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At Cloud Place, teens reach for sky

By Ellen Steinbaum, Globe Correspondent | June 29, 2008

'Do you expect me to have the answers cause I don't.'

The author of that line is 18-year-old Hannah Adams, but, as I talk with her, I feel that I or another of her elders should have written it to her, with apologies.

I met recently with Adams and Rhea Kroutil, also 18, who are both "spoken-word curators" at Cloud Place, a Copley Square studio and performance space where teens can work in film, visual art, graphic design, and the spoken word.

Teens accepted into the program at Cloud Place as paid curators are responsible for administering - including planning, publicizing, and documenting - arts programs that showcase their own talents and those of other teens. The venue is supported by the Cloud Foundation, which was founded in 1999 with a stated mission of enriching the lives of urban youth through "the transformative power of art."

Adams and Kroutil, new graduates of Boston Arts Academy and Boston Latin, respectively, have worked on arts presentations that most often deal with social realities they see around them and dream of changing.

"Social change is the focal point of all my poetry," says Adams.

Kroutil concurs: "You have to be an agent of social change. It's important to put socially conscious stuff out there. Everything I've ever witnessed in my life is in my poetry."

What urban teens witness, and what Adams and Kroutil write about, is what they have been handed by earlier generations who never found the answers to gun violence and domestic violence and families trying to cope with immigration issues.

"The type of world we live in now may hear you, but it doesn't listen," Adams says. But when the microphone is on at Cloud Place, and the lights are dimmed, what these young poets are witness to goes out to the room.

"People listen and they tell us, 'I've been in the same situation,' " Kroutil says. "Adults sometimes say we're inspiring them."

What is inspiring to me in the words of these two young writers is the energy and determination that rings through. What is dispiriting is how they are required to rehash the social ills we earlier generations have been unable to sort out. And so I cringe that the line about not having answers has been left to Adams to write. It is part of an untitled poem that goes on to ask, "Why is it that when I go through a box of my father's 35 year old pins, I find one that says 'use alternative energy' . . . what can we do except ask questions."

Reading this excerpt from Kroutil's poem "bittersweet," I hear decades-old echoes of how the personal entwines with the cynically political:

*I want to love you
Like nobody knew how to
Wanted to paint your beauty
Like a forgotten Picasso
Write you a promise
That you'd never let go
But words were never enough
And my poems only spoke of idealism*

In a time where pacts are meant to be broken

In her poem "verbally violent," Adams looks for a better way to confront social ills.

I made the decision to be verbally violent so I could transform hate into poetry . . . And if every stabber, shooter, sexual and mental abuser had the opportunity to spit a piece on the top of their . . . lungs, they would put down their weapons of mass destruction and pick up a pen, and a pad, and start shooting with their violent verses.

It could happen - who knows? At Cloud Place, the voices continue to protest, continue to question, continue to soar.

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