

# Montreal Gazette

## A journey from streetwise to sonnets; Poetry helps at-risk kids express themselves

Tue May 19 2009

Page: A3

Section: News

Byline: PEGGY CURRAN

Column: Peggy Curran

Source: The Gazette

Series: you'll like this: A weekly focus on positive news in troubled times

Illustrations: Colour Photo: DAVE SIDAWAY, THE GAZETTE / Poet Larissa Andrusyshyn works with a Mountainview School student. "At first, they are very combative, I don't know why we have to do this' ... but then they do it. They act dismissive, but when the books come out, you can tell they are pretty happy."

Fresh from the basketball court at Mountainview High, two youths are having trouble getting their heads around this sonnet business.

"Can I go wash my face? Man, sweat is like drying on my face."

Montreal poet Larissa Andrusyshyn leads this workshop for troubled and at-risk kids, sponsored by the Quebec Writers' Federation and the Centre for Literacy of Quebec, and she isn't letting them off the hook that easily.

"What are your favourite shoes? Write about that," she tells one of the boys.

"No, don't take that, I'm going to do that one," his friend snaps, now picking up a pencil and scribbling furiously.

Another youth, a recent arrival sent down from a private school, has shiny silver sneakers and that perfect smile that usually follows braces. "I'd rather write a haiku," mainly, he admits, because he knows haikus are short.

And at the computer at the back of the room, M. tunes out the chatter, wearing earphones and listening to music as he pumps out aching stanzas shadowed by his violent past.

They call themselves the "Poet Revolutionaries" or "Rebel Youth Together" or the "Original Poets."

Many have been chiselled by hard times, by run-ins with the law or families that haven't always been there for them. Their reading, writing and math skills vary wildly. Mountainview, a social affairs school in the English Montreal School Board affiliated with Batshaw Youth and Family Services, is, depending how you see the world, a school of last resort or new beginnings. Attendance in class often takes a back seat to other lessons: court dates, a stint in a detention centre, behavioural problems or a disruptive move to another group home.

But for a few weeks every spring, students are encouraged to imagine the possibilities of life beyond Shawbridge or the challenges and temptations of the street - and write it down. For the last three years, QWF and the Centre for Literacy have joined forces with local schools and such community agencies as Head and Hands and Jeunesse 2000 to sponsor a

unique writing program.

For 45 minutes twice a week, the students in Andrusyshyn workshops at Mountainview may try their hand at free-form poetry or acrostics or "flash fiction" - telling a story in six words. Some write about a hockey game or a girl they'd like to date. A few venture deeper, to explore why they had to steal that gold chain and what it's like to be 15 and unsure you'll ever finish high school.

S. writes voraciously and says she comes from a family of poets. In one poem, she worries about an old lady with "worn-out feet" she saw on the bus. Recurring themes in M.'s pieces are guns, violence and his quest to find peace and silence in a chaotic world. "Deception and depression, here comes another therapy session for the broken hearted," he writes.

"Writing helps me to get my emotions out," M. says. "It just comes into my head."

Sam says when he was still living at home and had nothing to do, he'd take out paper and write. "That was a long time ago. Now the only reason I do it is because she comes to the class. But it's pretty good."

At the end of the sessions, the students collaborate with the workshop leader to produce a 'zine, a photocopied collection of their writing that they can show to their parents, group home leaders and friends.

"It seemed like a strange fit at the beginning to have a poetry magazine in a school with troubled youth, but in many ways it does make sense," said Danny Olivenstein, the head teacher at Mountainview, where enrolment is capped at 36 students. "The kids have their own issues, but they are extremely expressive. Many of them don't have traditional grammatical skills, but they love rap, they love to rhyme. If you can alter some of the words that we don't normally use in the classroom but keep the same spirit and keep the same free expression of ideas, then you can often end up with some real art."

Getting students to believe there is value in their work is often a challenge. "They've always been told that this is no good, this is a mistake, more red-marked than your typical essay. So they don't believe that their writing is any good," Olivenstein said. "To see it published in a real magazine and then

we give it out to people and they can't believe it. In some cases, it is the first time they have seen their own work celebrated by any adult. It's a neat feeling."

pcurran@thegazette.canwest.com

As the school year draws to an end, there are only two students left in Tracy Clarkson's class at Mountainview. Both girls, they have warmed to the poetry workshop, where they write with ease and enthusiasm. "My main thing is to introduce them to different genres of writing and to show them that they can do it," Clarkson said. "Once they see that they have a folio of work that they can look back on, they can see that they have actually accomplished something, that's a huge boon for them.

"They definitely have a lot to say. They are very honest about their experiences. They've already had difficult lives and talk openly about poverty, violence. They are highly aware of their predicament," said Andrusyshyn, who has just completed a master's in creative writing at Concordia University.

She says it's often easier for the girls to write about their feelings. "No 14-year-old boy wants to be seen as a poet," Andrusyshyn said. "Boys in my class may say, 'Can I write this as rap?' It's much more acceptable to them if it is seen as rap. It is not cool to write sonnets. At first, they are very combative, 'I don't know why we have to do this'... but then they do it. They act dismissive, but when the books come out, you can tell they are pretty happy."

At Jeunesse 2000, an after-school youth program in eastern Notre Dame de Grâce, Matana Roberts has just wrapped up a four-week 'zine session where teens worked together to prepare RYT - Rebel Youth Together, a 30-page combination of their art, poetry and reflections. Unlike the students at Mountainview, their participation was voluntary. "They are very frank and incredibly vocal and articulate," Roberts said. "I found it be really life-affirming."

At Mountainview, Olivenstein and Clarkson said how well a workshop goes can depend on factors that have no rhyme or reason - who is in the class that day, the weather, if a student acted out and has been told they can't leave their group home on the weekend.

"Hopefully, in poetry they can sometimes express in writing what they used to express in punching," Olivenstein said.

Sarah Haggard, the program's coordinator for two years, said the Centre for Literacy has been monitoring the program to see whether the workshops are having an impact on the teenagers' ability to use language effectively as a coping tool, in or out of the classroom.

"You can get a nice warm glow from something like this, but you want to know it is meeting some genuine needs."

For more about the Writers in the Community program and to see some of the students' poems and videos, visit <http://qwf.org/programs/wic>