happening. You know, a lot of us I started a Latino artists wellness group, because honestly, I felt like, I felt really unwell. And how could I write and not address what some of those concerns were? And so I was like, I'm going to write about dreamers. I'm going to do that. I'm the writer I get to I get to do it, you know. And so yeah, I added a subplot about dreamers because that's the the story of In the Heights is about Dominicans; it's about Puerto Ricans; it's about Mexicans; about Central American South Americans. And unlike Puerto Ricans, no, we're just born with a US passport. We don't have immigration stories, we have migration stories, but beyond that, my community members, these are things that they're struggling with and facing. So I was excited to include that that update.

### Cynthia Lech, 263

Absolutely. And before I get into the next question, you know, I do think it's so important to write about your shared stories. And we actually had a comment from Kevin Maynard of the 257, who said, "listening to these stories, and remembering my time at CHS reminds me how much I love my time at dear Central High." And I think that really resonates even with Cristin, Quiara - we talked about that even in our pre-call and kind of just conversations that we've had. So it's always lovely to hear that from other alumni as well.

### Cynthia Lech, 263

Alright, so the next question. And this is from Lizzie Miller-Weyant of the 255th. class.

Cristin O'Keefe Aptowicz, 255

255!

Cynthia Lech, 263

Yes! The question is - the moment that we're in right now relates deeply to a lot of the issues that Quiara is discussing. As we recover from the COVID pandemic, how can we take some of these lessons into the long road to addressing our nation's history of racism?

Cristin O'Keefe Aptowicz, 255

An easy question, Quiara; a softball question. Haha

Quiara Alegría Hudes, 254

Whew, you know that that is the question. I feel in some ways lucky. For instance, about *In the Heights*, that piece is really very joyous. And the book, *My Broken Language* - I'm looking down to the side because it's sitting here by me, but I had to include tremendous scenes of exhilaration; of joy; of party; of life; of love, um, because it would be too much to take otherwise. And so, I feel personally speaking, how to move forward for me is with tenderness and softness and delicacy balanced with truth and courage. I'm not by nature, an aggressive person. So, I always admire people can just like get themselves into the, you know, into the civic ring and just start duking it out. But that's never been a strategy that works for me. So, I always try to measure tenderness with with the rougher aspects of things.

Cynthia Lech, 263

Absolutely. This question is from Steve Burnstein of the 222nd. He is a board member. It's for both Quiara and Cristin - what advice would you give to a young person who wants to pursue a career in the arts? And I think, Carol, this is where you also could chime in, as someone who has sort of shaped these, these young individuals, right, throughout their kind of career and interests in the arts.

Quiara Alegría Hudes, 254

Do you want to go first, Carol?

Ms. Carole Nehez

No you go ahead, I mean, you guys are out there writing, you know.

Quiara Alegría Hudes, 254

Um, I would say to do it every chance you get, and, um, to read and write the stuff, find the reading that you love, you know. Life is short so don't struggle through stuff that you're not connecting with. Just move on, find the reading that you love. Write, write like every day is an experiment and every day is a shopping spree of words. You know, just just jump in and have fun. It's not work, it's play, play, you know, even even the heavy stuff, even the sad stuff, even the emotional stuff, even the difficult political stuff. It is play what we do with words and don't forget that and so yeah, don't don't worry about like, if you're in high school, don't worry about like, getting into college off your writing none of that. That's that's push that aside and just tell us what you want to tell us and trust we will be here to listen. Find someone who can listen - find someone who can read it.

Ms. Carole Nehez

I also heard an exchange Quiara between you and Paula Vogel and she was saying to you, I think it was something that she told you when you first came to Brown, and she said, the writing the writing, it's a muscle. And the more you do it, the stronger it gets. I thought that was great.

Quiara Alegría Hudes, 254

So true. Because when I got to Brown, she said, Okay, I want you to write a full-length play in 48 hours, I said, lady, you must be out of your mind. And she said, trust me, yeah, writing is a muscle, it gets stronger. And indeed, and you know,



what I was really strong with that muscle while I was at Central because I was writing in Ms. Nehez's class; I was writing in Dr. Phillips' class; I was writing in the Mirror; I was writing for the Centralizer. You know, it was nonstop for me, I just didn't, I wasn't consciously flexing that muscle, I was just doing it because it was joyous for me.

