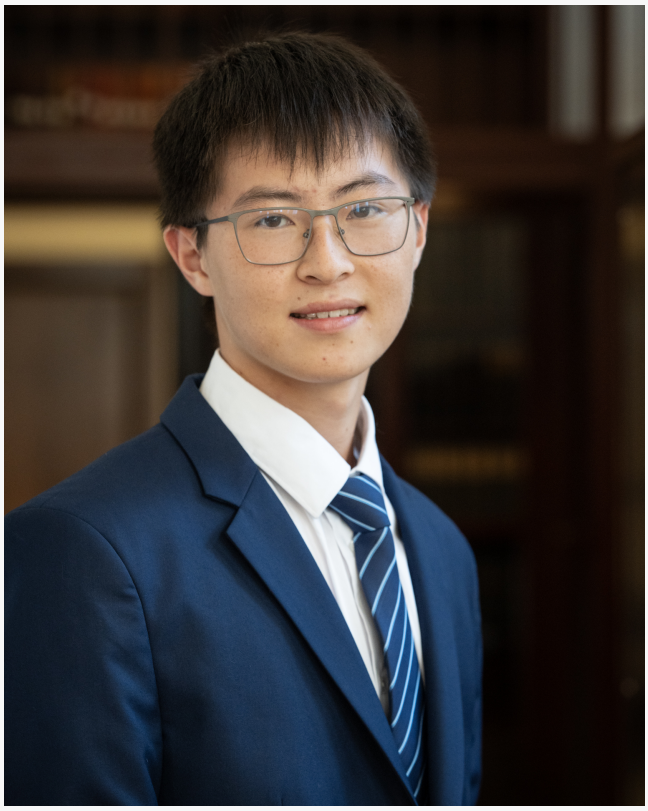
Student-Written Play "No Swears Academy" Premieres to a Full House in Providence

Benefit performance by Phillips Exeter student Gary Guo supports education for immigrant, refugee and low-income students via Oasis International.



Gary Guo, a Phillips Exeter Academy student and the playwriter of “No Swears Academy,” a student-created play exploring academic pressure, mental health and the joy of learning.

PROVIDENCE, RI, UNITED STATES, September 6, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- No Swears Academy," an original play written by high school student Gary Guo, made its public debut Aug. 26 at the Providence Public Library in Rhode Island, drawing a full house for an evening that combined youth theater, education and community service.

The benefit performance brought together students, educators, families and community members in support of Oasis International, a Rhode Island-based 501(c)(3) nonprofit serving African immigrant communities and low-income neighborhoods in Providence. Proceeds and donations from the event were designated to support the organization’s youth and scholarship programs.

Audience members responded throughout the performance to the play's mixture of humor and serious social themes. Laughter accompanied its comic exchanges and recognizable details of student life, while scenes involving academic pressure, strained family relationships, loneliness and emotional distress created quieter moments of reflection. The performance concluded with sustained applause for Guo and the cast, marking a successful first staging of the work.

"No Swears Academy" follows Brian, JK, Clara and their classmates during the first week of school. A summer reading assignment involving "Flowers for Algernon" by Daniel Keyes, a disagreement over fish tacos and the unexpected happiness created by a case of Capri-Sun become part of a broader story about how teenagers respond to competition, expectations and

uncertainty.

At the beginning of the play, Brian is focused on earning straight A's and gaining admission to Harvard. He measures progress through grades and views education primarily as a path to academic achievement. As the story develops, conversations with friends, teachers and members of his family lead him to reconsider that approach. He begins to see learning not only as a requirement, but also as a source of curiosity, independence and freedom.



Cast members perform during the premiere of “No Swears Academy” at the Providence Public Library on Aug. 26, 2026.


The cast brings “No Swears Academy” to the stage during its benefit performance supporting Oasis International’s youth and scholarship programs.

Another central character, JK, uses jokes to entertain his friends and conceal a deeper sense of isolation. His storyline introduces questions about adolescent mental health and the difficulty of recognizing distress when it is hidden behind humor, privilege or apparent confidence. The character's experiences encourage students and adults to look beyond outward appearances and to take emotional well-being seriously.

In an interview with BARTV, Guo said Brian should not be understood as a direct portrait of the playwright. Rather, the character combines qualities and experiences Guo has observed among many students, including himself.

Guo recalled seeing students spend “all of their time chasing an A.” He added, “I once was doing that too.” Over time, he began asking whether he was genuinely interested in what he was studying and whether grades alone could show that meaningful learning had taken place.

Guo said his thinking changed when he discovered that interest and curiosity allowed him to participate more fully in class, ask better questions and engage more deeply with difficult material. He came to view a grade as one indication of how well a student had mastered a particular subject, rather than the sole measure of meaningful learning.

