Poetry slam fosters hope

By James Sullivan | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT | MAY 21, 2013

Solome Nakimuli and Sarah Eustache of Cambridge Rindge and Latin celebrate after Eustache’s performance in the preliminary round of the Louder Than a Bomb competition at Mass College of Art and Design.

Four students stood at the front of the room. Behind them hung a series of framed posters, all featuring large question marks.

The students’ matching white T-shirts were printed with big black exclamation points. Though the contrast was unplanned — the setting was a bright cafeteria at Massachusetts College of Art and Design, and the students were high schoolers from Lowell — the team’s emphatic stage presence was no accident. Like all the teenagers who participate in the Louder Than a Bomb poetry slam, now in its second year in Massachusetts, these students from Lowell’s FreeVerse! team are learning to meet life’s big questions head on, with bravery, enthusiasm, and a fierce sense of community.

With a name that grabbed attention even before the Boston Marathon attack, the concept behind Louder Than a Bomb (LTAB) is that words — even raw, emotional words — can foster healing. “What we create in this, the whole idea is that it’s bigger than violence,” said Amanda Torres, who moved to Massachusetts from Chicago, where the annual LTAB competition began over a decade ago, to start an offshoot here. After preliminary and semifinal rounds last weekend at MassArt, the finals will take place Thursday at the Boston University Theater.
Earlier this month members of all 24 of this year’s teams met for a daylong ice-breaking session in the theater at the Institute of Contemporary Art, backdropped by the museum’s huge glass windows looking out onto Boston Harbor. After the session, Phil O’Connor, a big young man in camouflage shorts and an XXL Sacramento Kings tank top, recalled his introduction to slam poetry in last year’s competition.

He and his teammates from Worcester arrived at their first event thinking, “We’re gonna smash ’em,” he said. But the spirit of common ground that LTAB creates changed their attitude immediately. “After the first poem, we said, forget that,” he said. “Now, after this, I’ll be happy for a month, for no reason.”

Louder Than a Bomb was formed in Chicago in 2001 by cofounders Kevin Coval and Anna West, a program of the nonprofit group Young Chicago Authors. The slam was designed to bring together teams of students from neighborhoods of the city who might not otherwise cross each other’s paths. The runaway success of the program — this year more than 100 teams competed in greater Chicago — led to a moving documentary of the same name released in 2010.

West came to Boston a few years ago to study in Harvard’s Arts in Education graduate program, and Torres, a former LTAB competitor, followed her here, intending to bring a new writing program to the state. With West and Alex Charalambides, she started the Massachusetts Literary Education and Performance Collective — MassLEAP — which spawned the local version of LTAB.

“So many schools are using performance poetry as a vehicle for connecting people’s stories,” Torres said after the ICA event, as students and teachers from Boston, Peabody, Framingham, and elsewhere shared hugs and said goodbye. “It was apparent that Massachusetts, with such a rich literary history, was behind the eight ball for a state program.”

LTAB, which was named after Public Enemy’s 1988 rap song with that title, faced immediate scrutiny after it was formed, when the 9/11 attacks put the country on edge about any expression of violence.

“They thought long and hard about that,” said Torres. Ultimately, however, the founders stood their ground, stressing that the name of the competition was meant to represent the empowered voices its participants gain.

“Our ideal is that poetry transforms school culture from the inside out,” said Torres. “And not just Louder Than a Bomb.”

“It’s like an infestation,” added Porsa Olayiwola with a smile. Another Chicago native, she’s a highly regarded hip-hop poet and the Enrichment and Recruitment Coordinator at Dorchester’s Codman Academy, now coaching Codman’s slam team.

Some of the MassLEAP affiliates such as Olayiwola, who call themselves “teaching artists,” will coax promising but reluctant students to become team members in order to establish an LTAB tradition at their schools.

