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Students’ Verses Tug at Hearts in Competitive Poetry Slam

Declared ‘life-changing’ by spectators, the popular Poetry Slam delighted a packed audience and offered thoughtful reflection on issues dear to students.

Dillon Stambaugh performs at the Fall 2014 Poetry Slam Image Credit: Andrew Burgess

November 13, 2014 | Alexandria Wojtanowski ’15

BRISTOL, R.I. – On a typically quiet Thursday evening on campus, one classroom broke the stillness last week with a raucous display of artistic creation. One of the most well-attended student events, the 9th biannual Poetry Slam reverberated the auditorium-style classroom with a thunder of poetry, cheering, and music.

For a moment, imagine yourself seated inside the room, the anticipation palpable among audience members and “slammers” alike. Every seat and aisle in the room is filled, with the overspill of spectators poured out through the hallway, raptly listening to slammers they cannot even see for two hours. For the slammers, the energy in the room reflects their minds’ feverish frenzy as they prepare to perform, a feeling of electricity surging through their veins, testing their fight-or-flight response.

But their mettle was already proven via try-outs to make the cut for the Poetry Slam – a highly competitive production that has gained so much popularity since Associate Director of the Center for Academic Development Karen Bilotti and Omar Reyes ’11 launched it in 2009 that the event now
takes place each semester and draws a big audience. All 17 slam poets turned in powerful performances, leaving the hardest decision of the night to the judges.

Those tasked with the scoring – senior Tim LeBel, Student Senate president; junior Pelumi Adegawa, vice-president of the Multi-Cultural Student Union; Amish Trivedi, adjunct Professor of Writing Studies; Laura Choiniere, service coordinator for Student Accessibility Services and nine-time Poetry Slam judge; KC Ferrara, director of the Feinstein Center for Service Learning and Community Engagement; and senior Hy Dinh, a mechanical engineering major with a love of literature – apportioned 60 percent to written content and 40 percent to performance. Senior Grace Ahl, a previous slam champ, hosted the event, which was sponsored by the Writing Center, Student Programs & Leadership, Multicultural Student Union, WQRI, Media Services and Student Advocacy.

Encouraged to stand up from their seats when they felt moved by a poet, audience members ‘voted’ for their favorites with their feet. By the end, everyone stood to applause all of the night’s slammers, which saw sophomore Jared Clough claim victory as slam champ a second time – the first as a freshman sweeping last fall’s Poetry Slam. And as further testimony to this venerated campus affair, spectators later pronounced the verses uttered by student poets to be heart-rending and “life-changing.”

From among the many talented student-poets that evening, here is a sample of the slammers’ verse:

- “We used to be able to adapt without portraying our emotions through selfies and Snapchats, without hiding behind our voices on Twitter and Yik Yak until we successfully delete our identity … Every day we become more numb to what’s real, convincing ourselves that we are less conflicted by ignoring the fact that we are now more addicted … I am flesh; I am machine. Now I know what it means to be a paradox.” – Jared Clough ’17

- Women are never allowed to speak candidly about the demons that haunt our minds; we tell pretty lies and spin metaphors out of the strands of the truth … we don’t want to make anyone uncomfortable because of the horrors that make us afraid to leave the house at night … I am so fucking sick of comparing myself to a garden, or a temple, when an ashtray of a boy made me feel like nothing that beautiful.” – Grace Napoli ’17

- “If it weren’t for depression I would have never opened my heart up to the world and I’d still be that cynical kid dragging my feet, cursing the air that I breathe. Sometimes it’s important to remind yourself, I’ve come a long way.” – Perry Maltese ’15

- “She walks with self-consciousness, seeking prominence. Her caffeine- and nicotine-induced heart is colder than her wet moccasins … She groans over her paper on female behavior and sub-tweets about her haters like ‘kk talk to you later.’ Her baby blue eyes gaze at the world around her, cutting diamonds with looks that could slash tires and deep-fry flounder. And she seems weak, but she’s hardly asleep in her seat.” – Jon Perlstein ’16
“And then I realize I’m by myself. Alone. In the dark, staring at the moon and wondering if you are, too. And I hope you are. Because at least for that moment, we’re together.” — RJ Scofield ’15

“Ignorance is trained, it’s not ingrained in our brains. It’s the way we are raised: to see the ugly, not the beauty in the faces of the hungry. They deserved it, they earned it — a life of endless poverty. You tell yourself this noble lie to clear your conscience instead of your pocket.” — Jen Iacobino ’15

“What’s so wrong with being vulnerable? Why are we all so uncomfortable with sharing the thoughts locked inside the back of our minds — the things that pump our fears and insecurities, from our beating hearts to our numbing extremities. If you ever need a remedy, for depression, anxiety, or something petty, talk to a friend; and if you can’t find any, you can come tell me anything, ‘cause there’s no reason to leave words unsaid.” — Nick Andrews ’16’

“Words that have no place in conversation because their mention stinks like a bowl of spoiled mistakes. Set fire to those words in your head like a bundle of sticks and watch, smiling with a victorious sneer, as all the hate they embody dissipates into a glorious gust of wind, bringing forth some change.” — Connor Sweet ’16

“Adulthood places its hands on everyone eventually … I’m not going to lie — being an adult scares the living shit out of me. But I know who I am, and your youth is a fever you can’t cool. And yeah, age is a number. But I’ll tell you what — all the cigarettes and scratch tickets in the world aren’t going to make me old before I say so.” — Nicola Alexander ’18

“If you see a man in a turban or a woman in a headdress, let’s stop whispering ‘They’re oppressed.’ Let’s stop thinking that they’re a threat. Let’s show them some damn respect. Let’s trust them as equals and friends. Just because they pray to a different heavenly father, doesn’t make them a martyr. It doesn’t make you a target. If fear is your main prescription, than visit a different doctor.” — Jesse Ramos ’14 (intermission slammer and former host)