

Herald-Sun, The (includes Raleigh Extra and Chapel Hill Herald (Durham, NC)

Herald-Sun, The (Durham, NC)

May 23, 1999

'Lioness' of the Triangle uses poetry to roar out her message of healing

Author: ERIK PUGH The Herald-Sun

Edition: Final

Section: University

Page: H1

Index Terms:

writers;poets

Estimated printed pages: 4

Article Text:

When Thema Simone Bryant was just 5, her mother often challenged her with questions. Not ones about what dress her Barbie doll would wear or what color hairpins she liked. Instead, Cecilia Bryant often asked her daughter things like, "What do think it would take to change the world?"

As a child, Thema usually had good answers. But today, as a radiant 25-year-old, she might have her best answer yet.

People in the world need healing and empowerment, Bryant says, and she is using her many intellectual and spiritual gifts trying to provide both.

By day, Bryant is a clinical psychologist and scholar completing a doctoral program at Duke University.

By night, she is one of the Triangle's best-known poets, helping spark a revival in the area's poetry scene with her unforgettable readings at poetry "slams" and open-mike nights.

Her poems - which touch on gender, racial and spiritual issues - have drawn acclaim for providing a potent mix of hope and the belief that all people can "raise the bar" higher and enhance their lives.

"I'm trying to heal the nation through therapy and through poetry," Bryant said. "Our communities and nation needs every gift we have; so I try to empower people.

Last year, fans received Bryant's message through her first book, "The Birthing of a Lioness," a collection of her poetry.

The book, which revealed her own struggle to gain self-confidence and strength in the face of adversity, aims to help others use their vast talents and gifts.

"A lot people are performing in life below what they're capable of doing," Bryant said. "If

you think you can't learn, can't excel, can't do, that thinking will handicap your confidence.

In the Triangle, word has spread about the Lioness. But the nation also is about to hear her roar.

On Friday at the Durham Arts Council, Bryant will unveil her latest project - a new compact disc featuring her reading poems over the mellow sounds of a jazz ensemble. The CD entitled, "Sky - an Upbeat Black Girl's Song," will be distributed nationally and could propel Bryant's message of healing and empowering onto an even bigger stage. "Thema has as much possibility of breaking through nationally as a clinical psychologist as she does as a poet," said Brett Chambers, organizer of the poetry and open-mike events at Durham's Talk of the Town restaurant. "She understands human behavior and has what I call 'it,' meaning lots of talent.

The CD will introduce a new population to the spoken word art form, said Shani Harris, a local independent filmmaker. "The poetry and music are both wonderfully powerful," she said. "I love it.

Bryant has performed in many cities throughout the nation, including Dallas and her native Baltimore. Her international stops include London and the Caribbean. She was showcased nationally on C-SPAN as the featured poet of the Million Youth March. This year she was named Emerging Artist of the Year by the North Carolina Arts Council. Even with all Bryant's accolades, crowds at Talk of the Town still can be tough to win over, Chambers said. If a performer steps to the mike and lacks a commanding presence, people will just keep playing cards or talking to each other, Chambers said.

"But the first time Thema got behind the mike she was electric," Chambers said. "People stopped what they were doing to listen and you could hear a pin drop in there. They loved her.

Bryant said in other areas of life, she was not always viewed with such love and adoration. As a child she said she bought into the American "beauty myths" which often negate dark skin and African features. It wasn't until she reached high school that she learned to love the ebony hue God had given her.

When she was in 10th grade, her father, a bishop in the African Methodist Episcopal church, moved the family of four to Liberia, where he went to complete a religious assignment.

Bryant loved the West African nation and it loved her. By 11th grade, she became Miss High School Liberia, beating competitors from all over the country.

"For the first time I knew what it felt like to be in the majority," Bryant said. "It gives you a major sense of confidence when the president of the country looks like you, newscasters look like you, and government officials look like you.

But here in the United States, Bryant is keenly aware of what it feels like to be a minority.

She knows the stinging pain of sexism and racism and wants to combat both through her poetry.

She refers to herself as the Lioness "because in the Old Testament of the Bible God is referred to as the lion of Judah," Bryant said. "So as a daughter of God, I'm a Lioness. Her roars are getting rave reviews.

"She's an exciting presence when she is on stage," said poet Phillip Shabazz, artist in residence at Duke. "There are a lot of talented poets, but many don't have presence that

Thema does.

Bryant's ability to deliver words with passion and conviction dates back to elementary school, when she won dramatic-reading contests reciting poems such as Maya Angelou's "Still I Rise.

Today, when she reads, she is fulfilled by knowing her work is changing lives. She is pleased to be answering those questions her mother asked her as a child - "What would it take to change the world?

For many people, Bryant's work is providing some answers.

"That's the reward, when you see people's light bulb turn on," Bryant said. "I want people to know how wonderfully they are created.

Caption:

Photo: KEVIN SEIFERT: Thema Bryant was named Most Promising Young Artist in North Carolina for her poetry writing. Bryant is an author and dancer and says her works have a womanist approach.

Copyright, 1999, The Durham Herald Company

Record Number: 0338065527