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The Halls Come Alive with the Sound of Poetry

by Susan Thibedeau

Now in its eighth year at Bangor (Maine) High School (BHS), Poetry Out Loud has become a mainstay in English classes. As this program has expanded at BHS, more and more English teachers have joined in, meaning that virtually every high school student participates in this national recitation project that encourages students to memorize and perform a poem. According to English teacher David Barnett, “Poetry Out Loud allows every kid to play and have fun with poetry.” Abby McCarthy, BHS senior, explains what makes Poetry Out Loud so special: “When you see a stranger open up on stage like that, and really express his/her true self, it’s really amazing. When you see someone perform their own unique twist on a poem or deliver some phrase in a way you never thought to interpret it, it’s really powerful.”

Each year, a December day is devoted to the school-wide competition when more than 70 Bangor High School students recite a poem in the school’s auditorium to an audience of their peers and teachers. One winner is chosen to go on to the regional competition, but the build-up prior to that final choice reveals how much poetry permeates BHS. “I love overhearing students in the halls talking about which poem they are going to do, or reciting a few lines to each other,” says Emilie Throckmorton, a cosponsor of the program. She continues: “Former U.S. Poet Laureate Billy Collins believed that students should be given opportunities to read and appreciate poetry without always being forced to analyze it. That is exactly what happens in the month preceding Poetry Out Loud and on the performance day itself. Students enjoy the words, the sounds, the rhythms, and the feeling of poems, and cheer each other on for their performances.”

The skills required to perform in front of approximately 200 people are true life-long skills. Participating in Poetry Out Loud not only builds memorization and public speaking skills, but also opens students to another level of understanding and meaning in poetry. Stephanie Hendrix, English teacher, elaborates, “Poetry Out Loud gives kids a chance to make a personal connection to a poem. They embody the poem; they become the poem.”

Yet, despite the development of thinking and speaking skills dear to any teacher’s heart, perhaps the best part of Poetry Out Loud is the element of surprise. You never know who’s going to do an amazing job. Every year one of the quieter students in a class wows both classmates and teachers with a stellar performance. And classmates learn about each other through the poems each chooses. As English teacher Jane Venturelli describes, “this program gives quiet kids a chance to show what’s inside of them.” According to Megan Ward, BHS senior, “my favorite part is watching different people find their voice. I like seeing other people find who they are behind a microphone, and sometimes they transform completely.”

Fazeel Hashmi, BHS 2015 champion and one of the top five state finalists, summarizes how Poetry Out Loud is meaningful to him: “Poetry is a universal language capable of relaying emotions that withstand the test of time.” A program that inspires students to experience and enjoy poetry and performance, Poetry Out Loud is here to stay. 🐾



Susan Thibedeau, a high school English teacher, cochairs the Bangor High School English Department and is the co-coordinator of BHS’s Poetry Out Loud program. She loves all forms of the written word.