

# The three R's: Rhyme, rhythm and repetition

**N**yahnii Jordan believes that good poets weave their feelings into their work and she does too. At age 10, she may have been one of the younger students attending poetry club sessions two hours a week in spring 2009, but her poems covered subjects more reminiscent of an aging blues singer's laments than the writings of a St. Clair Evans Academy fourth-grader.

"I think about what I'm going through, like if I'm going through a hard time like running out of food, I will write about that," said Nyahnii, one of 29 St. Clair Evans students participating last spring in a poetry program directed by Dr. Nile Stanley, an associate professor of childhood education at UNF and author of "Creating Readers with

Poetry" and "Performance Literacy through Storytelling."

The ongoing program, which is designed to improve literacy skills among children attending challenged schools, has achieved that and more, according to Vivianne Davis, a teacher and UNF faculty sponsor of what's formally called the Creativity Club at St. Clair Evans Academy. She said students gain self-confidence, overcome shyness and improve their reading, writing and computer skills by participating in club activities and performances focused on poetry.

"It really helps them open their eyes to their own talent," she said.

Lolita Bronson, a recent UNF graduate who volunteered to help Davis with the St. Clair Evans club, said she is amazed at just how well it works. "Especially for urban students,

It involved their creativity. It was fun. It didn't seem like work. They were learning," Bronson said.

Bronson and other UNF students in Stanley's Foundations of Literacy class seized the opportunity to earn extra credit by volunteering to help with poetry club activities and tutor students in reading at either St. Clair Evans or J. Allen Axson Montessori Academy, which also has a poetry club. Both schools are in Jacksonville. Davis and a teacher leading a poetry club program at J. Allen Axson each received a \$1,500 stipend to take on the added workload. They also received money to buy snacks for the two-hour meetings and T-shirts for the students.

The Cummer Family Foundation donates \$10,000 a year to UNF for the program. Stanley said he'd like to see it in 10 schools instead of just two, and

that his dream is to grow the program to the point where it could be in all 106 elementary schools in Duval County. He said some of his former students started similar programs at the schools where they now teach.

On days when Stanley attends the St. Clair Evans club sessions, he pulls his baritone ukulele from its case and leads students through a series of poetry performances punctuated by exaggerated facial expressions, wild arm and hand gestures and a cacophony of sounds accompanying phrases like "boom, zoom, zing" that keep students smiling, active and attentive. Students can't wait to be called on, and Stanley makes sure every student participates.

"Poetry is very fun," said fourth-grader Zyquan Carswell. "I think poetry is a good thing to learn in life, like so many different things. ... It rhymes and it's fun. Some poems make me laugh, some make me sad."

The St. Clair Evans club has a karaoke box, which students use for what they call their Poetry Café performances, as well as a djembe, a hand-held drum originating from West Africa, to keep pace with a poet's cadence. With karaoke microphone in hand, the student poets turn into rappers.

"I'm a drummer," said Reginal Graves, a fifth-grader who regularly accompanies student poets on the djembe. "I've got all my friends here with me, and I'm not shy if I'm a poet."

Teaching poetry has come a long way from the days when Stanley was in school and English teachers, in his words, "put a poem under a bright light and beat a confession out of it." Things really changed for him when he studied with a group called Poetry Alive from Asheville, N.C., and learned about performance poetry. He said he finally understood Lewis Carroll's "Jabberwocky" while seeing it acted out. Stanley had never seen poetry performed like that and became

hooked on a technique that encourages young people to read.

"I saw how beneficial it was," said Stanley, who has been with UNF since 1999. "I started performing for libraries, getting grants to perform more. I saw the positive effect."

He also saw the large crowds drawn by musicians and took up the ukulele to add to his repertoire. Some of the things drawing youngsters to poetry are the rhyme, rhythm and repetition so familiar in the works of Dr. Seuss and other children's writers who revolutionized the genre. Stanley's performances and teaching revel in such word play.

He teaches students to project their words when reciting poetry and emphasizes techniques by using words children find fun to hear, say and write.

Davis said she has seen tremendous changes in the students who participated in the St. Clair Evans poetry club, which goes by the official name Creativity Club because it incorporates art, performance art, creative writing and storytelling into the program.

"I've seen students come out of their shell, students discover more about who they are and ones whose self-esteem blossomed," Davis said. "They're so confident now compared to when they first started. I've seen diction improve, even poise. They're learning how to project their voices as well as how to stand on a stage. It's all part of what makes poetry club."

Davis said her involvement enables her to see students in a different light as well as hear them express themselves through poetry in a way teachers normally wouldn't.

"They're able to say things that they probably couldn't normally say because they're expressing something deep within them," she said. "Some of their poems are so whimsical and light, but others are so deep."

For Bronson, who graduated in May

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and now teaches kindergarten at Westview K-8 [kindergarten through eighth-grade] on the Westside of Jacksonville, "It helped me see that you can actually teach outside of the box, and that children can learn without me having to just drill it into them," she said.

Of the dozen St. Clair Evans students interviewed for this story, they all said poetry club helped them improve their writing and reading. Most said they use a dictionary or thesaurus when writing poetry, and many said they use a computer to research potential subjects and poems. They all said poetry club was fun.

"I know I can write free verses like ones you don't have to rhyme, but I try to make it more interesting, more like rhyming so the other kids can see that poetry is not just dull, but it can be fun and exciting," said Nyahnii, the fourth-grader, who writes about going through hard times.

Stanley said poetry touches children at an emotional level, engaging and involving them, especially when they experience it as performance.

Nyahnii would agree. Microphone in hand, she belts out the words, line-by-line, stanza-by-stanza, during her turn on stage in the Poetry Café. "When I write my poetry, I feel that I'm letting it all go free," she said.



Dr. Nile Stanley (on ukulele) and Reginal Graves (on djembe) accompany Nyahnii Jordan as she recites one of her poems for the St. Clair Evans Academy poetry club.