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Speak, Children

by Colbert I. King

Until those bullets took the life out of Helen Foster-El last month, East Capitol Dwellings was just another pocket of poverty conveniently out of sight at the eastern end of the District. But bullets were flying and bodies were falling in that community long before a 55-year-old grandmother was cut down. The children living there know this all too well.

Many of them attend W. Bruce Evans Middle School on East Capitol Street, in the heart of East Capitol Dwellings. Some are students at Hart Middle School in Congress Heights. A few spent the 1998-99 school year recording their life experiences in poems. Nancy Schwalb, coordinator of the Youth Poetry Slam League should be thanked for organizing their efforts in an anthology of student writings. But a real debt of gratitude is owed the students. Rather than allow their lives to be scrutinized and portrayed by others, they chose to tell what it's like to be where they are, in their own words.

Their poetry, written months before East Capitol Dwellings hit the front pages, is honest, often eloquent, occasionally upbeat, sometimes sad. Above all, these are the works of talented children. They tell of dreams, pain, fears and hopes. And without quite intending to do so, they remind us why we as a city should care deeply about them.

But enough of that. Today's column belongs to the girls and boys of East Capitol Dwellings. Speak, children:

"Projects" by Lorrain Allen

Do you know what the projects are like?
It's like a junk yard never getting cleaned up,
It's like a war never ending,
But neither side wins.
The love is gone, but the hate stays on,
And every day is a funnel
for another dead soul.
No hope, because
There's no future to hope for;
Every day there's another drive-by.
In the projects,
Water can't put out the fire
The projects are a war
That will never end

Until we all come together
And find peace.

"Southeast Rejection" by Jessica Rawls

No money
No attention
A place full of hate
Too terrible to mention
The children have
Beat up schools
No good equipment
And taxes are cruel
Don't tell us
How bad we are
Look at yourself
Now tell me
How bad could you be?
A bad community
No police protection
Nothing is well
Southeast Rejection.

"My Hood" by Anthony De Braux

I'm on 58. [58th Street]
you'll see lots of blacks
a lot of trash and woods
we'll see us having fun
you'll see us terrorizing
we'll see kids play fighting
you'll see kids hurting
I see my lovely everyday hood
you see the trashy hood
what you call the projects

"Dream No More" by Aminah Fulmore

Decades later still
Screams haunt my walks through the hood
Flight left, ghetto dreams
Would leave but instead I have
Overcome reality.

"Music In So Many Ways" by Paul West

This music is smooth, smoother
Than a paved road.
This music is calm, calmer

Than a spring breeze.
This music is graceful, more graceful
Than a dove's afternoon flight.
This music is heavenly, more heavenly
Than a bluejay's song of love.
This music is magic in so many ways
That words cannot express what I am feeling right
now.

"hey you" by Candace Tyndale

hey you, did you know
you were gone.
hey you, you been gone for
3 years bout to be four.
hey you, did you make it
past that golden gate.
hey you, did you see me when
my eyes turned red, blood
shot red.
hey you, maybe you did,
maybe you didn't.
hey you, I seen you did you
see me.
hey you, the last time I saw
you, you were the prettiest person
in the room besides me.
hey you, grandma I might
come visit you in 90 more
years, did you meet anyone
nice? is he taking care of you
I know I did. at least
that's what I remember.
hey you, I'm on my
way home with you.

"Who I Am" by Danielle Patterson

I am a 7th grader at Evans Middle School.
I am a Shaglates from Clay Terrace.
I am a Soldier from 3rd Ward.
I can define myself because I'm from Clay Terrace.
I'm a member of Clay Terrace.
I am proud of myself because I go to school
And get an education.
I am proud of myself because I don't smoke.
I am proud of myself because I don't drink.
I am proud of myself because I don't sell drugs.
I am proud of myself because I don't steal cars.

I am proud of myself,
Of who I am.

And finally:

"Poetry Is" by Jolene Smith

Now this thang called poetry ain't fun.
It seems like an accident you want to stop
But it's already been done.
You can't help the way it comes,
Because it comes so strong.
You didn't know you had it
But it's been in you all along.
Now you think you're not so cool,
But it's better than acting like a fool.
Poetry is something you take from down deep
You can even think of poetry
When you're fast asleep.
It pulls you in
Like a whirlpool pulling a sinking ship,
Then spits you back up,
Like a high diver's backwards flip.
Poetry is one precious thing to me
It sometimes is a memory
Of a nap under a palm tree.
Poetry can be a way to get rid of anger and pain;
Poetry is long walks through the rain.
It is the breakfast you eat every day;
It's the cheerful way you watch kids play.
Poetry can make a dead man come alive;
It is the pain when you walk through a beehive.
Poetry is making love on a windy night
It is losing blood --
You put up a good fight
Poetry is you
Poetry is me
This is the way
I thought it to be.

Thanks for the expressions, young poets -- many thanks.

The writer is a member of the editorial page staff.

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