



PHOTOS BY DANIEL WHELAN

The six poets from Miriam's Kitchen are from left: Ricky Balthrop, David Harris, Darlene Ferguson, Eugene Talbot, Adlai Hatcher and Randall Cook.

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Homeless Captivate With Poetry

BY DANIEL WHELAN
THE CONNECTION

*one step closer
to the God who hears her
prayers every morning*

Six homeless people from Washington, D.C. captivated over 70 high school students with poetry at the Vienna Presbyterian Church on a recent Sunday night.

The five men and one woman belong to Miriam's Poets, a poetry workshop run by the Washington D.C. breakfast program, Miriam's Kitchen. The poets meet each week to discuss and write poetry. They also perform readings at local businesses, universities, and schools to educate the public on homelessness.

"Like you, I grew up with a suburban middle class background. I had no idea I would end up like this," said David Harris to the audience of teenagers.

Harris—youngest of the six poets at 39—in a grey hooded sweatshirt, bent glasses and a flow of ragged hair from chin to scalp, opened the reading with his poem "Majestic Hands," which uses the imagery of a homeless woman's weathered hands to describe her life, from cradling kittens and babies to reaching for spare change from strangers.

His second poem, "Elizabeth Anne," addressed the power of friendship and love:

*A hike into her mountains
reveals
there is hope, there is hope
there is peace
for me, and for all who suffer,
and in her presence, I feel*

WHEN HARRIS FINISHED, the teenagers applauded enthusiastically.

"I was so impressed at how he could see so much good in another human being," said Becca Rattray, a ninth-grader at Thomas Jefferson High School.

Harris was followed by Ricky Balthrop, Darlene Ferguson, Eugene Talbot, Adlai Hatcher, and Randall Cook. The poets shared not only poems, but life experiences and perspectives on spirituality, family, politics, growing up, and personal relationships.

"I could see the wheels turning in the minds of the kids," said Daniel Eagan, senior high director of the church's student ministry. Eagan and Student Ministry Direc-

tor Eric De Vries bring small groups of students to Miriam's Kitchen weekly at 5:30 a.m. to help prepare breakfast.

"Most kids who live out in these areas rarely meet or talk to anyone who is homeless," said Scott Schenkelberg, executive director of Miriam's Kitchen. "These programs are a way for people to find empathy for homeless people—to understand that they are creative, talented people who, for some reason or another, have become homeless."

Even students like Sarah Verley, who volunteers regularly at Miriam's Kitchen, found a greater appreciation for homeless people. "I just see them differently now," said Verley, a ninth-grader at Madison High School.

"I was amazed at how much experience they have all had, how

SEE HOMELESS. PAGE 17



High school students listen attentively to poetry at the Vienna Presbyterian Church

COMMUNITY

Homeless Captivate With Poetry

FROM PAGE 16

many lessons they have learned in their lives, and that we can learn from someone who is not so accomplished by today's standards," said Rattray.

Randall Cook, a U.S. Navy veteran, cheerfully described his life as a journey that started in Dayton, Ohio and took him, via the Navy, to Japan, the Philippines, South Korea, San Diego, and finally, Washington, D.C. His poem "On the Grass," written the day of the reading, described his previous night's sleep under a tree beside the State Department.

Rick Balthrop's poem "Home" described with photographic detail, his childhood memories of home:

*Home is red Kool-Aid in a mayonnaise jar
Home is a stash of bubblegum
Home is an extra large pot of slop.*

DARLENE FERGUSON described how the juxtaposition of a

mobile soup kitchen standing before the tall, glassy-walled World Bank inspired her to write her poem "Picnic View."

Eugene Talbot enlisted the help of Adam Luddeke, a senior at Oakton High School, to read his poem "Women." The poem, which warns men against the backlash of mistreating women, elicited an enthusiastic response from the crowd with its final line "And it's going to cost you."

Adlai Hatcher spoke of his struggle to find work since writing the poem "September Third in the Park," last year. His poem, comparing words to leaves, served as a grim reminder of a dangerous winter looming ahead for those without housing:

*Words falling, floating downward from above
saying it's September and Fall is coming.*

Schenkelberg, along with Program Assistant Emily Carmody, long-time volunteer Porter Coggeshall, Eagan and De Vries

arranged the event at the church.

WHEN THE FINAL ROUND of applause faded, the attentive high school students, who had sat attentively for 90 minutes, became teenagers again—talking, laughing and gathering into groups. The poets sampled some refreshments, said their goodbyes, and headed back to Washington, D.C. to sleep on the grass beside the State Department, in the Metro stations and bus shelters.

And by 7 a.m. Monday morning, they lined up again with over one hundred and fifty others outside the door to Miriam's Kitchen.

Besides reading at Georgetown University, The George Washington University, American University, Barnes and Noble Books, Border's Books, The Fannie Mae Foundation, the National Academy of Sciences, The Kennedy Center, the poets have also published three poetry anthologies: *Thoughts After Breakfast* (1997), *167 Wednesdays/ 167 Thursdays* (2001), and most recently *Soft Concrete Stairs* (2002).


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