### Cristin O'Keefe Aptowicz, 255

And there's another thing which you mentioned in the book, which I think is another point to share with young artists is sort of also do it yourself. You know, you and I both have a history of Zines, which were very big in the 90s. And may or may not have been allowed on school property. But one of the gifts that I am grateful for is a history of creating, of self publishing, of organizing, of being behind the scenes, and seeing what it means to be an artist from the other side. And so if you as you're creating your own work, and reading and absorbing, you know, go to your bookstore, when they allow it and, and go to every event and see if you can help with their events, or organize a you know, speakers to come into your local group. And I think you'll have a better sense of what it means to be a working artist, once you're on the other side of, of the equation, so that when you are put in the position of the visiting artists, or the person who promised you would submit something by a deadline. As an artist, you're like, but I need more time. I need the muse. But once you've created, you know edited the literary journal or Zine, you go no homie, I need to put this to print, whatever you have, is gonna have to be good enough. And so I think that's another good thing is, is don't look at your art as this precious thing that cultivates you away from the world. You know, get in on the ground level, roll up your sleeves, create your own scenes, spotlight other authors, bring people into your community. And and that will be a lesson that you'll carry with you for the rest of your career.

### Ms. Carole Nehez

Right or get together with friends who are also writing and read - share your stuff, and talk about it together. I think that's great.

### Cristin O'Keefe Aptowicz, 255

Horizontal loyalty - that's that's a phrase, you know, people think you need to have a mentor or go to the right school, in order to achieve in the arts, but scientists actually studied it. And they discovered something called horizontal loyalty, which means that you meet with peers whose work you respect, whose work ethic you respect, and you connect with them and as one rises, we all rise, because people who are your age are going to experience a career in the arts that's unique to your generation in a way that a mentor, you know, simply can't. So yes, it's a follow up on Ms. Nehez - connect with your peers and the people you admire and form those relationships, or marry them in the case of Quiara.

### Cynthia Lech, 263

I have a few more questions, and certainly just want to get to those before we close. And this one is for Quiara. Could you talk more about the importance of music. And this came from Charlie Berg of the 231st you know, both at Central (classical) and salsa (Latin music). He notes that he was a Jewish kid at Central playing salsa in Philly in the early 70s. So he just wants to learn more about the importance of music to you.

### Quiara Alegría Hudes, 254

Wonderful tradition of Jewish instrumentalists and musicians contributing to the salsa movement. So you know, I hear that and they recognize that thing about Larry Larry Harlow, who was very important in funny all stars, it's a great tradition. Um, this gets a little bit off of Central but I'll try to weave it back in. You know, I had the good fortune of being born into a family that had a musician and and, and at that a female musician, which was my aunt Linda. She was the composer for the Big Apple circus for 20 years. You know, she moonlighted as a punk rock chick at CBGBs. And she was the only chick instrumentalists in sight. There were not other women in that club who weren't singing, but she was the bandleader and the composer. She wrote all their crazy songs. And she taught me how to play piano; she taught me how to use my ear because I only saw her a few times a year. So she taught me how to use my ear so I could keep teaching myself. I didn't take formal piano lessons till much later. So when I got to Central, I didn't quite have the chops of some of the other kids who had been really who were more technical, and more proficient as instrumentalists. But I was still playing by

ear. I played in jazz band at Central, I dabbled in choir. I took music theory, which was a wonderful, that was wonderful experience. There was a tiny little room behind the choir room that had an upright piano and like enough space to pull the bench out. So you could kind of sit up against the piano. I spent hours in there, writing love songs, writing jazzy tunes. And, you know, to be honest, when you grow -- and plus in Philly, you know, Philly is one of the historic r&b cities other than Detroit in this nation. So I was seeing the Roots were playing on the street corner, you know, they were playing Pass the Popcorn before it was an album and before it was played on Power99 FM, there was a lot of amazing music happening in the city. And to be honest, I got to Yale, I was a music major and it was a shock, because within that department, there was one kind of music and that was it. And don't you bring the rest of them that knew the rest of this other stuff into the classroom. And I was like, I could feel -- I loved my time at Yale, I learned a lot, but I was like, it's not as good as Central. You know, like Central had some advantages over these kind of more rarefied spaces I entered later. And the diversity was a big one.

### Cynthia Lech, 263

Absolutely, I think some of our starstruck alumni and friends, including Joe Rosenberg, of the 212 kind of talk about your growing up in Philadelphia, and, you know, how did you get to know Washington Heights so deeply in order to write about the book for the show? And how did you and Lin Manuel find each other?

