Passion for poetry

Davis inspires students as they prepare for poetry slam

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High school students across Minot are passionate about their poetry and excited to perform in the fourth annual Boom Slam this Sunday at Minot State University from 2-4:30 p.m.

"Boom Slam is bigger and better," Minot native and multimedia spoken word poet Joe Davis said. "This is our fourth year running and our first year expanding it beyond (Magic City Campus). My ultimate aspiration is to have all the Minot high schools be a part of this event."

"Boom Slam gives students a voice," said Angelina Edison, a language arts teacher at Minot High School-Magic City Campus. "It's really about the students speaking to the community. This is not a school project, and Boom Slam gives the students a real audience."

During the week, students gain valuable coaching and experience to enhance their artistry. Davis and Edison provide writing and performance workshops that not only boost the students' literary talents but instill confidence.

At first glance, one would believe that Davis was always commanding the stage. Edison recalls a moment when Davis transformed from a quiet artist to a passionate performer.

"As a student, he was very quiet and not quick to share his poems with the class," Edison said. "Joe was a general artist who did a lot of drawings that were very Seuss-like. Once he started sharing with a real audience and experienced real feedback, I believe he discovered that this was what he wanted to do. He became really energetic and elaborated more about his feelings."
As a proud alumnus, Davis quickly accepted the chance to work beside his former teacher.

"Boom Slam really got started because of a great relationship with Mrs. Edison," Davis said. "About five years ago she invited me back because she knew I was a performance poet and asked me to get the kids excited about poetry."

Poetry is one of the oldest art forms in the world, and Boom Slam is bringing new life and fresh voices to poetry. "The heart of this event is to give kids something that I didn't have," Davis said. "These types of events are available but the kids may not be aware of them. When I was younger, there were poetry slams going on and writing workshops taking place, but I didn't know anything about them. So, I want the kids to know that hey, there is an event to express yourself and if you want be part of this, here it is."

Before there was Boom Slam, Davis developed his craft on the playgrounds of Minot.

"I've always been a lover, so I wrote poetry," Davis said. "Growing up, I wrote for the ladies but as I got older and faced hard times, that's when poetry became a catalyst for me. Poetry was a means for healing."

For Davis, the path to poetry started with family outings to the library.

"Growing up, I was always in the library," Davis said. "I have to give love to my parents for cultivating a love of reading. On the weekends, my dad and I would walk to the library. Till I was nine years old, I lived on the Air Force base, and everything was within walking distance. They would let me spend hours in the library, and I remember picking up stacks of books."

Prior to honing his poetic talent, Davis was drawn to the world of visual arts.

"At the library, I would pick books with pictures," Davis said. "I love art and I used to consider being a cartoonist. I'm a lover of words and images."

Inspired by numerous authors such as Doctor Seuss, Davis found refuge and delight inside the world of literature.

"I read a lot of Doctor Seuss," Davis said. "Langston Hughes was another influence who had a profound impact on me. They could get a message across in a way that anybody could understand. Their words had deep and beautiful meanings."

Davis credits the power of prayer and logotherapy, for helping him overcome bouts of childhood illness.

"There is something called logotherapy," Davis said. "It uses words and creative expression as a source of healing. There are facilities that practice this all over the world. As a kid, I would always write to get my feelings out, however I didn't know that I was doing logotherapy. It was in essence a practice of healing through words and this is where my journey of poetry really became important to me. At this point, poetry was more than a hobby and was helping me to live."

With the guidance of his parents and the affirmation of teachers, Davis was mentored and encouraged to exercise his poetic talents.

"I have to credit my teachers, my mentors and my community," Davis said. "They were the ones who encouraged me to share my poetry. They were always saying, 'Hey, this is powerful stuff and you should share this.'"

Blessed with a gift to assemble emotional connections to words, Davis appeared to have all the tools required to launch a career in poetry. Yet, another hurdle tested his will to express his art.

"One of the most common fears is the fear of public speaking," Davis said. "Research says that fear of public speaking is greater than the fear of death. I didn't know what people would think or how they would feel, if I shared my most vulnerable thoughts and feelings. However, once I started expressing myself, I realized that I was inspiring people and the people were inspiring me. This became my motivating factor. If I can say something that is going to impact somebody's life, then that's what I want to do for the rest of my life."
Overcoming his intense fear of public speaking, Davis recognized the power of words and aspired to give a voice to a younger generation.

"Words can be transformative," Davis said. "Words have the ability to become agents of change, capable of reshaping the world. Words are vessels, and when we speak them we make things happen. Once a young person understands that, she or he becomes unstoppable. Too often, especially when we're young, we're told that our words and our voices don't matter. I want to tell people that what they say does matter."

Davis believes the key to unlocking power is to express words with purpose and intent.

"When you speak with intent, and have a purpose behind your words, that's powerful," Davis said. "You cannot be careless about words. So much can be communicated, so many things can be achieved when we understand the power of words. We can change the world."

After graduating from Minot State University with a degree in English, the world of poetry summoned the talents of Davis.

"Once I graduated from MSU, I knew I wanted to be a writer and a performer," Davis said. "So, I thought where can I do this as a profession. The summer after I graduated, I accepted an invitation to join a cohort of artists in New York. There were dancers, singers, painters, musicians, and of course there were poets. We did some cool stuff. I really loved going to the subway and doing street art."

His talent was quickly recognized and provided Davis an opportunity to travel to Minneapolis.

"Through my performances, I met a friend from Minneapolis," Davis said. "He invited me out to Minneapolis for a weekend and introduced me to the entire community. New York was really fast paced for me, especially coming from Minot. Everything was like go-go-go. That was cool, but I just wanted something that was slower paced. I was really impressed with the Minneapolis community. My good friend David Scherer Agape, a Christian hip hop artist, he took me to a Timberwolves game, introduced me to artists at his crib, and I really liked how his church appreciated art. So, I decided to move to Minneapolis."

Celebrating art and cultivating compassion has opened many doors for Davis. Boom Slam allows him to return to Minot and open the doors for future generations.

"I want the kids to take ownership of their work and this event," Davis said. "I want them to catch the fire and carry this forward. This is not about me, this their movement and I'm just opening the gate. I'm telling them to come on in, and I hope they learn that the world can be theirs."
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