

Poets look to slam competition



The 2012 Bull City Slam Team throws up the “bull horns” hand gesture. From left: Elliot Axiom, SLAP, Kimberly “Redefining Freedom” McCrae, Ishine, Dasan Ahanu. (Photo courtesy of Dasan Ahanu).

By Melanie Johnson
Durham VOICE Staff Writer

Twelve poets. Three minutes. Four spots.

At 8 p.m. on April 20, 12 of the Triangle’s best poets will compete to earn one of four spots on the 2013 Bull City Slam Team, which will represent Durham in the National Poetry Slam in August.

At Grand Slam Finals, top-scoring poets from the Hayti Heritage Center’s monthly Jambalaya Soul Slam will have three minutes to perform original poems to be judged by a panel of five audience members.

The event will consist of three rounds with eliminations occurring each round. The four poets with the highest cumulative scores by the end of the third round will be selected for the 2013 Bull City Slam Team.

Dasan Ahanu, the founder of the event and coach of the Bull City team each year, said there is always a wide range of poetic content shared at the slams.

“It’s personal experience, social commentary, self-reflection, identity, love,” Ahanu said. “It’s a beautiful hodgepodge.”

Building the Team

Ahanu, who once competed nationally on the Charlotte slam poetry team, started the Jambalaya Soul Slam in Raleigh in 2002. The program moved to the Hayti Heritage Center in Durham in 2005 and has been growing ever since. With grant support from the St. Joseph’s Historic Foundation, the Bull City Slam Team has competed at various regional and national poetry competitions for the past seven years.

Elliot Axiom, a finalist who has been on the Bull City team since its creation, said that while the slams are competitive by nature, poets primarily attend with the intention of sharing their work — and their stories — with an audience.

“We’re competing, and yes, we want to

win, but the trueness of it should be your work,” Axiom said. “It’s about saying, ‘This is me — in all my glory and infamy.’”

Axiom said he used to perform with his eyes closed as a way of tuning out the audience during a performance but is now fairly confident performing his work in front of a crowd.

“I’m an old hen at this,” Axiom said. “And I have told all the young poets that say, ‘I’m

GRAND SLAM FINALS

When: Saturday, April 20, 2013

Time: 8 p.m.

Where: Hayti Heritage Center at 804 Old Fayetteville St. Durham

Ticket price: \$7 general admission

For more information, contact Dasan Ahanu at (919) 295-0176 or dasan67@live.com.

gonna take your spot,' I say, 'If you want it, come and get it, but I'm not just going to give it away.'

Axiom said that the nature of how judges are selected for the event — at random from the audience — can make it difficult to predict who will score well in the competition and win a spot on the team.

"There's no guarantee," Axiom said. "I've had to struggle and fight and scratch, and I've been fortunate to make it as many times as I have."

A Family Reunion

Starr Seward, who was a member of the SlamCharlotte national championship poetry team in 2008, is competing for her first time in Durham.

Seward qualified as a finalist in November, when she was also chosen to represent Durham in the 2013 Women of the World Poetry Slam. Seward placed 17th at the event, which brings together 73 of the world's top female poets.

Seward, who has qualified for WOWPS five times, said she looks forward to the event for the competitive aspect and for the chance to see fellow poets she has come to think of as family members.

"Half of it is a competition, and half of it is hanging out, listening to your friends' poetry," Seward said. "When you go to these events, it's like going to a family reunion. The family is huge. It's nationwide."

Kimberly McCrae, a fellow finalist who was on last year's Bull City Team, said the poetry community is extremely close-knit, especially in North Carolina. McCrae, whose poet name is "Redefining Freedom," is an advisor to the Duke University spoken word group Spoken Verb.

McCrae said some of the young poets in the community call her "Aunt Freedom," and she looks on some of them as her children.

"Being one of the older people on the poetry scene, I feel like I have a responsibility to create and maintain an image that is respectful," McCrae said. "That speaks to the standard of excellence that I believe poetry is supposed to be exemplary of."

Redefining Identity

McCrae said it's only been in the past couple of years that she has felt comfortable enough to share personal, often pain-

ful stories through her poetry.

