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Teens are raising their voices in poetry showcase

Sat, 04/30/2011 - 8:30am | Julie Wurth

Poetry isn't the most popular hobby among high school students, Jazzlyn Carter confesses, but she is now an official convert.

The 14-year-old Urbana High School freshman is one of 15 teens taking part in a poetry showcase organized by the Champaign County ACCESS Initiative to demonstrate the importance of family and youth involvement in the children's mental health movement.

Several of the teens will also perform at a "poetry slam" at the Virginia Theatre on Sunday after a free screening of "Louder Than a Bomb," a documentary about four Chicago high school teams competing with many others in a poetry slam.

The idea is to give teens a voice about issues that concern them, leading up to Children's Mental Health Awareness Week, which starts Sunday, said their coach, Aaron Ammons.

Domestic violence, bullying and other stressors affect teens' mental health, said Ammons, a local author and poet.

"This is about young people using the expression of the spoken word in poetry to deal with issues that they face as teens," he said. "They're using this creative expression and using their voice in a positive way and to help other people. That's what we're trying to celebrate here."

The ACCESS Initiative focuses on families and youths with mental-health issues and involvement in the juvenile-justice system.

Organizers recruited teens for the poetry project through area high schools and other organizations.

The students worked with Ammons to choose topics centered on trauma and resilience, ranging from suicide to homosexuality to peer pressure and learning disabilities. They attended five two-hour workshops where they watched "Louder Than a Bomb" and worked on their own poems, listening to each other perform and critiquing each other's work.

"This is not a contest. The point is the poetry and the relationships they build with the other students," Ammons said. "That sort of camaraderie, that's what we're really working on."

Carter is an aspiring songwriter who didn't think she'd be much of a poet until she got involved with the project. She's written gospel songs and other music, but the spoken word is "deeper," with no music to distract the listener, she said. The focus is purely on the words.

"I didn't feel like I would be good at writing a poem," Carter said, but she surprised herself. The writing



Photo by: Darrell Hoemann/The News-Gazette

Several members of a local poetry slam workshop pose for a photo Friday during a rehearsal at the Don Moyer Boys and Girls Club in Champaign. The group includes, top row from left, Reno Hines, Kamron Haley, Lonnie Johnson, Dante Scott and Keosha Hines and, bottom row, Collette Harmon (wearing yellow), Jazzlyn Carter, Tamarra Likens, Deandre Lemons and Marshall Allston-Yeagle.

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came easily, and she put together her poem in three short bursts of creativity.

Her poem, "Murder of the Soul," describes how "violence is deeper than physical. You can murder someone on the inside with what you say," she said. Her goal is to encourage people to "watch what you say."

Carter said she didn't draw on any particular experience in her own life, though she says she has been hurt by words at times.

"It just came to me. It seems like this was something inside of me. I'm not sure exactly what it is. I just know your words can hurt people, especially at a young age. It soaks in," she said.

She reads her poem like a rap song, with strong emotion. The other teens encouraged Carter to "go deeper" after hearing the first section she wrote, and she did, invoking images of crime in later passages. She said the other teens were "speechless" when they heard the finished product.

The two-minute poem begins:

"I fight through this and I look around

seeing the things that try to hold us down

We say it's murder, and drugs,

from all those so-called thugs

but tell me what that really means

Tell me what you see in between

The lines of the words on my computer screen."

And later:

"The fact that you crush my soul feel no remorse for the sin?

You know what, that makes you worse than the dealer

more dangerous than that serial killer.

And worse than that murderer out there on the streets.

'Cause your words are like bullets and you're right in front of me."

Carter, who sings and plays the piano, has hopes of becoming a singer-songwriter some day, though she may go to medical school or law school as a "backup."

"I'm a performer at heart," she said.

She plans to keep up with the poetry, too, to help with her songwriting. She thinks the project was valuable because teens don't give much thought to poetry otherwise.

"Poetry really reaches people in a way nothing else can. You're not going to change people like this in a song. It just opens people's eyes and gets them to understand something new," she said.

Three of the students will perform at 6 p.m. Sunday at the Virginia Theatre following the free showing of "Louder Than a Bomb" at 4 p.m. by the Champaign County Anti-Stigma Alliance. (The film will also be shown at noon, by paid admission, as part of Eberfest, and five Chicago Steinmetz High School poets will perform after both showings.)

All 15 local teen poets will also perform at two other free public venues:

7:30 to 9:30 p.m. today at the Independent Media Center, 202 S. Broadway Ave., U, as part of a "Poetry for the People Slam" with youth and adult performers.

6 to 8 p.m. Thursday at the "Teen SPEAK" Cafe at the Independent Media Center, coordinated by Ammons.

(Updated every 5 minutes)

Besides Carter, the participants are: Keosha Gaines, Meaguell Gaines, Kamron Haley, Collette "Co-Co" Harmon, Tamarra Likens, Nailah Davis, Dante Scott, Lonnie Johnson, Marshall Allston-Yeagle, Summir Evans, Jemika Butler, Deandre Lemons, Rashod Fly and Preston Roseborough.

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Urbana backs more land for King Park

Mon, 04/25/2011 - 9:44pm | [Patrick Wade](#)

URBANA -- King Park will be getting a little bit bigger if the city council next week finalizes a lease agreement with the park district that aldermen supported Monday.

A vacant lot at 909 N. Lincoln Ave., adjacent to the park, has been deeded to the city, and officials have decided its best use would be to enlarge King Park.

To do so, city officials have agreed to lease the land at \$1 per year to the park district, which would be responsible for the lot's upkeep. Libby Tyler, director of community development, said the contract is very similar to a lease the city maintains on a property just to the north at 911 N. Lincoln Ave.

The park board must also vote to approve the lease.

In other business, the council supported an intergovernmental agreement to move toward the construction of a segment of Olympian Drive. The Champaign County board last week supported the agreement, which directs federal and state dollars to the engineering design and land acquisition of what has been a hotly debated road.

A separate but related agreement, which is the next step toward extending North Lincoln Avenue to intersect where Olympian Drive will end, was deferred as the council waits for the county board to address the contract. Board members are expected to take up the issue in May.

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Utowner wrote 1 day 10 hours ago

#1

Ok, does anyone else think this is insane? The city has two adjoining lots on Lincoln Ave. which has an insanely high traffic count and we can't think of anything better to do with them than extend an already underutilized park? How about we see if a private developer who could bring tax money would be interested? It amazes me that so much land in Urbana with excellent frontage is under developed or not held to highest and best use. Everytime I drive by the UI Credit Union at Five Points I want to scream...the busiest intersection in town is dominated by a

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angiep wrote 1 day 8 hours ago

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I think this is a great idea for my neighborhood. King park's pavillion is almost booked solid for weekends this summer. I believe this is great for my neighborhood and for the children and families in this area

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