

Kathleen Morris

More Than One Story

The other night at Ign!te the M!c was, as to be expected, wonderful. People from all over came out to give support, such as Anita Magnani and Anna Maria Panaia, two women who arrived an hour early and waited patiently for the show to begin. They told me they were there to see their nephew, Vincent Magnani, perform poetry in front of a crowd for his very first time. They said they were also looking forward to hearing different types of poetry and described it as an opportunity they “couldn’t refuse.”

Magnani, an East Longmeadow high school alum, was the first to the stage and performed a harrowing poem about the Holocaust. He explained afterwards that he got into poetry because of his grandmother used to give him poetry to read. The talented young poet, who’s also already had three collections of poems published, also said that there’s a need for places like the Bing Art Center “where writers and artists can express themselves more comfortably with the world.” Magnani was followed on stage by one of the masters of ceremonies of the event, Andrew Torres. He read a poem of his that was full of relevant pop culture references and vivid imagery. It caught the attention of everyone in the audience.

There were many other poets that performed. Angela Haynes, a Springfield College student, read a heartfelt piece. She described writing as a sort of therapy, and following her piece Torres reiterated that point, saying that “We all have a reason why we do anything.” Cheyenne Capella, a young high school poet who goes by the stage name Chichi Capella, cited her inspiration as being Ign!te the M!c’s very own founder, Magdalena Gómez. She explained that she’d been exposed to poetry at a young age by Gómez and had embraced it ever since.

Wendy Koomson, another student from Springfield College, performed a poem of hers. It was a deeply personal account of her experience with friends who’d fallen prey to heroin addiction. Susan Suy, a Springfield College student and the other MC of the night, stood arm in arm with Koomson as she read her poem to a captivated crowd.

Poetry wasn’t the only type of performance of the night. Three comedians also took to the stage. Despite being generally nervous when it comes to performing, I was one of them. With the support of everyone there, it didn’t seem as daunting, so I decided to put a comical spin on the current political climate. Tomas Roche, who’s performed at Ign!te the M!c in the past, took to the stage as well, using a story telling style of comedy that featured outlandish and hilarious stories from his childhood. After the show, he explained that he’d promised himself to “not be afraid of failing,” which is why he’s decided to pursue stand-up comedy. Matt Jarvis, a newcomer, also did a stand-up routine, explaining after the show that there’s not enough laughter in the world.

He definitely helped to alleviate that with his deadpan and self-deprecating brand of comedy. He also explained that he'd heard about the event from Roche, who he's good friends with.

Jarvis wasn't the only new performer there. Melany Rivera-Sandoval performed a very moving poem that paid homage to her grandmother. Her inspiration to perform came from her past experience at the event. She told me afterwards that she'd seen the encouraging atmosphere and decided to perform this time around. Mina Atif, a friend of Magnani, also read a poem of her own. Afterwards she shared her own thoughts about Ign!te the M!c, saying "I'm Pakistani so for women to even talk about how they feel in a public place is amazing. My friend told me about this place and I thought I'd check it out. As soon as I came in I didn't regret it. Everything was so cozy and so nice, there was love all around, and it made me feel comfortable to go up for my first time." Rebecca Bard, who is also good friends of Magnani and Atif, was also a newcomer who shared a poem she'd been working on. The three of them also had their friend Justin Letkowski in the audience providing moral support.

One of the most amazing parts about Ign!te the M!c has to be the effect the performers have on the audience members. They make them feel uplifted and motivated. A nine-year-old girl named Lily was a perfect example of this. She was there that night with her mom. They'd gone to The Bing for a Zumba class, but when they saw they'd gotten the dates wrong they decided to stick around and enjoy the show. Lily was so encouraged by the different performances that she decided to do one of her own, delivering a poem she'd created on the spot. It was so moving to watch and she received a big round of applause afterwards.

That's what the Bing Art Center and Ign!te the M!c is all about. Helping people to know that their voice matters, no matter their age, gender, race, or nationality. This past one was amazing, and the ones to follow will no doubt be just as great.