

Students and young offenders bond over shared love of poetry

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December 15, 2010



Talk to the hand ... a Juniperina girl shows the title of one of her poems. *Photo: Tamara Dean*

IN MANY ways it was a typical poetry reading - a group of teenage girls gathered around a school library table reciting their deeply moving compositions about lost love, deceased relatives, friendship, alienation and, naturally, favourite shoes.

But a few things made it unusual. The high security screening to get into the venue, part of Juniperina Juvenile Justice Centre in

Lidcombe. The diverse backgrounds and circumstances of the teenage poets. And the random sniffer dog search which prevented two of the Juniperina girls from delivering their poems in person.

The eight girls who took part in the unique poetry session came from three different schools - Bankstown High School, Pymble Ladies' College and the Sunning Hill Education and Training Unit, the school attached to the juvenile justice centre.

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It was the first time students from any juvenile justice facility in Australia have joined Papercuts, a national poetry education program which began in 2007 and will involve at least 36 schools next year.

"The program is built on the need for Australian poetry in secondary education," explains Johanna Featherstone, artistic director of The Red Room Company, a not-for-profit organisation based in Darlinghurst which runs Papercuts and other unconventional poetry initiatives.

Professional poets hold seminars and workshops with each school, promoting the positive benefits of students learning to express their inner feelings and concerns in verse.

"I was overwhelmed at how the [Sunning Hill] girls were able to share things that were really personal and private," says Judith Bishop, the poet who worked with the five girls from the juvenile justice centre who enthusiastically joined in the program.

One, Gina*, began the reading with her ode *My Pink Shoes*: "I love shoes and this pair are my favourite," she says to giggles of appreciation from the other schoolgirls. They made her feel tall, beautiful and special, the poem explained.

"My poem is about a pillow my mum gave me," Cassie* tells the gathering. "You know, those soft, silky ones?" The other girls - Amalia Sablada, Amara Khan, Anna Tran from Bankstown High and Ann Ding from Pymble Ladies' College - murmurs their assent.

After each poem, applause and supportive comments ring out. James Opie, Sunning Hill's principal, thanks the Bankstown and Pymble girls "for coming to our lovely school - you're always welcome".

*Names have been changed.

For more information, click [here](#).

CASSIE'S POEM

MY PILLOW

My pillow so soft and warm,
Now all ripped and torn.
It was a gift from my mother,
Now it was destroyed by another.
My pillow so soft and black,
It was there when I felt slack,
With multi-coloured circles,
It always had my back,
Oh I wish I could go back,

to when I was fully attached.

My pillow so soft and silky,

Now trashed and filthy.