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Ode and Young; At Workshop, Students Discover Poetry and Themselves

by Jacqueline Trescott

Zulaikha Edmondson, a trim column of white shirt and blue-striped pants, was reading her poem "Wise Words." The words seemed to rush out of her.

My poem knows the ways of the world/ It can live, she said, the curl of her dark hair kissing her chin. People in the audience may have wished Zulaikha would slow down, but the 15-year-old was racing on. The force of having a lot to say had overwhelmed her in the last few months. When she paused, the onlookers cheered. The occasion was an evening reading last week at the downtown Borders Books. A lacquered black lectern had been set up beside the high shelves of show business books. Elvis and the Beatles stared down, frozen in their youth, as members of a younger generation -- Michael, Devin, Jeremiah, Rickey, Ayanna, Brandon, Tiffany, Zulaikha, Jevon and Brooke -- read their own words, some for the very first time in public.

This night's poets were all students from Hart Junior High School, on Mississippi Avenue SE, who became part of a workshop last fall organized by the D.C. WritersCorps. Most had never met a published writer before Nancy Schwalb, a slight woman with a coaxing manner and a fistful of Margaret Walker Alexander's writings, walked into the workshop. Schwalb is part of WritersCorps, a collaboration by the National Service/AmeriCorps, the National Endowment for the Arts and arts agencies in the Bronx, San Francisco and Washington. Besides visiting schools, writers who participate in the program have fanned out to hospitals, libraries, jails, shelters and community centers, carrying out a mandate issued by President Clinton in 1994 to make a difference by teaching.

In the creative writing classes at Hart, nearly 300 students are studying poets, poetic forms and the synergy between poetry and music. They don't get any school credit; eventually an anthology of their work will be published. Six of them were named finalists in the local Parkmont Poetry Festival, the highest number of any junior or senior high school.

To hear some of the students tell it, they have come alive because they have discovered something inside themselves.

"I thought it would be fun," Zulaikha says of the course. She had written the obligatory school essays, but no poems. "The words just started coming out. Then I started reading [published poems], and I liked trying to figure out what the poet was saying underneath the words." In five months she embraced a whole new world, discovering the works of Georgia Douglas Johnson, Langston Hughes and Ishmael Reed.

Inside Schwalb's bare classroom, the learning process uses a couple of approaches. One is to read a well-known poet who writes about issues the students face. After reading Rita Dove's "Flash Cards," a reflection on math drills, Tiffany Kelley submitted a work called "My Problems Are the Zenith of My life." When she read it at Borders last week, audience members were falling out of their chairs with laughter. The teachers, said Tiffany, are "the top and the bottom," yet They make my life a bowl of corn flakes/ That have been sitting/ In milk for an hour. At another session, Schwalb played the Fugees' remake of "Killing Me Softly" to illustrate the use of metaphors and similes. Rickey Lewis submitted "As Drifting Waves": I think about my life as it passes me by/ the sound of the sorrow as/ it taps upon my window pane.

"It's amazing how frank they are," Schwalb says. "There is a boy who is always writing about his failed love affairs. That is very brave. What they are doing is recognizing their ideas. They are figuring things out."

Now the young poets are facing their public. Up front is Jevon Billups, 15, his T-shirt, black jeans and sneakers smartly coordinated. This is his first reading. For practice, he stood in a corner of the bookstore and read his poems aloud. Then, making eye contact with people in the back row, he demonstrated his performer's flair, letting his face take on expressions of self-deprecating humor. His predecessors had simply glued their eyes to the page and read.

Jevon thought poetry was boring until he actually started writing. He immediately like Schwalb's classroom style. "She gave us a poem and told us we had to write one like it. Now that was interesting," says Jevon, who's called "the Bishop" because of his seriousness.

In the school sessions, he liked Schwalb's directive to write about his feelings. After listening to John Coltrane's "A Love Supreme," and a poem about Coltrane by Michael Harper, Jevon hit a Scott Joplin-style reverie in "Feeling the Music": I feel as if I were playing an upright piano/ about a hundred years old/ and every chord I hit is beautiful/ and makes a new song.

But sometimes he thinks Schwalb has gone off the deep end. Like the afternoon she gave them a series of poems about rivers. "She told us to write about any river, real or not," says Jevon. His mystification didn't last long. When he read "The Niagara in You" last week, his listeners were rapt with approval. I see a source of power/ that electrifies a great body/ When I'm dark you add color/ I don't need your help/ let me be me.

For Zulaikha, the class has become not just a weekly exercise but an expression of the self she had locked in. "The poems were alive," she says of her writing. "And [the experience] was getting away to a place where I didn't know I could go."

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