

Bronx teens' rhyme time



"Poetry gives teens the tools to tell their story," says Victoria Sammartino (far l.), executive director and founder of the Voices UnBroken program.

Photo by Joy Keh



Voices UnBroken program lets youths in crisis vent with rap and poetry

TWENTY NERVOUS TEENS waited to read their poetry at the offices of Voices UnBroken, a youth program in the Bronx.

"Who wants to go first?" asked Victoria Sammartino, executive director and founder of the 10-year-old nonprofit.

The young poets, ages 13 to 21, are from residency programs for young people in crisis.

At the monthly poetry reading last week a girl named Brianna stood up and quietly read a strongly worded poem about running away from home. Next, a tall, thin girl named Dawn performed an a cappella rap song about honesty.

Sammartino doesn't lose a beat after each poem. "What lines stayed with you? Did you hear any metaphors? Can we hear that great line again?"

Plugging in background mu-

BY ABBY LUBY
DAILY NEWS WRITER

sic, two youngsters known as "Bonito" and "Epidemic" belted out a song about the harsh realities of growing up in the Bronx where you "don't let a dude teach you what you're destined to be."

"Poetry gives teens the tools to tell their story," said Sammartino, 31, who partners with city organizations helping youth who are homeless, incarcerated or in drug treatment.

"These young people have been neglected and abused and are very private about their lives.

We are teaching them how to write about that and about love, friendship, goals and dreams.

"We make writing a game. We ask them to use sensory language to describe different emotions, like what do they think 'frustration' tastes or smells like."

The young writers are asked to start sentences with "I never thought...", "I'm the kind of person who...", "I'm scared...", "All around me I see...", "In my past life I was...", "I believe..."

"It's about getting them to tap into emotions they may have not wanted to talk about before," explained Sammartino, who said their poems and songs deal with guilt, jealousy, new love, heartbreak, loss.

A haunting poem about harsh family relationships titled "Fresh

Start," was read by Jennifer, who cracked open her bright yellow journal filled with more than 100 poems. "I've written a poem every night since starting with Voices UnBroken three months ago," she said.

Sammartino encourages the writers to vigorously applaud each other. Poem subjects ran the gambit from free falling through the universe to being forever stuck in the "hood."

A stanza in a poem by girl named Adrienne read, "tears on my pillow...stops my dreams," and segued to a line about suicide. Sammartino adroitly addressed this, saying: "This is something you talk about — to us or one of your supervisors here in this room, right?"

The teens say reading their poetry is a way to vent their feel-

ings, and hearing poems by their peers puts their own lives in perspective.

"It shows we're not the only voices out there. And the applause is overwhelming," says Brianna.

Voices UnBroken also runs workshops at correctional facilities and homeless shelters. The organization gets private and public funding, which helps pay some 10 teachers to lead city-wide workshops.

The way Sammartino sees it, these teens learning how to write is more about their sense of self.

"In the residential facilities and group homes the kids don't get too many family visits and they are unsure of how much they are missed by the larger community. We want them to know they are worth finding and tell them: 'We haven't heard your voice.'"



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