

June 20, 2009

Esther Buffler Fellowship/PHS Artist-in-Residency Report
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The idea of holding a series of poetry slams at PHS came to me early on in the planning process. I wanted to give the students something they hadn't seen before. The initial task, however, was rounding up enough of my friends to pull off three slams (five people at least, though thankfully eight confirmed) on a Thursday morning...not to mention the first class that started at 7:30 in the morning! After a flurry of emails, voicemails, text messages, phone calls and last-minute additions and cancelations, somehow we pulled it off. I'd like to thank Matt Biondi, McKendy Fils-Aime, Sam Teitle, Mat Tremblay, Heidi Therrien, Cody Laplant, Jeff Stumpo and Beau Williams for coming together and putting on an amazing performance I'm sure the students will remember.

I knew from the start that I wanted to include other poets in the residency, as I owe them for any award or recognition I've received. I'd never be the writer I am without the people I've met and worked with over the past four years. After I graduated in 2006 and began my first teaching job, open-mic poetry nights around the Seacoast were what kept me centered and sane through months of combative parents and uninterested students. I depend on the attentive ears, feedback and camaraderie at these events. I've been competing in poetry slams for three years with moderate success, but the best part is that I've gotten to workshop, perform and build friendships with an increasing number of exceptional poets. These people – and I'm honored to call them my friends – are the backbone of the poetry scene in New Hampshire and the students at PHS recognized how close we are. One wrote, "I liked how supportive you all seem to be of each other" while others, impressed by the subject matter of the poems, shared things like, "[the poets] could turn these typical situations into works of art" and "[t]hey were all so passionate and full of life and entertaining...a new side of poetry was introduced [to me] that I didn't even know existed!"

Based on other responses from both students and teachers, they had no idea what to expect and (I expect this opinion will be shared by at least some slammers) this is the

perfect audience and/or judge when it comes to a slam. One student wrote, "[w]hen I heard that poets were coming to class, I figured it might be kind of boring". Another shared, "[w]hen the idea of a poetry slam was brought up, I was initially like, 'eh', I mean, what more could it be than lonely poets dressed all in black at a coffee shop reading their depressing poems to a bored audience?" Many would consider this the "typical teenage view" of poetry and a pretty scary audience member to perform in front of, but we call it a slam poet's dream judge! We *want* people who've never been to a slam before, we *want* people who don't have much interest in "poetry," we *want* people who *don't like* poetry, etc...and the students were happy to oblige us with lots of different opinions. The energy levels and enthusiasm was terrific.

One student summed it all up pretty well: "I realized that in the grand scheme of a slam, scores are somewhat arbitrary. What really matters is the expression of emotion, of experience, of life..." In a single sentence this student encapsulated my reasons for bringing a poetry slam and spoken word artists to PHS. I wanted them to see that poetry can be cool, that you can meet friends that challenge you to push yourself creatively, that not all their preconceptions about poets are true, that poetry can be a form of therapy and emotional release and so many other things. I truly enjoyed my experience as artist in residence and think the students took something major from it, as well. I hope they pick up where we leave off.

Here are a few student pieces from an upcoming chapbook of student poetry and some more student/teacher reflections on the PHS poetry slams:

Where I'm From

I am of life,
which when made mine
is of me.
I am a child of my mother's worry
and my father's "man up"
of scraped and muddy knees
and the smell of the old Boston Whaler.
I am of sunlight, playing golden
on a warm wooden floor

of laughter-steeped car rides,
of sprinklers and snowsuits
and song, I am
always singing.
I am of books, of
stories, my best friends
could be found between pages,
created by language.
I am from broken Polish phrases,
Cohanna, bougie, gyen dobrjie...
from archaic tongues, from all the world.
I am of words, big words
made for words.
I write, therefore I am
I am therefore I write
I am from love and hate
from laughter and from tears.
Tested by fire,
cooled in the Atlantic
forever my home

by Johanna S.

Poem

From year to year it builds like a spider's den.
Without question,
without thought,
no matter, no how.
This is life.
This is our meaning.
I am from...
fill in the blank.

By Phil B.

Where I'm From

"You can't repeat the past"

I'm from

Dark Side of the Moon

softly playing
crooning through a
star perforated skylight

I'm from
playing with Beau
and losing myself in
his furry landscape

I'm from
-well played sir, well played
-Wowie Zowie!
-Yikes Bikes!
and
smashing...just smashing

I'm from
tiled cooled toes
hot chocolate warmed fingers
and naps under the afghan
as snows carve mountains
from frozen air

I'm from
empty divorce-shorn halls
and wringing consolation from pain
a sixty year old man's
teary second chance

"Of course you can"

I'm from
these places,
these people

and that's
where I'm
going

By Joey M.

"...the poems we saw performed were unlike most I've heard."

"The language was amazing...I was awed by the powerful imagery, the rhythmical

qualities, the humor that rolled over us...The poets made me want to get back to writing my own poems."

"The other girls...were telling EVERYBODY about the slam...something they would have made fun of an hour and a half before, but they were electrified - I've never seen them so excited (in school) about anything like that before."

"There was love, music, religion, heritage, women power, domestic issues, war, education, pop culture, travel, responsibility and self-expression..."

"So often, people ignore the power of words...poetry can not be ignored slam-style!"

"I was amazed how open the poets were about their lives. Some...shared their most painful or closest life moments to a room full of strangers and...I wouldn't have been able to do that."

"I wish [the slam] was longer...I didn't want to leave."

"...I hope to work with you all some day and I hope other students get to share this experience as well."

"I wanted to record each poem to keep forever and look back on."

"[The slam] gave me chills."

"Before [the slam] all the poetry that I had to read through in school always seemed dusty and dull...yesterday made me see that poetry can be one of the most exciting forms of art."

"I remember the message of each poem...which is rare because I usually forget poems I read."

"I really enjoyed how all the poets treated us like adults...making the classroom cease to exist."