

Teen poet slams opponents

War of words fought in Kay

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Thirteen-year-old Rhia Hardman couldn't stop smiling after she found out she won third place at Wednesday's Poetry Slam in Kay Spiritual Life Center, beating out not only three of her fellow classmates, but also graduate and undergraduate students from AU.

Hardman and her classmates made the trek from Charles Hart Middle School in Southeast D.C. to recite their own words on subjects ranging from death to the planet Saturn.

Four AU undergraduate and graduate students also performed poetry, while self-dubbed "Slam Master" Nicki Miller, an AU staff member, presided.

The Poetry Slam is an annual event held in conjunction with literature professor Betty T. Bennett's Experience of Poetry class. Contestants face off against one another to show off their lyrical talents, while five audience members judge their performances.

"I think it's really important that this event is in conjunction with a General Education class," Bennett said. "It introduces students to new poetry."

The slam also gives young teenagers the chance to deliver their poetry to an audience. Each year, students from Charles Hart Middle School participate in the competition. The school is the only inner-city public school in the country that produces a literature magazine, and students are strongly encouraged to voice their artistic side.

And they did. The small but engaged audience clapped and cheered on Shaquiel Jenkins, Raekala Middleton, Deandre Britten and Hardman as they recited their poems, and booed and hissed each time a judge gave one of them a low score.

For the four students, the actual competition was not as important as the opportunity to express themselves. Jenkins tackled the subject of being a confused teenager quite well, and Middleton's poem about herself was not only funny, but was even more powerful because of her spirited delivery and extroverted personality.

Middleton was not the only student who performed energetically. AU student John Breckman's poem on Whole Foods and its New Yorker-reading yuppies and their expensive tastes drew laughs from the audience, as did his reflection on chess games between him and family members. His readings earned him first place in the slam.

AU alumnus Derrick Brown's haiku series on late-night pizza in Adams Morgan, which he described as "Nastycrap.com" and "piss-colored cheese," was also a hit with the audience, placing him second.

Nothing could beat the attitudes of the Charles Hart students, however. When asked by an audience member what inspired people so young to write poetry, it did not take Jenkins long to think of his answer.

"My poems come from life experiences," he said. "They come from turning points in my life."

Jenkins, who aspires to be a Supreme Court justice, and the rest of his classmates will, one would hope, have more turning points that allow them to express themselves as they did Wednesday.

The D.C. Creative Writing Workshop, the program based out of Charles Hart Middle School, will host a reading by other students March 16 at 7 p.m. at Karibu Books at The Mall at Prince George's. For more information, visit www.dccww.org.



Media Credit: Aileen Dungee
John Breckman won a poetry slam featuring D.C. middle school students.