"The joy in learning" is the most important message he hopes audiences carry with them, Guo said. Education, in his view, creates opportunities and gives people more paths from which to choose. Knowledge has greater value when it is joined with moral awareness, emotional health and a willingness to use what one has learned to help others.



A scene from “No Swears Academy,” a student-written play exploring academic pressure, friendship, family relationships and mental health.



The cast of “No Swears Academy” takes a final bow following the successful premiere and benefit performance at the Providence Public Library.

Guo traced the play's initial inspiration to his experience in a highly competitive academic environment, where he found himself surrounded by highly accomplished students and increasingly focused on earning top grades. Reading "Flowers for Algernon" prompted him to examine the relationship between intelligence, happiness and moral responsibility. He then began considering how those questions could be shared beyond the classroom.

Theater offered an appropriate medium. Guo has been involved in acting and theater for approximately six years and said the stage can open audiences to ideas in a way that is both immediate and personal. By placing serious concerns inside a humorous school story, he sought to make the characters recognizable rather than symbolic and to give audiences space to connect with difficult subjects.

Humor was also a deliberate creative decision. Guo said the opening of the play introduces intense family pressure, and he did not want the production to feel relentlessly stressful. Comic dialogue helps keep the audience engaged, but it also reveals how imperfect people continue searching for happiness while carrying burdens that may not be visible to those around them.

Guo's educational background also shaped the play. He spent the first 13 years of his life in China's public school system and described his early education as largely focused on absorbing information and memorizing facts. After moving to the United States, he encountered a more

discussion-based learning environment.

At Phillips Exeter Academy, Guo participates in classes using the Harkness method, in which students and a teacher sit around a table and exchange ideas. He said the approach encouraged him to ask "why," consider the author and context behind a source, compare information and form conclusions from multiple perspectives.

Guo is a rising sophomore at Phillips Exeter Academy as well as a writer, actor and student journalist. According to event materials, his work has received recognition through the Scholastic Art & Writing Awards, The New York Times and the John Locke Global Essay Prize.

Julie Batten, the play's director, Guo's writing advisor and his instructor for the past four years, said the production demonstrated the power of words to create meaning between people. For Batten, writing is not primarily about punctuation or vocabulary, but about communicating with another human being and using language to affect the world.

She also connected the play's academic themes to a larger concern about the expectations placed on teenagers in intensely competitive environments.

"Nothing is more valuable than a life," Batten said. "Not a Harvard degree, not a fancy car. Not a nice home."

Batten praised the cast for bringing the play to the stage while balancing professional, academic and family responsibilities. Cast members included busy adults as well as younger performers managing the beginning of a new school year. Each participant gave up time or rearranged responsibilities to create what she described as an offering to the community.

"They did an amazing job," Batten said, adding that Guo "poured his heart into it."

The charitable purpose of the performance was central to the project. Guo said he began looking for a local nonprofit organization after deciding that he wanted his creative work to benefit the community around him. His search led him to Oasis International and its youth initiatives.

Oasis International has served the local community for more than three decades, according to Guo's interview. Its programs support education, scholarships, mentoring, creativity, leadership development and civic engagement. The organization also provides college scholarships to high school students, helping young people pursue higher education and expand their future opportunities.

Muraina 'Morris' Akinfolarin, Oasis International's founding member and executive director, attended the performance and welcomed Guo's decision to use a student-created theater production as a form of community support.

Akinfolarin said Guo's initiative was personally meaningful because he is also an immigrant and remembers his own experience arriving in the United States at a young age. He praised Guo for taking independent action and expressed hope that Oasis International would continue finding opportunities to collaborate with him.

"I think it's marvelous," Akinfolarin said. "I think it's a job well done."

He also encouraged young people to continue their education and continually reinvent themselves. Education, he said, is something a person can hold on to throughout life and something that cannot be taken away. His message applied not only to immigrants, but to anyone seeking a stronger future.

For Guo, turning the play into a benefit performance reflected his own experience of receiving support. He grew up in rural China and came to the United States as an English-language learner. Along the way, he said, teachers, tennis coaches, voice instructors and other mentors helped him develop the confidence and skills to pursue new opportunities.

"I would like to pay that kindness forward to the world," Guo said.

He hopes to become a creator who is brave enough to be specific, open enough to listen and disciplined enough to finish what he begins. He does not view writing, acting, directing, journalism and charitable organizing as separate pursuits. Instead, he hopes to bring them together in projects that benefit society and invite other people to participate in community service.

The premiere of "No Swears Academy" demonstrated that a student production can do more than present a story. By drawing a full audience, encouraging conversations about education and mental health, and raising support for students and families, the event connected creative expression with practical community action.

Guo said even a small contribution can have a meaningful effect. Through future performances and collaborations, he hopes to continue using theater to bring people together, expand educational opportunity and encourage students to find not only achievement, but purpose and joy in learning.

For more information about Oasis International, visit www.oasisri.org.

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