

Youths find The Spot to turn pain into poetry

A UNIVERSAL LANGUAGE

The weekly sessions in downtown Denver provide a therapeutic outlet to voice experiences in an artistic way.

By **Jeremy Meyer**
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In a half-lit room with walls festooned with spray-painted images, pain transforms weekly into poetry.

Murder, death and heartbreak are themes, shouted and rhymed, in poetry sessions at The Spot, a downtown Denver gathering place for troubled youths.

Some therapists have found today's youth culture is drawn to poetry and spoken-word performance and are using it to delve into their psyches.

Weekly sessions at The Spot fill with 20 or more young adults who perform their works before enthusiastic supporters.

Everything goes, said Catherine O'Neill Thorn, who leads the sessions. There's no censorship. Only respect.

At a recent session, a woman read

about her murdered sister. A boy wrote about his friend who was shot to death while crossing the street. Another woman read about her 3-year-old daughter who died from a sudden illness.

Poetry therapy gets people to voice their experiences in an artistic way, providing a healthy release, said Thorn, director of Art From Ashes Inc., the nonprofit group that conducts the weekly sessions at The Spot with a grant from the Colorado Council on the Arts.

Thorn, 46, has worked with troubled youths for more than a decade in a variety of venues, including residential treatment.

"Anything you keep repressed is dangerous," she said. "I help them release their anxiety and their fears."

"Poetry is in many ways a universal language," said Kathleen Adams, a Denver therapist and past president of the National Association of Poetry Therapy. "It speaks the language of rhythms, metaphor and sound. ...

"Poetry can reveal and conceal at the same time. That way, people who have been deeply troubled and impacted can speak about their experiences with-



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Cherie Barefield performs her poetry under the name "Nubia" at The Spot in Denver. Most of her poems deal with her sister, Golden Barefield, who was stabbed to death a year ago.

out directly and painfully confronting them."

Poetry therapists are registered through the National Federation of Biblio/Poetry Therapy, which creates and

maintains the standards.

Registered poetry therapists must have master's degrees in a clinical field and complete 975 hours of training.

Cherie Barefield, 25, goes by the poet

name "Nubia." Most of her poems deal with her sister, Golden Barefield, who was stabbed to death a year ago.

"I share my diary," Barefield said. "I put it all out. The light and the dark. For me to embrace that, that is how I get through it."

Thorn tells a story of a 13-year-old sex offender at a treatment facility who would attend the poetry sessions but never participate.

One day, he approached Thorn with this poem:

"I sit in the corner. Not knowing what to do. Not wanting to talk. But people want me to. Wanting to cry. Not able to. Not knowing why. God I want to cry."

In a recent session at The Spot, writers stepped up to a microphone amid loud cheers.

"What I would say to you is breathe," wrote one boy in a poem about his friend who was shot. "If only you'd have turned to your left. What I would say to you is duck, and maybe he would have missed."

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