

The Washington Times

May 4, 2005

Teachers, students compete in poetry slam

By Denise Barnes

Poetry enthusiasts squared off in a literary battle at Ballou Senior High School in Southeast yesterday, some of whom used the spoken word to pay tribute to student Lavelle Kendall Jones, who was fatally shot late last month and laid to rest Monday.

About 100 students filled the school's auditorium to cheer on their classmates and teachers during the school's first Students vs. Faculty Poetry Slam.

"This is a great feat in terms of creating literary genius and a profitable exercise for students," said Lionel Roberts, a slam participant and advanced-placement history teacher at Ballou.

Mr. Roberts, 45, penned a poem titled "Saving Brothers From Themselves," which he dedicated to Lavelle, whom he described as a "promising student."

Lavelle, 16, was killed April 24 in Southeast when a bullet was fired into his head from someone in a car in the next lane. At the time, he was in the passenger seat of a car at a red light, police said.

Mr. Roberts said the slam provided students with a creative outlet to voice their thoughts about their community and the challenges they face every day.

"Every year, one, two or three students have been killed since I've been here. One student was killed inside the school, and many students are killed in the streets," Mr. Roberts said. "I think it's such a great [accomplishment] for these students to make it to Ballou every day and show happiness and concern for each other," in spite of their circumstances.

The hour-long slam was sponsored by the D.C. Creative Writing Workshop, a nonprofit organization that provides students at Ballou, Simon Elementary School and Charles Hart Middle School in Southeast with intensive literary-arts instruction.

Jamila Wade, the organization's senior program director who emceed the slam, announced the publication of Ballou's new literary magazine, "Voice of the Knight." The magazine is a compilation of poetry written by students over the course of a year.

"Grief, anger, fear, frustration, acceptance, forgiveness, peace, joy, love. We need poetry to deal with life's everyday struggles. We need it to heal us, we need it to help us rejoice. Without self-expression, without writing, without our words, we would have no voice," Ms. Wade said before introducing the student artists and instructors.

Shawnita Jackson, 17, who won the slam, stepped up to the microphone with only her memory, experiences and voice upon which to rely. The 10th-grader exuded confidence as she passionately recited her poem, which she called "My Voice."

"My poetry makes me think of my past, the things that I go through -- the things I've been through," Shawnita said.

"My poetry relieves my depression -- depression about things that go on in the neighborhood. Poetry is the only way to release it. [But], right now, I'm very, very, very happy," she said, smiling.