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Books of Hope holds reading at Somerville library

By Ashley Taylor

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"I want to be heard," Maishka Antoine began reading. "I-want-to-be-heard," she continued, emphasizing each word. Antoine, 15, has written two books as the youngest member of Books of Hope, a youth writing and publishing program in Somerville.

Antoine and six of her peers in Books of Hope were recently heard at the Somerville Central Library, where the authors read their work for a small but enthusiastic audience on Oct. 15. Author and publisher Jasen Sousa, a graduate student interning with Books of Hope, also took the stage to read his poetry.

The poems and subsequent discussion touched on racism, poverty and violence, but the mood in the air was more warm than dismal. The young authors clapped and cheered their own loudly and participated readily in call-and-response poems. Most of the authors coupled their poems of injustice and struggle with poems of pride, dreams and hope.

Books of Hope began in 1999, and since then, its participants have published more than 100 books. Poet and non-fiction author Laura "Soul" Brown has directed the program since 2005. Books of Hope authors gather with Brown and other writers on Monday nights at the Mystic Learning Center, on the grounds of the Mystic housing projects.

This year, Books of Hope has 13 participants (their capacity is 15) and runs from October through June. There is no charge for the program, and participants earn money from sales of their work.

Jasen Sousa, founder of J-Rock Publishing, read several poems from his newest book, *Humming Eternity* at a Book of Hope reading on Oct. 15. Sousa, who grew up in Somerville, started writing as a way to bring news to his friends in jails and mental hospitals and has published seven volumes of poetry for young adults.

The Mystic projects consist of two low-income housing developments on Mystic Avenue -- the state-run Mystic River Development and federal housing development Mystic View. According to the Mystic Learning Center's website, 84 percent of families in the Mystic Projects are headed by single mothers. Books of Hope author Jessica Masse describes the Mystic Projects as "known for violence," adding that both organizations hope to help young people overcome the hardships faced there.

The challenges they face -- poverty, racism, abuse of women, struggles in education -- are the material for many of the poems read last Thursday. Antoine's poem, "For My People: Remix," contains most of these topics. The poem takes the structure and themes of Margaret Walker's 1942 poem "For My People," and adds her own perspective.

Walker's poem begins with slave "dirges" -- Antoine's begins with boogie boogie.

Walker's poem describes the menial, thankless work of her people over the years. Antoine describes the aspirations of her generation to become people of influence.



~Photos by Ashley Taylor

Walker describes her playmates growing up in Alabama. Antoine describes hers in the Somerville housing projects "who jump the doubles of/double-dutch singing made up rhymes, who play with/the red rubber ball and the metal stars of jaxs," and "who swim at the public pool, and go/to summer school just for food."

Walker describes school, where people learned they were "black and poor and small and different." Antoine describes school where people "learn that a race we/look down on did more than we think."

Antoine speaks of hardship, hunger, cold, and abandonment. She closes with a stanza about the civil rights movement, "For my people who fought back the court cases with lawyers that sucked and still won."

In 1942, years before the Civil Rights Movement, Margaret Walker wrote, "Let the martial songs be written, let the dirges disappear. Let a race of

men now rise and take control." Antoine, writing in 2009, ends, "For my people, for our future, which will always be strong."

Many of the poems grapple with race and racism. Of the students from Books of Hope at the reading, eight were black, one was Latino, and one was white. They seemed united in their passion for civil rights.

Leo Galindo, a first-generation American whose parents are Honduran, read "Walk On, Think On," about the Freedom Trail, slavery and civil rights.

"Race isn't that big of an issue to me," Galindo said after the reading, "because I've always grown up in diverse neighborhoods, so there's always been a lot of different cultures that I grew up around, and that [was what] I was exposed to, and so I think that there's bigger issues than race. I think there's poverty, and there's teenage violence, and there's not a lot of opportunities for youth like myself, you know?"

Anthony Cimea, originally from Haiti, read a poem called "Screaming For MLK," in which he and his peers chanted: "MLK: Your life is my dream, and your dream is my life: Incomplete."

Many of the young authors read poems about ambition and optimism in the face of racism and poverty. In "My Life," Zanterius Broadus states, "My life is just like usual/Just another black man trying/to make it out of the ghetto."

By "make it," Broadus adds, "I want to be a black man/who makes more money than Bill Gates" and "the one that went through the struggle/but still made it to the top."

In a poem titled, "YBF," Keisha Jean-Louis details her own ambitions as a Young Black Female who "walk[s] the projects of Somerville/The Mystic with bigger dreams/Than you can imagine."

Jessica Masse's poem, "Generation To Generation: Changing the Future's Nation," describes life on the streets, with impressive rhyme and call and response, ultimately asking her peers to "wake up and see what's true" to change the world.

It's a sentiment Galindo agrees with, saying, "Books of Hope is one of the few rare gifts that youth like myself are given where we have the chance to express ourselves, and in doing so have a positive influence on everyone around us."