

Making them listen

Durham teens compete to perform at an international slam poetry competition.

By Ramishah Maruf

Durham School of the Arts student Uche Nwogalanya strides up the small church stage. She takes a deep breath, flips her hair back and lets the words flow out.

“You are no monster, just a black boy,” Nwogalanya said. “To the son I may one day have.”

Nwogalanya shared the stage with six other high school girls for Blackspace’s second annual Youth Grand Slam Finals on Saturday, Feb. 10. The girls, who made it through two previous qualifiers, were competing for a spot on Blackspace’s slam poetry team. The competition was held at NorthStar, Blackspace’s new event space located in a renovated church. The members will compete at Brave New Voices, an international poetry slam competition, in Chicago this summer.

The slam consisted of three rounds, and the poets performed a different poem in each round. After each performance, five judges, who were randomly chosen from the audience, rated them on a scale of 1 to 10. Nwogalanya won this year’s slam.

“Winning reassured me that my poetry is worth sharing and people actually believe in me,” Nwogalanya said.

A platform to use their voice

Blackspace is a makerspace, or a creative hub, for youth based in Durham. By hosting weekly spoken

word performance workshops and events like the Grand Slam, Blackspace aims to empower black youth by encouraging them to share their stories.

“(Black and brown youth) are told they don’t have a voice, or they’re told not to use it,” Mariah Monsanto, program director and slam master for Blackspace Poetry, said. “I think a lot of people need this platform to use their voice.”

Last year, with funding from crowd-source fundraising, grants and ticketed events, members of the Blackspace slam poetry team were able to share their voices on an international stage at Brave New

Voices in San Francisco. The team was the first from Durham to compete at the event.

“It was ethereal,” Durham School of the Arts senior Zoë Thompson said. “I had never been around so many poets and so many different people with the same passion as me.”

Communicating between mind and heart

The rules for Saturday night’s finals were simple. If a poet said something compelling, snap your fingers so the poet’s voice isn’t drowned out. Rub your hands together to send a poet positive energy if they forget their words. And most importantly, when Monsanto announced the score, clap for the poet, not the points.

Thompson was one of the first on stage. She said the poems she prepared were extended metaphors, with topics ranging from her grandmother’s house to fog. She said her inspiration comes from what deeply affects her in her everyday life. “I always have this unclear communication between my mind and my heart,” Thompson

said. “So writing allows me that communication where my brain and my heart can sit down with each other and be like, ‘Yo, what’s up, what’s going on?’”

Thompson performed her first slam in 2016, after attending Blackspace workshops. Her creative writing teacher, Alexa Garvoille, said since then, she’s seen her grow both as a person and a writer.

“I don’t know when it changed, but somewhere in her sophomore year, she just came out of her shell,” Garvoille said. “I think without the experience of performing she wouldn’t know that about herself -- that you need to be heard, you need to perform or you need an audience.”



Uche Nwogalanya (middle), a Durham School of the Arts student, reacts to winning Blackspace’s second annual Youth Grand Slam Finals on Feb. 10. She will represent Durham at Brave New Voices, an international poetry competition, in Chicago this summer. Photo by Ramishah Maruf.

Now, Garvoille said Thompson is a leader on campus, organizing rallies and the DSA Black Arts Festival, which is the first Black History Month event at the school.

Working together

When Thompson’s scores were announced, the loudest cheers came from the back row of seats, where the poets were sitting. Thompson said many of the poets went to Durham School of the Arts, which is a 15-minute walk from Blackspace.

“We’ll work on the poems together in school sometimes, and then they’ll go to Blackspace and work on it there,” Garvoille said. “It’s been a good partnership between Blackspace and DSA. We work together even though we’re not intentionally working together sometimes, just because we’re working with the same kids.”

When the scores were announced, the poets stood together on stage holding hands. Many have known each other for several years. Over those years, Durham School of the Arts senior Lauran Jones said, slamm-ing changed her life.

“I used to be really self-conscious when I went on stage. I don’t think I’m the prettiest person in the world, and everyone is staring at you,” Jones said. “But now, I just go up there and it’s essentially like my second home. And when I’m up there, I know I have the audience under control and I’m going to make them listen to me. I’m going to make them put down their phones and listen to what I have to say.”

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