### Quiara Alegría Hudes, 254

To me, I got to New York and it was so different than Philly. The subway like honestly felt a lot safer. Um, half my adolescence in Philly was spent like on totally isolated street corners waiting for a SEPTA bus that never came like I was you know, I was always messed with when I was alone, it was you know, so getting to work I was like, Oh wow, I can walk around there's people around I was much bolder to explore and I moved here I moved to Washington Heights. I you know, I How did I learn how

### Quiara Alegría Hudes, 254

Someone said that we should trademark "Yale not as good as Central."

### Quiara Alegría Hudes, 254

I learned how to I learned the neighborhood the same way I learned everything else that I researched in my plays, which is like you just dive in headfirst. You take the time and you get to know something on the level of the thing. So like, I hung out in restaurants, I hung out in parks, like I you know, I eavesdropped on the subway. I would I wrote a lot of In the Heights going up and down the subway line just in Washington Heights, just to get a vibe of like, who's getting on who's getting off, you know, what's the flow of traffic. So that's how I was able to write about it. And that the, the way that Lin and I met was that I had already been a playwright writing out of the community in North Philly. So I was already writing about en baquío as I called it, and one of the producers of In the Heights heard one of my plays read and was like, you know, I'm producing this thing, but it's a similar neighborhood, but it's in New York, can I connect you with someone and it wasn't but a week later, Lin and I met for the first time and started telling our family stories and realized that there was some common stuff we shared that we wanted to write about together.

### Cynthia Lech, 263

That's truly serendipitous. You know, this evening, lots of folks have messaged saying that they've ordered your book. And you know, it's absolutely a wonderful read. And, you know, of course, it talks about Central, but there's so much more that Quiara kind of weaves in and out of her writing, and including Cristin as well. And so we have shared those links for their books below. So feel free to click the order button. And of course, we're here to help. So if you have any questions you want to reach out to us, we're happy to support your ordering the books.

### Cynthia Lech, 263

And the last question we have, and this gentlemen Earl Ross of the 242nd who has mentioned that he's just ordered your book but he loves the title: My Broken Language. The title evokes so much about the stories and the experiences many

BIPOC students calibrate in academic spaces. So what he - his question is, to what extent has writing been a form of reclaiming one's humanity and cultural expressions?

Quiara Alegría Hudes, 254

Yeah, to every possible extent. I mean, this is this is where I proselytize to people of all ages. You know, because I really do feel I felt to get sitting down in Ms. Nehez's class the first day the the the approaches everyone has or Writer. So here we go. And I, it makes me think of something Toni Morrison said, and I'm gonna, I'm gonna butcher the quote, but she essentially said, "I stood on the margin and claimed it as center. And other people were welcome to join me at at center, if they chose." It's to, you know, to stand in a story and say, you know, I will not be silent to stories, I will speak and tell my story, the way I choose to tell it not not the story someone else is putting on me. It's so liberating. And actually, it's a, it's not like you, you, you make that declaration, and then you just say everything you've already always known. No, it's actually, that's the first step for me of self education. Because once I sit at my desk, once I'm taking a walk, and I'm saying no, I'm going to tell a story, then that really start asking all these internal questions. I'm going super deep and digging, like digging in my like soul garden and being like, but what is the story actually? I know what I think the story is, oh, the story is about a girl who's half Puerto Rican, half white, like -- Okay, that's kind of obvious. But what's really the story? What does that mean? And I discover so much about my own humanity. So it's not just reclaiming it, it's actually discovering it in a new way. And I want everyone to have that experience. I think that there's little, that's more powerful than than telling one story.

Cynthia Lech, 263

We lost Cristin there for a moment. But I think she has just joined us again.

Cynthia Lech, 263

So, you know, I'm going to kind of wrap up here, but just truly tremendous conversation tonight! And you know, we thank you - Quiara, Cristin, and Carole,

for an enlightening and organic conversation. I learned so much, and gained a greater sense of dedication and really a commitment to the arts. You know, we appreciate each of you for sharing your insight and experience at Central, and where it's taken you since your time behind those, these Crimson doors.

Cynthia Lech, 263

There truly has never been a more critical moment to invest in the future of Central High School. Please consider making a gift today to honor our traditions and standards of excellence that support the students of today and the alumni of tomorrow. We thank you, everyone for joining us, and we certainly welcome your feedback or suggestions on future alumni speaker series. Thank you so much. Take care everyone.

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