“I was pressured,” Tasha Joyce, a mild-mannered high schooler in a Pittsburgh Steelers hoodie, said with a straight face as she joined a circle of students and coaches after the ICA session. The group broke up in good-natured catcalls, teasing her for throwing her coach, Olayiwola, under the bus.
Now that she was ready for her first poetry slam, though, Joyce realized her coach was right: “I have ‘froetry’ in my veins,” she said proudly.

Ralph Casseus, who wore a black T-shirt printed with the album cover of the Clash’s “London Calling,” said he, too, had to be convinced to sign up. He represents the ICA’s own team, from the museum’s extracurricular “WallTalk” art and writing program.

“I could tell he was hungry for this,” said Torres, who helped create the ICA team. But until she pushed him to join, the only creative writing Casseus had done, he said, was writing story lines at home with his brother for their action figures.

Students who become involved often find that their LATB commitments are some of their favorite activities, the coaches said.

“I was just having a conversation with our principal,” said Olayiwola. “Yesterday was a sunny day, and we were all there until 6 on a Friday, the hottest day of May. He was deeply impressed.”

Some educators have questioned the competitive nature of Louder Than a Bomb. Teams are judged on their individual and group performances, and half don’t make it out of the preliminary round. But Charalambides noted that writers are often competing for something — prizes, or teaching jobs.

Still, the tournament has an oft-repeated slogan: “The points are not the point — the point is the poetry!” When fellow competitors hear a thought or line they appreciate, they murmur or whoop their approval, or snap their fingers. When a nervous student stumbles, the room fills with cries of “C’mon, you got this!” And when a performer receives a low score from a judge, teammates and opponents alike holler, “Listen to the poem!”

The introductory session, called “Crossing the Street,” was designed to de-emphasize the competitive aspect of Louder Than a Bomb. When they first arrived, students were asked to describe where they are from in six words. Next, they were instructed to look around the room and create teams of four with complete strangers, then write a group poem in 10 minutes.

The exercises encourage the students to forge instant friendships, and their support of each other is genuine. Many of the students write poems that express feelings they’ve otherwise kept bottled up, about an absent father or an experience with racism or, in several performances this year, the aftermath of the Marathon bombing.

“It’s a process of affirmation,” said Sofia Snow, a MassLEAP partner who was voted the best spoken-word artist in Boston in 2006, when she was just 17. “Nobody got booed, even when people were messing up. The healing starts when you write your poem, and it’s completed when you perform it.”

During the preliminaries at MassArt, several teams presented poems that celebrated their sense of self. Four students from the Advanced Math and Science Academy Charter School in Marlborough performed a group piece called “Nerds in Love,” which began with them chanting the first several digits of pi (“I could go on, but that would be... irrational”) and featured several knockout lines in which they pleaded with an object of affection: “We could have chemistry!”

Just down the street, in a large, comfortable classroom on the 11th floor of the MassArt tower, the four young women from the Codman team blew away the judges with a piece that celebrated their bodies as their own: “My body is not a game. . . . My body is not a vending machine. . . . My body is not an electrical outlet.”

And in a third room on the campus, Mikey Russo, a student from Framingham High School’s “Carry Up and Slam” team, delivered a funny, heartfelt poem he called “Tweets to Jesus.” As the audience responded loudly, one admirer in the back grinned and began singing “Hallelujah.”
their own identities.

"Once you’re labeled as a poet," said Codman Academy’s Shawntell Usher, "there’s pride in knowing that people know what your talent is. You can’t un-label yourself."

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Correction: Due to a photographer’s error, the name of Sarah Eustache, a member of the Cambridge Rindge and Latin poetry slam team, was misspelled in earlier versions of this story.

In the “Louder Than a Bomb” documentary, one ponytailed Chicago student, Adam Gottlieb, is shown sitting on his bed at home, wearing his trademark backward Kangol cap, describing his contagious enthusiasm for the spoken word.

“Writing a poem does not change the world,” he says into the camera. “Learning about new people and understanding and really feeling inspired by people who are different than you — I would like to say that’s changing the world. And if not, it's definitely coming much, much closer.”