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Student Poets Reach Within

by Judith Havemann

There were few riffs on vague or distant topics in the Parkmont Poetry Festival.

The 600 entrants in the citywide contest chose subjects that were intensely personal and relevant to their lives.

Jasmine Baxter of Jefferson Junior High School wrote verses about the random murder of her beloved brother. "God can have him later. I need my brother at my side," she wrote.

Brooks Swett of the National Cathedral School for Girls wrote of a time when summertime is wistfully recalled "at the end of Eden and the eve of fall."

And Reginald Williams of Hart Middle School wrote about poverty and "the tin cup which earned him a few cents each day of his miserable life."

They were among the 40 winners of the Parkmont festival, which honors the writing of poetry by public and private school students across the city.

Over the past 22 years, the festival has attracted thousands of contestants. Each year, the poems are weeded down to about 200 by a panel of published poets. This year, Cornelius Eady, an author of seven books of poetry who is now teaching at American University, picked the 40 winners.

On May 8, each student was asked to read his or her poem to an audience of more than 100 friends and relatives at the private Parkmont School on 16th Street. The winners received a \$25 gift certificate from Olsson's Books and Records, a T-shirt and a booklet of the winning poems.

Monica Jones, an English teacher at Jefferson Junior High School in Southwest, said her students are highly motivated by the freedom to express themselves that poetry offers. "They love writing poetry. They are not intimidated by the grammar," she said.

She assigns her students topics. Anger was their favorite this year. The poems they turned in seethed with anger over injured friendships and, especially, betrayal. They wrote about things their teacher had never imagined.

Nancy Schwalb, who is the executive director of the D.C. Creative Writing Workshop based at Hart Middle School in Southeast, reads poems with the students in her classes and asks them to distill the meaning of the work in their own words.

"Once they start, their vocabulary really grows. They begin to use words on the edge of their vocabulary. They know the meaning of these words, but they never have used them" until they begin expressing themselves in poetry, she said. Her students draw images from their own lives, but some of them choose to write fantasy, she said.

Judy Lentz, poetry coordinator for the festival, said the contest started with a smaller range of students and expanded to include both junior and senior high schools as it became established. All schools in the city are invited to participate each year, she said. It is one of the few vehicles for public and private school students to come together.

Topics have changed over time as the city has changed, Lentz said.

"The subject of living and dying in D.C. has come up more in the past 10 years," she said. "There are always some students who write about beauty and nature. We used to see more of it. It is a reflection of the time. They are writing about what they see in the world."

Fourteen of the winning poems were chosen by District Extra editors for publication.

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