

Survivors Find Healing by Writing Poetry

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The poets sit scattered across the auditorium at Lee Center in Alexandria waiting for their turn on the stage. The goal of “Embrace Your Poetry Share” is to create a trauma-informed, survivor centered space for all of those impacted by sexual violence and their supporters.

“It illustrates the power of community and art in the individual collective healing process and reminds us all that we are not alone,” says Linley Beckbridge, Development director at Doorways in Arlington.

The participants who have signed up to read their poetry at the event on Wednesday, April 26 each have an individual story but all share the trauma and self doubt that come from sexual violence in its many forms. Some are nervous, others are assertive, others still recovering from the hurt and still seeking answers. Some can’t let go of it; others won’t let it define them anymore.

“I pray for the ability to self regulate, let go of my fear; to ask the question again and again even when I cannot bear to hear the answers again and again.”

Holly Karapetkova, Arlington’s poet laureate, begins the evening by reading a poem written by her student, Jordan, for Karapetkova’s creative writing class at Marymount University and read at a campus event last fall. Karapetkova says she held this “Speaking Out on Sexual Assault Event” because she had heard from a number of students who had experienced sexual assault and wanted to speak out about it. She explains that sexual assault is a big problem on all college campuses.

Solidarity is why she held this event because part of what is going on is that people speaking out gain courage from each other. “Some shared experiences for the first time,” says Karapetkova.

Jordan said the sexual assault happened when she was 16 years-old, about five years ago. And at the Marymount event when she read her poem, “I finally felt like I got it out there. I came from a community that was very religious. If I told people about it, the common response was to pray about it.” She says she was frustrated and angry. “I didn’t feel like I was getting help. I felt like I was alone.”

Jordan says it helped her to heal by writing. She found that by putting it in words really helped instead of telling about it. “Saying it out loud and openly left me vulnerable with a form of media like this. But there were other people there who knew.” She said it was a release, more of an honor to be able to feel comfort. “It was more of a survival story in a way.”

“Her eyes scream ‘help me’
Why did it happen?
I have no answer.....
Will we be ok?
I finally have an answer



Poet LKN from the Philippines on zoom for Embrace Your Poetry Share event on Wednesday, April 26.



Holly Karapetkova, Arlington poet laureate.



Sonja Allen, Executive Director of Alexandria’s Guest House.



Doorways staff, board and volunteers at Embrace Your Poetry Share event.

I hold her shaking hand
We will be ok
She is hurt
She is guarded
She is withering
but someday she will be ok.”

LKN, a poet attending the event from the Philippines, explains even the male gender can be assaulted. He is a victim of rape in 2017 by four men in Manila who drugged him in a bar. The poem he wrote is a reaction to a comment he got several weeks ago about a poem he had written relating to his rape. “They wanted me to make it less powerful, less impactful.”

He had performed in person in Manila earlier this month and was approached by some attending the event who had not been personally impacted themselves. LKN says they found it disturbing and wanted him to make the poem more hopeful. “Rape is never hopeful. But those who were there who had experienced sexual assault lauded my poems.

LKN was published by Doorways in 2020

and has been attending Poetry Share virtually since 2021. He says poetry has been a companion of his trauma. “It listens to the pain all survivors share — a part of us got stolen that moment, and we can never have it back. Later in the year he plans to release his debut full collection of poetry.

“when I share about rape,
I wish my rapists taught me
how to water it down lower than ignorance
is bliss of softening trauma can feel so good
like how they try to shush me
when I tried to scream for help?....

I wish rape didn’t burn
the children’s books in my body
or the spotlight of my childhood’s innocence
they were all razed of judgment i can’t reclaim
the recollections of my ruin is all i have
should i let others’ consideration fill my library?

Sonja Allen, Executive Director of Guest House, read “I Need to Speak,” a poem from the Alexandria poet laureate, Zeina Azzam.

“Choose to remember or not to remember,
forgive or not to forgive

the ones who hurt you. Each time you speak
the prick of a memory fades.”

Elizabeth Tropea is assistant director of Artemis House, a 24-hour emergency shelter in Fairfax County offering temporary housing, case management, access to employment resources and legal services. She puts her experience with the clients into poetry. “It’s magic to put words onto paper.”

She observes that their clients are in major survival mode when they arrive at the shelter and are dealing with homelessness as well as sexual assault. “They can’t work through their grief yet; they are worrying about their next meal and where they will stay the night.”

And she adds that unlike other assault victims the people who come to their shelter don’t have a support system to help them through the grief.

“I have always loved poetry and this Share the Poetry Event was an intersect of poetry with the work I do. Art is incredibly healing; I hope to incorporate more of it in the work I do.”

“I pray for the strength to step into these spaces
again and again and again
to ask the questions again and again and again
even when I cannot bare to know the answers
again and again and again
I hold onto hope that these inadequate actions and efforts will
somehow contribute to the end of another’s abuse
so they do not come home to pain
again and again and again
so they might begin again
I cannot be a savior, but I can be a seer.”

The event was sponsored by Doorways, a 24-hour emergency shelter and family residential home for formerly homeless in Arlington; Guest House, a residential facility in Alexandria for women who have committed non-violent crimes; and the Alexandria Sexual Assault Center which has a 24-hour hotline and offers services to abuse victims. Over the last 10 years, the event has morphed from in-person before Covid, to all virtual during the pandemic to a hybrid in-person/virtual event on Zoom this year.

“I’ve made bad decisions
You’re behind bars
and I’m shooting for the stars
I’m no longer the victim
You didn’t win and I’m proud to be me.”