

'3D storytelling': Deaf Crows slam brings poetry to life

Learning to create poetry with body movements, instead of words



Photos

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ASL instructor Patricia Spicer lead the group through the slam poetry experience.
(Madeline Kotzer/CBC News)

233 shares

Mustafa Alabssi loves to perform, it's his favourite thing to do.

The high school student recently moved to Canada from Syria. Now he's learning how to craft poetry in his third language — American Sign Language.



Mustafa Alabssi has caught on to ASL quickly since moving from Syria to Canada recently. ASL is the teen's third language, after Arabic and Arabic Sign Language.
(CBC)

"I really just like performing stories and I love having all the attention on me and welcoming people and going to parties and just showing people, I am a deaf bird and I have a story to tell you," Alabssi said.

In about six months, the teen has become nearly fluent in American Sign Language (ASL).



ASL instructor Patricia Spicer moves a group of aspiring poets through an exercise. (Madeline Kotzer/CBC News)

Alabssi credits his success to high school teacher Joanne Weber and the Deaf Crows — a youth collective. The Regina group focuses on performance art, created by students from Thom Collegiate's Hard of Hearing and Deaf Program.

- [Deaf Crows: Art opens up a different world for Regina students](#)

Deaf poetry — or 3D storytelling



Alabssi brainstorms ideas for his group's slam poetry performance. (Madeline Kotzer/CBC News)

On a dreary, Wednesday night Alabssi is one of about 40 people who've packed into a Regina library. The energetic group (composed of Deaf Crows, hearing, hard of hearing and deaf people) have gathered to learn how to create 3D stories — also known as ASL poetry.

Alabssi has come with several members of his family, who sit in the crowd.

"My family is just so important with the story I want to tell," he said. "Because I am from Syria and I came from a war-torn country so being here, it's like a celebration. I am so

proud to be Canadian. I just have such a great story that I want to learn how to express and share."



ASL instructor Patricia Spicer stands with interpreter Karen Nurkowski. (Madeline Kotzer/CBC News)

Like hearing wordsmiths, deaf poets make art with their language.

A signed performance uses repetition, rhyme, alliteration and rhythm to create patterns and to emphasize meaning.

However, deaf poets use their bodies to do this, instead of spoken words.

A repeated sign can signify the rhyme of a poem. Different shapes and movements often translate into alliteration, as the hearing world knows it.



Patricia Spicer working with a group of ASL poets. (Madeline Kotzer/CBC News)

ASL instructor Patricia Spicer likens the art form to "3D storytelling" and says it is becoming popular again.

"Well, I think that before there were a lot of people, deaf children, particularly, were kind of isolated and they didn't have a lot of socializing and they were on their own and they didn't really have a great place to identify themselves with other people," said Spicer.

Spicer said in the 1970s, people like Clayton Valli popularized deaf poetry.

Now, it's coming back.

"So, people have started to get involved with that and they realize that there's no more isolation," she said. "And, then they come to things like this and they just feel so

welcome and they feel that they can express themselves with people who have the same interests."

- [Deaf community feels marginalized in Saskatchewan, says human rights report](#)

Growing interest



Shayla Tanner is a Grade 12 student at Thom Collegiate and member of Regina's Deaf Crows Collective. (Madeline Kotzer/CBC News)

For Shayla Tanner, the event is opening up a whole new world.

The Grade 12 student writes poetry, but has never had the opportunity to perform her work.



Laughter was a key ingredient in many of the brainstorming sessions. (Madeline Kotzer/CBC News)

"I am really, really interested in learning it," she said. "I've never really experienced it before and it's really interesting."

Organizers say recent events like this, aimed at the deaf community, have drawn large crowds in the city.

This night, people from different worlds — hearing and deaf, locals and newcomers — have come together to create.

The result is a colourful performance that draws laughter and cheers from the crowd.



When it comes to creating good, ASL poetry, imagination is key. (Madeline Kotzer/CBC News)

So, what makes a good ASL poem?

According to ASL poets here, it's the same thing that makes a good poem in any language.

Imagination.