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Young words of wisdom

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AS220 project takes teens from prison to poetry

By TATIANA PINA
Journal Staff Writer

CRANSTON — Seventeen-year-old Jonathan says that if he could have anything he would cure his mother's cancer, buy her a car and get her a license.

The other part of his dream would be to get his two younger brothers out of the environment they're in so they don't end up in the Rhode Island Training School like him.

In prison there are a lot of things that make him mad. Fellow inmates can provoke him; the guards tell him what to do. He doesn't want to end up like his dad and uncle in prison. He doesn't want to be poor.

It makes him mad enough to take a swing at somebody ... but instead he grabs his pen and attacks a piece of paper. He writes about his life.

"Poetry makes me happy when I feel sad or lonely," says Jonathan. "It has changed my life. After I write, you'll see me running to find Demian (Demian Yattaw, his poetry teacher) or I'll be calling my friends to see what they think."

Muse Union

The influence writing poetry has had on Jonathan and others at the training school inspired AS220, a Providence arts center, which has been working with the training school and Yattaw, to embark on a project called AS220 Muse Union.

The goal of the project is to give youths a place they can go to express their creative impulses, says AS220's Umberto Crenca. The program is timely, says Crenca, given that the recent shootings in Colorado jarred the country into looking at youths and how to provide an environment they can feel a part of.

For starters, AS220 will work with the training school, Mount Pleasant High School and the Metropolitan School. Students in each will meet to set an agenda for the type of project they want —

Writing to escape

Zak says he uses his poetry to escape the training school. He is there for stealing a car. He says his day at the training school starts a 6 a.m. When school gets out, the inmates have one hour to themselves. Zak uses this time to write poetry and read mystery novels.

"In here, you think about everything," Zak says. "Every noise can be heard here. If the neighbors have a dog and he barks I start to think about my cockatiels and all the noise they used to make. They used to wake me up and make me mad. Now I wish I could be there hearing them."

recitals, theatrical presentations, dance, art exhibits or anything the students can come up with.

"Everyone has a spark of creativity that has to come out in some form," Crenca says. "The hope is to allow the kids to express themselves in their own ways."

Not all students excel in sports or academics, Crenca says. "There exists a need to give students a new outlet to channel their creative energies and the need to make all people feel included."

AS220 will provide a space for youths who have been released from the training school and who want to continue with poetry.

Poetry reading

Tonight from 5 to 9 AS220, 115 Empire St., Providence, will sponsor IMPACT, a program of poetry by the training school students. Those who have been released from the training school will recite their poetry. A book of 250 poems written by the students will be made available to the public. Poems by the students will be

Rapping and raving

Evan says that each time he sits down to write poetry, he thinks about the day he was arrested and how the police put handcuffs on him for bringing a weapon to school. He says he was already rapping when he heard others raving about the poetry class and asked to join.

Quickly he writes a poem about the chaos in Littleton, Colo..

Kaos

*In the kaos I blank out and open fire
In the kaos I will be an outcast no more
In the kaos I see friends and foes fall to the blood soaked floors
In the kaos I load, aim and squeeze at all enemies
In the kaos I feel no remorse for my actions
In the kaos I close my eyes and feel no more distractions
In the kaos time seems to stand still
In the kaos I will continue this rage until my goal is fulfilled
In the kaos I see my time is up now
In the kaos I take my own life to be a part of the crowd*

An outlet for pent-up anger

Mino, who is doing time for armed robbery says the poetry class has given him an outlet for his anger. "I have a lot of anger pent up in my head," he says. "I can let it out through poetry instead of taking it out on somebody."

An excerpt from his daily writings:

*Bad memories flipping through my mind like a devil's photo album
They turn off my light and I lay in my blue hard bed
My eyes are getting heavy like miniature weights hang off them
As I close my eyes, one final tear drops onto my soft white pillow
Making a sound like a rain drop on a car window.*

on display, written in calligraphy by various local artists.

Arlene Chorney, director of educational programming for the training school, says several students who have been released from the training school asked to return to the poetry classes.

"It's sad that they would want to return here because there is no other place to go," she says.

Crenca says the idea for the Muse Union came out of working with Yattaw and the kids at the training school and a program

AS220 does each month in which people from AS220 visit area schools to talk about the arts.

"We were running this program where we visit schools for a few minutes and talk about arts and then someone told us that seven kids had been released from the training school and had nowhere to go. That kind of put a reality check on things for us. We figured we could spend a couple of minutes with students or do something more permanent with them and substantive."