

The Somerville News

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Young writers' words heard loud and clear

By Elizabeth Bernardi

One of the young writers of Books of Hope stood to read at their first public event of the 2008 season, and she was giggling. Her peers sitting in the first few rows were making faces, goading her before they all quickly gained composure. They may be teenagers, but they are also learning to be professionals.

The setting was intimate - chairs lined in rows amid the Immigrant City exhibit at the Somerville Museum - and a few dozen listeners sat rapt as the writers, all poets this night, read from a selection of their soon-to-be published works.



At the podium, the author introduced herself - in five of six cases, the author was a she - and her work.

And then she began. In many cases, the poems were startlingly revealing, often full of pain. The subjects they covered -- rape, abuse, depression, abortion - only served to emphasize the emotional maturity of their authors, who read with grace, dignity, power, and confidence.

"Even young people, ages 13-23 who we're working with, have memories that deserve to be published," said director L. Soul Brown as she introduced them.

These young authors are an impressive group of committed writers, many pursuing ambitious athletic dreams as well, who gather twice a week at the Mystic Learning Center for writing sessions with Brown, and this year's writer-in-residence, author Askia Toure.

Toure is impressed with the students, he said, noting the variety of their achievements and the discipline they show in accomplishing them. It's important not to forget, though, that they are at a crucial age.

"They are a combination of child and adult," he explained. "We try to get them out to plays and museums."

The writers travel throughout the city together, experiencing art in all of its forms: museum exhibitions, theater performances, literary readings.

They also bring professional writers in as guests to work with and motivate the students.

"We're trying to show them that you can make a living at this," said Toure.

It was a field trip to the Somerville Museum to see the recent Immigrant City exhibit that resulted in a first-of-the-season reading there, just weeks before the students' published books will be available for sale.

Tanya Joseph, 15, has been a writer with Books of Hope for two years.

"My poetry and spoken word is mainly based on things I've been through in my life," said Joseph. "I was having problems at home, and I was in and out of the hospital." Joseph said she used to write exclusively about the negative things that happened to her, but Books of Hope has given her a new outlet.

"It shows me that I can write about positive things as well," she said. "It gives me a place to vent."

Joseph read from three poems that evening. Each reflected a struggling desire to make amends with pain, to be resilient.

Most of the writers' poems shared the same hopeful undertone, that pain can be overcome, that change can be made.

Farah Jean-Baptiste's new chapbook, "The Many Voices of Me" consists of letters written from various perspectives, and one she read from the perspective of a rape victim showed a capacity for deep empathy.

Maishka B. Antoine read perhaps most confidently, with the rhythm of an experienced spoken word poet. Her poems are full of rich imagery and ear-pleasing repetitions that suggest years of practice and polish. But Antoine is only 13 years old, the youngest member of Books of Hope. Her inspiration, she said, is her older sister, another member of Books of Hope.

"I've been writing for a year and a half," she said. And her favorite thing about the process of writing and reading her work?

"I get to give people my words."

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Comments

Which writer is in the photograph? (The article mentions two adults and three teenagers.)

Posted by: Ron Newman | [April 09, 2008 at 01:41 PM](#)