

The Press Republican

Author opens doors for students through poetry and reading

Expert lures students into magical world of reading, writing

By: [Stephen Bartlett](#)
Staff Writer

October 18, 2006

PLATTSBURGH — Poetry is not dead.

"It's alive, it speaks to you," poet Kwame Alexander said. "It is the blood running through your veins that keeps you laughing and loving."

For the Stafford Middle School students who spent time with Alexander, poetry was "special," "inspiring," "entertaining" and "fresh."

Alexander, fingers splayed, arms raised in the air, his braids bouncing off his head, whipped around to face the students and whispered, "Poetry is magical."

He is at Stafford Middle School this week as part of the 21st Century Grant Learning Center Program, which has allowed the Plattsburgh School District to bring in published authors to read to students, spend time working with them on writing and encourage reading.



Performance poet Kwame Alexander reads some students' rhyming poems Tuesday during a writing workshop at Stafford Middle School in Plattsburgh. Alexander performed for students and ran an after-school writing workshop with students participating in the 21st Century Grant Learning Program. He was there as part of a three-day author-in-residence session. *Staff Photo/Rob Fountain*

"Reading is so important to the writing process," Alexander said, eyes wide as he scanned his audience. "We learn to write from reading."

He wasn't allowed to watch television growing up. His father had written 16 books, so the family read.

"I hated reading," Alexander said.

But he has become a poet, publishing consultant, playwright, television producer and author of several books, including "Dancing Naked on the Floor," a collection of poems and essays. Alexander, who has appeared on television and radio programs, divides his time between northern Virginia and Hollywood.

On Tuesday, he slipped a disc into the CD player, instructing students to sit silently and read. They scattered throughout the room, some stretched out on the floor, others nestled in plastic seats, a few squeezing into cubbies as Chris Botti's trumpet, accompanied by Sting's vocals, slipped from the speakers, a piano's occasional jingle tip-toeing across the room.

"There is magic, ideas, plans and secrets in books," said Alexander, pausing as Sting sang:

"Through all of my life,

summer, winter, spring and fall of my life,

all I ever recall of my life,

is all of my life with you."

"You can travel all the way around the world without leaving your cubby hole, just by reading," Alexander said.

He encouraged students to laugh when reading passages amused them. A few seconds later, occasional chuckles and snickers began to intermingle with Botti's jazz.

"As you are reading," Alexander said, "think about whether the poet is being original. Are they painting a picture? Showing you something?"

Finally, he called them back to their seats. As students took turns sharing selections they enjoyed, their classmates applauding with finger snaps that sounded like a chorus of tiny woodpeckers.

In the background, the music's beat picked up, more lively, yet still somewhat subdued.

"There are so many things you can talk about in poetry," Alexander said. "It doesn't matter. You can talk about whatever you want."

He explained how the poems they read and listened to opened worlds for them, announcing aspects of life that "we can't say with that kind of power when talking."

Alexander stressed the importance of writing, saying that whether it be a resume or a lawyer's brief, such a skill is invaluable.

Brin Keyser, a Stafford sixth-grader, said she would take the lessons learned Tuesday home with her.

"I love to express myself and write about different things," she said. "I think it's fun."

That response was all Alexander wanted from his students.

"I just want them to be excited about poetry and writing. It opens so many doors for them."

Did this article satisfy your expectations? Tell us!