Buena grads give students different view of poetry

By Laura Ory
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SIERRA VISTA — Buena High School librarian Mary Kohn issued a kind of warning to students sitting before the stage in the performing arts center.

"You're about to see a whole different form of poetry," she said.

Three poets, former Buena graduate Logan Phillips, Jasmine Cuffee and Carlos Contreras, had students laughing and cheering while capturing their attention on the empty stage with just a microphone in hand.

Their words were all that was needed.

"You were expecting boring," Phillips said.

Instead, students got a taste of slam poetry, as the three performers sang, shouted, laughed the lines of their poems, read them like an open letter and moved where ever their words took them.

In slam poetry contests, poets are judged, given a three-minute time limit with cash prize at stake.

"It makes them think about how they're telling it to you," Phillips said.

The poetry they performed ranged topics of commercialism hip-hop and rap music, family, inspiration, dinosaurs and fossil fuel.

Phillips wanted students to know that however they want to express themselves is up to them.

"However they want to express themselves is valid," he said. "They need to find a way."

Without one, their voices won't be heard, Phillips said.

He began writing as a student at Buena. The 2001 Buena graduate was a wrestler at the high school until he broke his foot during the first week of practice of his junior year. With a lot of free time, he began write, but sharing his writing was a terrifying thought.

"I actually hid my notebooks," he said.

While attending Northern Arizona University, he discovered slam poetry and began performing. Since then, he has traveled internationally to perform and teach in Spain, London and Mexico.

Cuffee remembers being nervous when she first began reading her poetry at an open mic.

"I was shaking out of my mind," she said.

"I was their age when I started," said Cuffee, who is 22 now. "I want to let them know anybody can do it."

Contreras also began his writing in high school, when a poetry class was the only option he was left to add.

"I didn't choose the class, it chose me," he said. To his surprise, the class inspired him to be a writer.

The final school bell rang Friday while Contreras was reciting his last poem. Students stayed to hear him finish.

To see students stay after the bell was a first for principal Tad Bloss.

"It was amazing," said student Angela Lambiase about the show.

It was unlike other poetry readings she's seen.

"I thought it was really moving," she said.

Jacquelynne Miller also was impressed.

"They really get into it," she said. "They don't care what other people think because it's their opinions."

The performance was part of Buena Visiting Author Series. Last year, Kohn attended the Tucson Poetry Festival and saw a slam poetry performance for the first time. She wanted to share it with

Slam poet and Buena High School graduate Logan Phillips entertains students Friday in the Buena Performing Arts Center. Logan and two other poets visited and performed. (Mark Levy-Herald/Review)

Buena students. When she approached Bloss with the idea, he suggested the best poet he knew — Phillips. Bloss was glad to offer students new perspective and experience.

On Monday, Phillips will hold workshops with students.

"It makes kids realize what they think about and feel is completely worthy of writing about," Phillips said. "And you suddenly discover a whole sea of work and thoughts and different points of view in the student body you never knew."

More than 70 students have signed up for the opportunity, and they will have the opportunity to perform their work at the Tucson Poetry Festival, Kohn said.

Phillips is performing this year with Verbobala, or spoken video, an experimental theater group, whose next performance will be April 12 at the Tucson Poetry Festival.

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