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Adversity and Verse

by Kevin Merida

His goal is to win the Nobel Prize for Literature. Words just dance in his head. He stitches them together like a couturier, then wields them like a lyrical samurai.

Is he limping, walking on three legs,
slumped akimbo, eating mashed potatoes
and vanilla pudding for dessert?

Larry Robertson is 14. When I met him at Hart Middle School in Southeast, he was dressed in white jeans and a white T-shirt and wearing a black wool glove on his left hand. A black wool FUBU cap was pulled down over his forehead. If Larry is Hart's poet laureate, he certainly looked the part.

"I want to be so well known that they ask me to do readings and speak at universities and pay me a whole lot of money," he said.

I love Larry's confidence because I know so many kids who don't have any. The thing is, there are Larry Robertsons all over the city -- all over America -- in schools written off as too troubled to instill hope. We need to erase some myths about public education -- namely, that there are environments in which kids simply can't excel.

What Hart is doing -- in a community that has struggled with economic disadvantages and drugs -- is showing kids their possibilities. Give some credit to Nancy Schwalb, who directs the Hart-based D.C. Creative Writing Workshop. The school is developing a roster of future literary stars -- kids like Delonte Williams, Roosevelt Jones, Pamula Twyman, Sitembile and Yasmine Knatt, Monique Covington and Amani Al-Fatah, a precocious 13-year-old who's written 108 pages of a novel she's been working on since fourth grade. Titled "Joey's New Neighborhood," it's about a rich black family that lives in a 320-room mansion but hasn't forgotten the folks it left behind.

"My biggest interest is in writing books," said Amani. "I like to write stuff with feelings, emotion."

If George Bush wants to do something worthwhile in his spare time, he should have his limo roll up to Sixth Street and Mississippi Avenue SE so he can give some presidential oomph to Hart's writing program. He could talk about how Hart may be the only inner-city middle school in the country with a literary magazine. Then he could walk around the neighborhood, where I once lived, and shake some hands, demystify Congress Heights for all those who watch the nightly news and wonder if anything good ever goes on there. "We want to have a program here that is such a shining example that parents will be camping outside to get into Hart," says Schwalb, whose goal is to establish the school as a citywide writing magnet.

You can see what the writing program has done for Larry Robertson. In sixth grade, kids picked on him because he was different, outspoken, independent. He would say things that didn't go over well with his peers: Basketball is stupid; black males who play sports stereotype themselves. He would change the radio station if a song came on that was degrading to females.

The result: He got into fights and got suspended a lot. Depressed, he started writing "to avoid doing something horrible." And he got better and better at it. He won writing awards, such as the Parkmont Poetry Festival contest, a citywide competition for public and private schools. For two years straight, he made the team representing D.C. in the National Teen Poetry Slam. And a funny thing happened: As his poetry took off, respect among his peers grew, and he stopped getting picked on, and he stopped getting into fights.

And how is Hart's poet laureate treated now? "Oh, standing ovations, applause and numerous positive comments that last for months," Larry said in deadpan fashion. "Nothing big."

Hardly a school assembly goes by that Larry isn't asked to do a reading.

It was like diving into your world
without a life preserver,
but I never died.
Cuz I have the average life span of an
evergreen.
Heart of branches with minor thorns,
not mature enough to pierce me into love.
That's why I was there wondering,
when will bliss be blunder?
so that misery will have its company
and cake.

Those passages are from "Folly," which I watched Larry write in 20 minutes, all 10 verses, as an exercise in Schwalb's after-school writing club.

Larry has become The Man at Hart, and not by bouncing a ball or pimp-walking through the halls trying to play gangsta. If only there were more programs in public schools designed to help kids find their niche, then we'd have more Larry Robertsons and Amani Al-Fatahs.

What I worry about are the kids whose talents never get nurtured, who get left behind simply because they haven't been shown their options, kids who don't aspire to win the Nobel Prize for Literature because no one has told them that it's possible.

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