McCrae was in an abusive relationship for many years, and coming out of it, she struggled to find her identity.

"I didn't know who I was," McCrae said. "Coming out on the other side of that, it was necessary for me to figure out, 'What does freedom look like for me now?'"

McCrae's poet name, "Redefining Freedom," is representative of the new identity she has created for herself in acknowledging the past and moving on to the future. Her poems "Battle Scars," "Cracked Mirrors" and "Love Letter to a Fractured Past" were all written from her experiences in the abusive relationship.

Personal Catharsis

Axiom said he, too, writes poems from personal experiences of love, loss and hurt. He began writing poetry in the seventh grade as a way to express what he thought he couldn't articulate to anyone else.

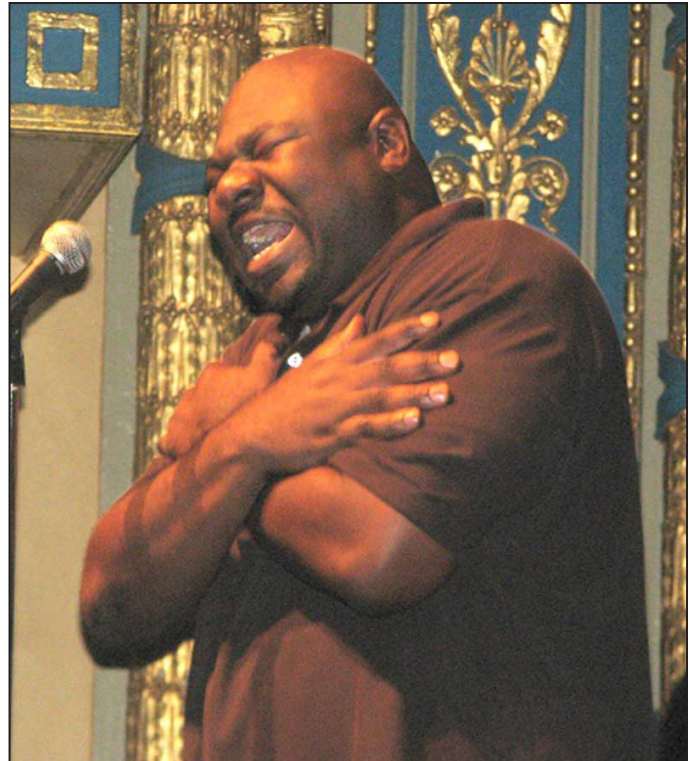
"It started as a personal catharsis," Axiom said. "I had things that I could explain better to paper than I could to people."

Seward also began writing at an early age, as an escape from childhood troubles. She now works for the Sacrificial Poets, youth poetry program in the Triangle that gives middle, high school and college students the chance to write and perform poetry.

"I remember when I was a kid, poetry was the only thing that really kept me together," Seward said. "So to give that experience to other kids — it's amazing."

The Power of Poetry

Regardless of what happens at Grand



Elliot Axiom performs at a slam poetry event. Axiom said he used to perform with his eyes closed as an effort to tune out the audience and focus on his piece. (Photo courtesy of Dasan Ahanu).

Slam Finals on April 20, Ahanu said the poetry slam is so much more than a competition.

"It's the empowerment of having your voice heard and having the opportunity to give voice to other people's stories," Ahanu said. "It's an outlet and a vehicle for expression."

Axiom said he writes poetry for others as well as for himself.

"I'll write something, and I'll say, 'Somebody needs this piece,'" Axiom said. "I might not know who they are, but I'll know somebody needs it. And a lot of times you write for those who can't speak for themselves."

Axiom said he will continue writing and performing poetry — even if he doesn't make the Bull City Slam Team for his eighth consecutive year.

Starr, too, said she couldn't imagine her life without poetry.

"There are very few things in this world that make sense to me," Seward said. "But writing poetry makes perfect sense all the time. I can't remember a time before poetry. I'll never stop."

"I remember when I was a kid, poetry was the only thing that really kept me together. So to give that experience to other kids — it's amazing."

Starr Seward, slam poet