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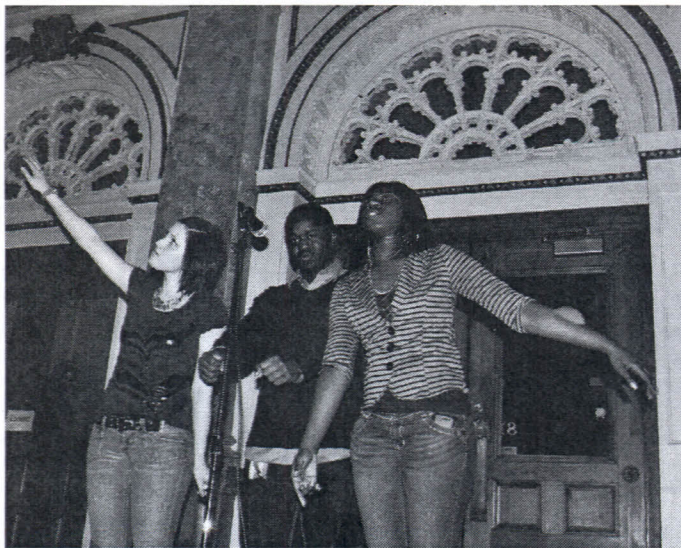
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Still Waters Slam League Finals: "You can't hold poets back!"

April 24th, 2012 | By Jennifer Kaufman
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Rufus King students perform at the Slam League Finals (Photos: Sherrell Locke)

"I've always enjoyed stories and words," says writer, poet and spoken word artist Dasha Kelly. It's that enjoyment that inspired her to create **Still Waters Collective**, an arts organization that provides programs for writers and poets, many of them young people.

More than a decade ago, Kelly realized she wanted to do something to inspire young people's creativity, and joined forces with other writers, poets and spoken word artists to provide a place where people can find and use their own voice to express themselves.

Still Waters Collective name was inspired by the phrase, "still waters run deep." Or as Kelly puts it, "We're all more than what can be seen on the surface."

One of Still Waters Collective most popular programs is its **High School Slam League**. From February to April, more than a dozen Milwaukee-area schools compete in poetry slam leagues. Students perform their original poetry, and expound on a multitude of topics. The Slam League recently capped off a big season with its Slam League Finals at the **Central Library** on Thursday, April 19.

Competing in the Slam Finals were teams from **Rufus King**, **Riverside**, **Washington** and **High School of**



Judges raise their scores. Slam coach, Dan Vaughn, hosts.

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the Arts. Other schools were also represented, including Tenor Messmer, Milwaukee School of Language and Ronald Reagan.

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There was a moment on Thursday where the finals were in jeopardy of being canceled due to a snafu in the availability of the library's Centennial Hall, but with the cliché "the show must go on" weighing on the minds of many, the finals were moved to the library's lobby, where students and other participants quickly organized near the front doors.

"Are you all ready for some poetry? You can't hold poets back!" shouted emcee Dan Vaughn, and the four rounds of the slam finals commenced.

Using elements beyond typical poetry recitation such as singing, rapping and DJ-ing, teams spoke on topics important to them, including family strife, race, violence, fatherless homes, the economy, technology, faith and other issues that affect their generation. Their poetry's brutal honesty was thought-provoking. I'm not ashamed to admit I often got teary-eyed and at times I got goose bumps.

Humor was also evident in some of the poems. One poem about the fleetingness of teenage romance made many of us laugh, and some older members of the audience could certainly relate.



The 2012 City Finals were held at the Milwaukee Central Library.

The audience went wild over the poetry, showing their approval with applause and cheers. This was no "polite" tea-sipping poetry reading; this was the Slam League Finals!

"Poetry is the freest form of therapy," said judge and local poet and radio host Darryl Jackson. "There is no right or wrong way to convey a message."

The fourth round showcased the top four teams from School of the Arts, Riverside, Rufus King and Washington. The poems were brilliant as were the performances, but it was School of the Arts' riveting poem on the destructive evil of incest that blew away the audience and brought top ten scores from the judges.

After the final round it was time to add up the points and figure out their places in the finals. But as High School of the Arts' participant Shaquille Grandberry said, "The points are not poetry; it's about the poetry." While the students anxiously awaited to find out where they placed, noted poet D.E.E.P recited her work to an enthusiastic audience.

Last year's champions, High School of the Arts, remained triumphant and won the first place trophy. The library exploded into huge applause not only for the winners, but for all of the schools. Receiving trophies was one thing, but in the end, poetry is the most important thing. As High School of the Arts Participant Jontrell Dixon, put it, "Poetry is telling a picture."

"Young people have voices, and they have opinions about the world around us," Still Waters communications/program director Julie Schumann, when asked why young people are so drawn to the organization. "Still Waters gives them the space to speak up and to set their inner stories free."

The Slam League inspires participants in many aspects of their lives, said Kelly.

"In the broadest sense, students value the network they're building among themselves, across schools and throughout the city," she said. "Individually, they are encouraged, inspired and in many cases, validated to hear stories from their peers. They trek from all walks of life, but share achievements based on works they create with their own experiences, opinions, ideas and words."

Still Waters Collective will continue to grow as an organization, with new schools showing interest in the Slam League. The organization focuses mostly on young people, but adults have not been forgotten. Kelly mentioned new adult initiatives will be introduced before the end of the year.

To learn more about Still Waters Collective visit their website at stillwaterscollective.com. See below for a promotional video about the Slam League from Still Waters Collective.



Milwaukee High School of the Arts defends their Slam League title