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# Wild: Hear Our Voices ... Books of Hope Writers Speak

By Patricia Wild

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SOMERVILLE - I am . . . /A sepia warm-blooded Haitian poet, declares Farah Jean-Baptiste. The 17-year old poet, a student at Somerville High School, has been writing poetry "since I was little." Author of "The Many Voices in Me," published last year, her new collection is entitled "Back and Ready to Attack: Let My Voice be Heard." "It's going to be big!" she predicts. I am a tall mango tree/ Open and generous/And willing to feed my people from sea to sea/ My blood flows through my veins/As Lake Victoria flows near my Uganda native land.

The talented Farah is one of the adolescent writers with the Books of Hope Program, based at the Mystic Learning Center, and ably directed by L. Soul Brown, also a gifted writer. Twice a week, Books of Hope writers, guided by Brown and others, work on their poetry, fiction and nonfiction. By the end of the program's cycle, most of these writers will have produced a book; these books are sold at a variety of venues in greater Boston, including Porter Square Books. Last year, books produced by Books of Hope writers were completely sold out.

A half-dozen Books of Hope writers read from their most recent work at the Somerville Museum. Sponsored by the Welcome Project (also based at the Mystic Learning Center) this evening's reading was the grand finale for the museum's "Immigrant City" exhibit. But while the event marked the end of the "Immigrant City" exhibit, it begins the Books of Hope "book tour." So if you were not able to attend the reading, don't worry. There will be many more opportunities to hear the voices of Books of Hope writers and to purchase their books, which will be ready next month.

Voices like Maishka Antoiné's: "Everybody can write poetry," the 13-year-old poet believes, "but not everybody can get it down on paper so that your audience can get something more from it." The Prospect Hill Academy student, like her fellow Books of Hope writer Farah Jean-Baptiste, has been writing her whole life. Her preferred subject matter? "Everyday life: a bus stop or an immigrant or the president; how I feel sometimes." You see you have to think outside the box that/Small little box that you live in. /'Cause you're only 0.5% of the world and all its little boxes.

Books of Hope writers delve into subjects all of us, immigrant or native-born, Mystic Housing or West Somerville residents, "can relate to," notes Lovette Robinson, especially those of us with lingering memories of our own adolescence. Her twin sister, Angelette, seated beside her, the 16-year-old Somerville High School student elucidates: "School not working the way you want to, or your parents not understanding you; first love."

Tanya Joseph, whose new book is entitled "The Battle Continues," writes poetry and short stories. In "Lost," her teenaged protagonist, "the only one with a brain" at her high school, decides to shed her "plaid shirts and knee-high skirts ... the French braid and flower clip" in order to attract the attention of "the most popular boy in school." To find out what happens, you'll just have to buy her book!

On the day after Barack Obama's speech on racism in this country, Books of Hope writer Jessica Masse, seventeen, and a Somerville High School student, talked about "racism, profiling, people following me around in stores." These day-to-day heartbreaks find their way in her work: Somerville where we breed where everyone knows greed no one sees the/ Struggle the pain that I see it's such a shame a city filled with such hate I feel/Like I'm back in 1978.

"I chose to run for the presidency at this moment in history," Obama had declared the night before, "because I believe deeply that we cannot solve the challenges of our time unless we solve them together — unless we perfect our union by understanding that we may have different stories, but we hold common hopes; that we may not look the same and we may not have come from the same place, but we all want to move in the same direction — towards a better future for our children and our grandchildren."

In other words, in the sobering words of Jessica Masse: "Somerville needs to shape up and come together!"

*Patricia Wild of Somerville is the author of "Swimming In It," a novel set in the city.*

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