

# Happy Birthday, Langston: The Community Celebrates with a Reading



(Photo (left to right): April Brown, Ricardo Pitts-Wiley, Bernadet Pitts-Wiley, Karen Allen Baxter, Angela Nash Wade. Photo Credit: Kathy Moyer)

It was Super Bowl Sunday, but the cool kids were hanging out at the Providence Public Library.

Sunday, February 4, marked the 23rd Annual Langston Hughes Community Poetry reading. All the way up on the third floor of the downtown library, there is a gorgeous auditorium that is especially toasty warm on a rainy, winter day. This is where hundreds of Langston Hughes fans gathered to celebrate his birthday. The cool kids were the total of 54 presenters and performers, including a three-piece jazz band.

Everything was a highlight, particularly the sapphire blue dress that must have been tailor made exclusively for April Brown, co-coordinator of this event (Kai Cameron is the other well-dressed co-coordinator). In fact, everyone seemed to be decked out in their Sunday best. Langston Hughes (born James Mercer Langston Hughes) would have been pleased. He also would have been 116 years old. There was birthday cake, but maybe that many candles weren't allowed in the library. Most people weren't there for the cake. The cake was frosting on the inspiration, wisdom and strength.

The event began with opening remarks, including informative words from guest scholar Dr. Renee T. White. She guided the audience through her understanding that calling Langston Hughes by just his first name was actually a sign of respect. Dr. White shared, "Langston helped me understand things my parents had said." She paid him homage saying that after she discovered Langston Hughes, "...through Langston, I discovered myself."

The program began with music and finished with music. Angela Nash Wade awakened the spirits of the upstairs library and brought the audience to its feet. A talented trio revered each and every presenter with reactive jazz. Daniel Ian Smith, John Baboian and Keala Kaumeheiwa provided the perfect jazz accents to Langston's poetry. It was interesting to see all of the different ways in which the performers quickly negotiated and/or requested certain sounds before they read. At one point, 32nd on the program, Kaumeheiwa brought his acoustic bass to the podium. Langston probably would have loved this depiction of Dream Boogie.

Most of the presenters signed up exactly one year ago at the 22nd annual event. It was intriguing to see the different levels of familiarity that the audience had with the individual presenters. Forty poems were read with three additional special presentations. Dr. Renee T. White also shared a poem. The event was built into three separate sections: Speak Truth to Power, Let Your Motto Be Resistance, and Dream Variations.

Because most of the presenters were behind a podium and reading off the page, the live music and the vocal variations were distinguishing elements. Julia S. Jordan-Zachary flowed with the jazz. Yamil Baez took an animated approach. Yon Tande's peacefully sparkling smile added depth to the poem "Man into Men." John Baboian inserted a comedic spin. Catalina Martinez delivered the poem "Sweet Words on Race" regally and with a sharp level of energy. Sylvia Ann Soares, who received special cheers from the crowd, read "America" with a heightened level of seasoned commitment and grace. Rob Dimmick whispered "Aunt Sue's Stories" like a lullaby to an onstage, colorfully clad Ramona Bass-Kolobe. When Karen Allen Baxter took the stage, there were shrieks in the audience. Her delivery of "Let America Be America Again" was polished with conviction. And Margaret Connell milked the words "warm manure" from "Un-American Investigators," much to the delight of the giggling audience.

If there were a voice built just for the oration of Langston Hughes' body of work, it might be Pell Award Winner Ricardo Pitts-Wiley. His voice carried the catharsis of the Harlem Renaissance with the power of the Civil Rights Movement. He was the guest performer, so he treated the audience to three impeccable deliveries of Langston Hughes' work. As an added treat for the audience in the finale of the event, Pitts-Wiley invited the Mixed Magic Exult Choir to the stage. If there were a dry eye in the house after 44 profound poems, four intriguing speeches, and an exquisite jazz band, this beautiful choir was there to change that notion. "Give Us Your Peace" was personified in its glory by Pitts-Wiley and the Mixed Magic Exult Choir.

This program was made possible through the Providence Department of Art, Culture and Tourism, and a grant from the Rhode Island Committee for the Humanities, an independent state affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities. It is just one of the hundreds of enchanting offerings by the Providence Public Library.