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Mrs. Clinton's Poetry Lesson; At Johnson Junior High, a Two-Way Learning Experience

by Elizabeth Kastor

As the room got stuffier and the TV lights hotter and the visiting dignitaries were still on their way, on their way, the kids' bodies slumped and their faces took on a uniform, stunned look.

White House staffers, glossy of hair and officious of manner, rearranged the children and the chairs.

Within a classroom at J. Hayden Johnson Junior High School in Southeast Washington, a score of poetry-writing kids and their edgily proud teachers were waiting yesterday afternoon for the arrival of Hillary Rodham Clinton and three famous adult poets scheduled to read at the White House last night. If you listened carefully, you could hear the approaching rumble of their massive public relations machine. Then, at last, the glossy-of-hair grew even more officious, and she was there!

"Remember!" whispered teacher Nancy Schwalb. "You cannot read too slowly!"

They were nervous, but they managed to read slowly. They introduced themselves with downcast eyes and practiced solemnity. In this school in the middle of a public housing project, a dozen children read their poems, bathed in the smiles of Clinton, Poet Laureate Robert Pinsky, former laureates Robert Hass and Rita Dove and outgoing D.C. schools chief Julius Becton.

"I am the best there ever was," read ninth-grader Tyrone Freeman.

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, 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.

"In a way, you know, it's a photo opportunity for the first lady," Schwalb said later. "It's National Poetry Month and she needed a backdrop of kids. But it's more than that. These kids have things to say, and she needs to hear them more than anyone."

Their poems are about love and violence, the cosmic questions of adolescence and urban life.

India Hemsley is in seventh grade. She read "In My Dream."

I fall into paradise. . . .
Everything is perfect
And time doesn't exist --
No killing, no smoking, no alcoholics:
In my dream,
Everybody lives for eternity.

"I thought poetry was boring at first," one girl explained. "But it's okay once you get the hang of it."

Later in the day, the kids were scheduled to go to Borders Books downtown and participate in a poetry slam, a popular form of public performance in which poems are read and then judged Olympics-style, the judges raising cards with ratings from 1 to 10. They were, purportedly, just "practicing" for the slam when Clinton and the PR machine happened to drop by.

"A lot of our kids, when they read at Borders, it's the first time they've been to a bookstore, first time they've bought a book -- and for some, believe it or not, it's the first time they've been on L Street," said Washington poet Kenneth Carroll, who runs the Humanities Council of the District's City Lights program, which sponsors writing and library programs in middle schools and public housing.

The goal of the program is not necessarily to make great writers but rather to help kids gain a bit more sense of control over written language, verbal expression and their lives.

"I grew up poor," Carroll said, "and the real danger of it is you begin to accept the isolation and the ethics and the values of the four blocks in which you live. The isolation, to me, is one of the most dangerous aspects of living in public housing."

Carroll took six kids to a national poetry slam in Connecticut last weekend. He wanted them to see other places, meet other people, realize that there are other ways. Yesterday, some of the citizens of those other places came to their world.

(And wasn't it interesting that some precariously hinged doors around the school were miraculously fixed for the visit, Carroll remarked with a smile. The drug dealers, too -- the regulars across the street -- were nowhere to be seen.)

Quinten February, a slight seventh-grader from Kramer Middle School in a crisp white shirt, stood and read:

When I die
I will be rain throwing water on plants,
And I will throw like a ball on fire,
And I will be famous,
And when I dance, people will dance too,
And when I draw, people will draw too.
And I will dance, with the remains
Of my mother's love in my pocket.

It will be a good night
And I will be in a white suit.

When the reading was done, Clinton and the laureates came out of the audience (after a good deal of fussing and chair-moving by the glossy-of-hair).

"I assure you I will not forget this," Pinsky told the students. "What you are doing today encourages us and cheers us on. It is important because it contributes to the great enterprise of memory."

Skilled emcee that she is, Clinton got the poets to talk about how they began to write, how they started their careers. And then she asked the kids to talk about the City Lights program. "How has doing this changed you, changed your life?" she asked.

What could they say? Of course it had changed their lives: Several boys in succession said that they found writing poetry helped them channel their anger, control their temper and attitude. Asked by Clinton if poetry slams gave them experience with public speaking, they said yes, of course.

Carroll and Schwalb have been asked repeatedly over the years to explain the purpose of what they are doing, to quantify the results.

"You say you're improving their reading, writing and spelling skills, but you can improve reading, writing and spelling skills a lot of different ways," Schwalb said after Clinton and the grown-up poets left. She is after something else, for both the kids and the rest of the world. She wants them to hear their own voices, and for others to hear them, too.

She and Carroll know it matters. Are lives changed? Are kids "saved" by poetry? Carroll laughed at the thought.

It matters.

GRAPHIC: Photo, frank johnston, Poets laureate Robert Pinsky and Rita Dove with the first lady and a student at a reading of students' poems. Poet Robert Hass and student Antoine Wade at the reading yesterday, which was part of the District's City Lights program.

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