

East of the River

July 2004

East of the River News

By Eliza Barclay

"I crawled away into that soul of mine/ It was dark and musty like a rainforest at night," Shaquille Jenkins, an 8th grader with tightly sewn cornrow braids, uttered with lyrical cadence. The backdrop of shelves and shelves of glossy book spines provided an appropriate setting for Jenkins and his classmates from Charles Hart Middle School on June 7 as they read their finely tuned poetry at the Borders Books and Music at 18th and L Streets NW. It was their final public reading for the school year and the students seemed both nervous to be sharing their work and giddy to have an audience with summer in such close reach.

Jenkins and other Hart students in the 6th, 7th, and 8th grades are participants in the D.C. Creative Writing Workshop (DCCWW), a non-profit program that provides creative writing instruction to middle school students economically underserved areas of DC. Founded in 1995, DCCWW operates out of Hart at 601 Mississippi Ave SE in the Congress Heights neighborhood. The program consists of English classes with writers-in-residence who provide students with intensive literary instruction in creative writing and challenge the students to read and discuss sophisticated literature.

According to DCCWW, "The Workshop's writers-in-residence have introduced thousands of students to the joys of self-expression and the written word, opening for them a world of opportunity that exists outside the historically neglected area in which they live."

Beyond the classes, students have the option to participate in the activities of after-school clubs up to three days a week including a Writing Club, Drama Club, and Literary Magazine Club. The Workshop has also established a Reading Resource Center at Hart, which functions as a library for students in the program.

On June 7, the students were reading from the Summer 2004 edition of their literary magazine, hArtworks. hArtworks is the nation's first inner-city public middle school literary magazine and was recognized in the 2004 Poet's Market as "an outstanding example of what a literary magazine can be (for anyone of any age)."

On the sidelines at Borders, DCCWW Executive Director Nancy Schwalb nodded encouragingly at some of the younger students who were reading their poetry in public for the first time. Schwalb introduced each student with gusto, highlighting their achievements along their poetry-writing path.

"The kids are pretty full of themselves after they pulled off an amazingly good production of Aristophanes' 'The Frogs' on May 27th," Schwalb said.

As a public-private partnership with the Hart Middle School, the Workshop is able to provide the 600 students who attend Hart with more than 500 hours of programming, both during the school day and after school. DCCWW is able to keep administrative costs low because the organization is housed at Hart and shares office space, utilities, and management support. Unlike other organizations whose principal cost is overhead, DCCWW can spend 95% of the budget on programmatic work helping at-risk youth find an outlet through writing.

Not only has DCCWW students' work earned them praise from teachers and mentors, but they have also gone on to win awards including the Parkmont Poetry Contest, Larry Neal Award, Junior League Teen Poetry Contest, District Lines Poetry on Metro Contest, and National Teen Poetry Slam. Some student work has even been published in Potomac Review. In 2004, several Hart graduates who participated in DCCWW are going on to attend the Duke Ellington School of the Arts in NW DC and the School Without Walls, among other schools.

Not only has DCCWW helped to guide so many students to a brighter future, but it has also provided them with a medium in which to tell their stories, which are crucially important to the city's understanding of itself. Reginald Williams read a poem at the reading called "Poverty," which won him a prize in the Parkmont Poetry contest: "Nations are not shattered, memorials are not built./ Nobody will miss him. Not one person./ But some things will:/ The corner on which he sat,/ The tin cup which earned him a few cents each day of his miserable life."

For more information on D.C. Creative Writing Workshop, visit www.dccww.org, or call 202.297.1957.