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It's a Slam Jam, Ma'am, and That Should Be Poetry, Hear?

by James Warren.

The mention of First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton and a poetry slam may conjure a single image: Hillary heaving a copy of Walt Whitman's "Leaves of Grass" across her bedroom at a ducking president.

It is, after all, the book he purchased on Martha's Vineyard for a favorite former White House intern. Whether Monica Lewinsky is more inclined to Whitman Samplers than Walt Whitman remains unclear. But our first lady last week confronted a Chicago-born literary genre, best associated with smoky taverns, in the antiseptic setting of a junior high school in one of the capital's poorer neighborhoods.

The typical White House staging drummed most--but thankfully not all--of the passion out of an event that offers hope that not all is lost amid the disarray of urban public education.

"It has changed me a little bit," Russell Jackson, 14, attired in a black-and-silver Oakland Raiders football jersey, would say later about his encounter with poetry.

"When I was angry, I'd pick up a pencil instead and write." By such turns are lives changed.

A poetry slam is the melding of performance art and competition into the act of reading poetry aloud. The slam is said to have originated in Chicago, with the fabled Green Mill lounge in Uptown its Cooperstown and Marc Smith its best-known practitioner and impresario.

You get up, read your poem and get judged by members of the audience on a scale of 1 to 10. It's meant to be raucous and has been imbued with an anti-establishment air.

Of course, any attempt at ruffling the mainstream dies quickly in the presence of the aggressively soulless Secret Service. Poetry slams thrive on the spontaneous and improvisational, which is exactly what our keepers of public order climb mountains to squelch.

But this, after all, is National Poetry Month, so somebody suggested that the first lady show up with three distinguished current and former poets laureate of the U.S.--Robert Pinsky, the incumbent, and predecessors Rita Dove and Robert Hass--and check out a slam at the Johnson Junior High School in the down-and-out Anacostia section.

Before the entourage's arrival, lockers outside the designated classroom were checked, the few press who surfaced were stuck way in the back of a large rectangular room, and chairs were set up at spots for specific participants and onlookers.

Curious pupils in the dominantly black school wandered by, a few wondering what all the goofy-looking white dudes in suits were up to. They were told by the goofy-looking dudes to do a 180-degree turn as hallway traffic was being redirected.

The first lady was running late, and somehow the event's centerpiece--having her walk in as a slam was under way--got scotched. That left the 10 pupils from Johnson and a competitor school somewhat antsy as they heeded the calls of the Secret Service, not their individual muse.

"H.G. Wells says the man who resorts to violence is the man who is out of ideas," an adult practitioner of slam poetry, who goes by D.J. Renegade, informed me during this lull.

Short story writer Nancy Schwalb and Renegade were there because they are affiliated with the WritersCorps, originally an endeavor of the National Endowment for the Humanities and Americorps, the domestic Peace Corps created by President Clinton.

For a pittance they go to inner-city schools and help students explore literature, in particular poetry. With the aid of the Humanities Council of Washington, D.C., which has taken over the National Endowment for the Arts' role, they've helped organize a four-school slam league that is said to be a success.

"Writing is not necessarily seen as a viable career opportunity," said Renegade, 35, who was raised in public housing in Pittsburgh. "But this program helps change the kids' relationship to language and literature. It motivates them to be more literate."

After the White House caravan surfaced, the principal introduced the dignitaries, who included the ramrod-stiff Julius Becton. He's a retired Army general who symbolizes D.C.'s mess: Picked by a federal control board to shape things up, he now is cutting and running, miffed over a perceived lack of support and clearly having come up short. If Becton, 71, at least could claim credit for some of the kids' poetry he was to hear, perhaps he could sleep better.

First up was Tyrone Freeman, 14, taking on the role of "sacrificial poet," or warmup act prior to the formal competition.

I am the best there ever was. You
might not think I am. One minute you
see me. Then the next, I'm not there.
Bam!!! I'm gone again.
I am so perfect that when you
look at me, I make you proud of yourself.
I am so full of joy that
when I put up my
Christmas lights, they
embarrass the sun.
But I am still normal, so

normal that if I told you my name a thousand times,
you still wouldn't know who I am.

Jackson, in his Raiders shirt, was nervous like the rest, given the august audience. His handiwork was a quick reminder of how quickly innocence is lost in the big city.

Do you have a clue what life is like today?
People are being abandoned and have no place to stay.
Do you have a clue that we're running out of time?
Life is short, and it's not a game.
Raping our women, calling them out of their name.
Selling drugs to our people, frying their brains.
Your baby's father left you. Now you're insane.

The judges held up their cards, giving him a respectable, if not resounding, total of 28. Others would fare better, like 14-year-old Willie Logan with his homage to Duke Ellington.

Listening to his instrumental jazz,
It's a true blast from the past.
I like that botta-boom, botta-bing!
It reminds me of the movie, "Do the Right Thing."
He's a pianist, composer, and band leader.
But his rocking rhythms are better than Nero's. That's Peter's.
He's known from Europe to the U.S.
His wonder music is known as the best.
Now he's a wonderful memory.
His music is a true treasury.
Duke Ellington's in jazz history.
Is he the greatest? That's not a mystery.

Five pupils from each school did their thing, with the judges occasionally razzed for their scoring and the Johnson pupils winning. The first lady then was moved to her second position, given a microphone and allowed to declare quite accurately, "I heard a lot of different emotions and experiences in your poetry." She spoke of celebrating American poetry that night at a White House gathering where Pinsky, Dove and Hass also would be. She asked each to recount their introduction to poetry.

Dove recalled being 10 years old and drawing an Easter bunny with droopy ears and writing a story. But she also tended to write in secret "and in junior high I stopped altogether because it wasn't cool." She read a lovely poem of hers, and Hass generously read one of Renegade's ("Nights like this, I wet my lips with the sounds of your name."). The pupils were impressed.

And, just like that, the Secret Service began shuffling in the back, looking at watches and whispering. It was time to split. But not before an Associated Press reporter, stuck in the back, performed his own peculiar duty.

"Mrs. Clinton," he shouted, "have you received a new grand jury subpoena?"

A mother of one pupil turned on a dime and, in a strike for civility, if not poetry, called back to the fellow, "Shame on you! Take that into your own neighborhood."

GRAPHIC: PHOTOPHOTO: Flanked by poets Robert Pinsky (left) and Robert Hass, First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton attends a poetry slam for junior high school pupils last week in Washington. Tribune photo by Pete Souza.

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