

MAINE WRITES

THEIR OWN VOICES

STUDENTS NEW TO ENGLISH TO COMPETE

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LEWISTON — ZamZam Mohamed bobbed her head and moved her body, almost dancing, to the beat of her words.

Early one morning
before the sun comes up
the rooster crows
and everyone knows
get out of bed
and get to work.

She memorized the poem, a piece she wrote about getting water from the village pump in Somalia, and she'd practiced performing in front of her Lewiston Middle School classmates countless times. She's normally quiet and shy, but her voice was strong, rhythmic now. So were her words.

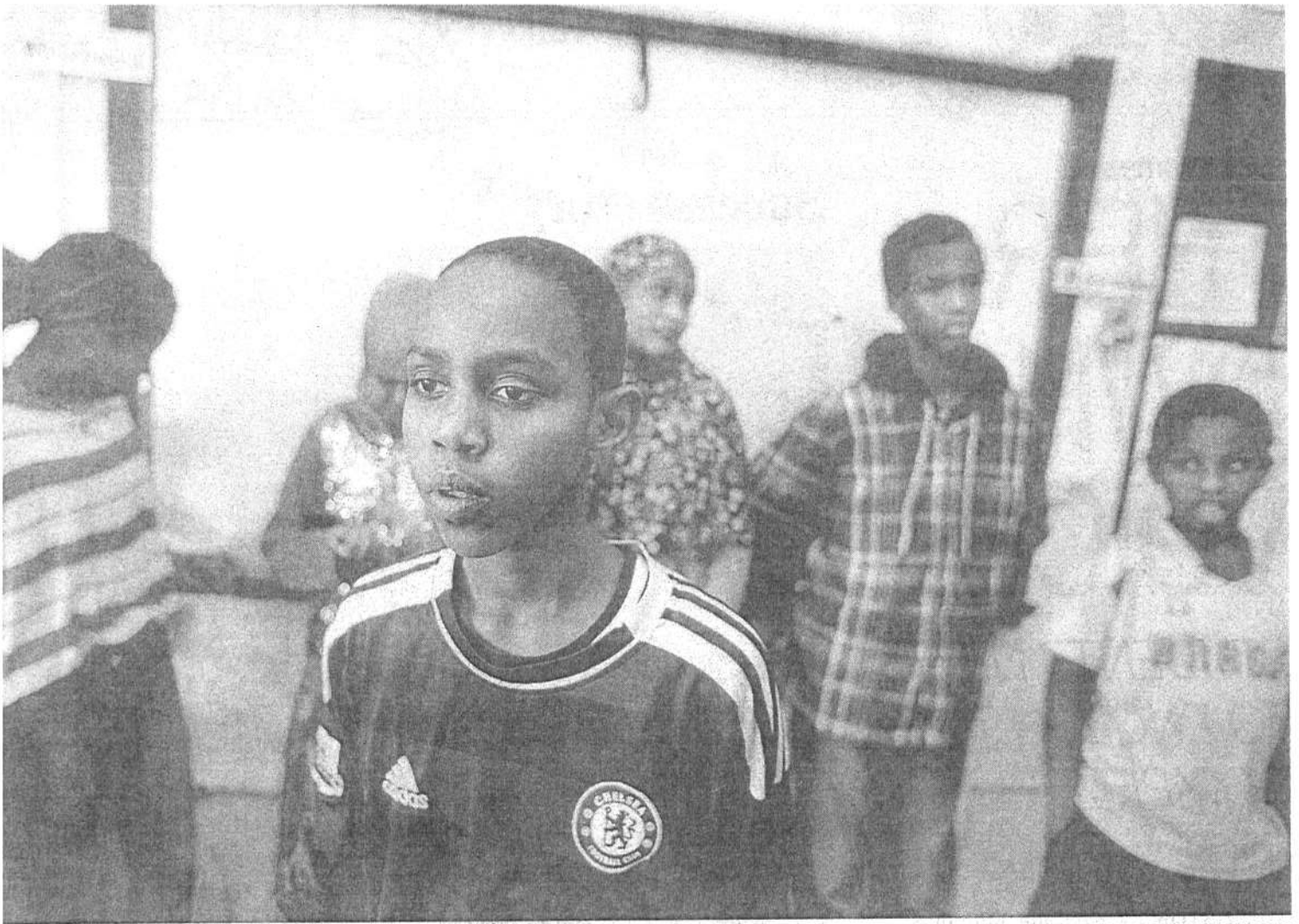
When she finished, describing her pride at pouring water in a pot for her mother, her body stilled. She exhaled, giggled with relief, and her classmates burst into applause.

On Tuesday, ZamZam and five of her classmates will represent Lewiston Middle School at the first Maine Writes poetry slam. More than a dozen Lewiston students overall will compete against New York students via teleconference. They will be judged on writing quality and performance.

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DARYN SLOVER/SUN JOURNAL PHOTOS

3, recites his poem "Home" at Lewiston Middle School on Friday. Aden, Dembo Orthens, back left, ZamZam Mohamed, Zahara Abdi, Hamza awane will perform during the first Maine Writes poetry slam. To see a video of Dembo reciting her poem "Kalemie," go to sunjournal.com/

POETRY SLAM

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But something makes ZamZam and her middle school team unique: They're just learning English. When they started nearly four months ago, many weren't entirely sure what poetry was.

"I thought we were going to sing," ZamZam said.

The program, coordinated by L/A Arts, placed teaching artists in Lewiston Middle, Farwell Elementary and Montello Elementary schools for 15 weeks. The artists worked with fifth-grade classes in Farwell and Montello, and with a class of seventh- and eighth-graders at the middle school. Students learned about poetry, then tried writing some of their own.

"It was transformative," said Joshua Vink, director of L/A Arts' Arts in Education program and one of the teaching artists. He'd been involved in a student poetry slam in New York and thought Lewiston's students could benefit as well.

"It's definitely something where it takes time for the kids to really feel ownership over the work and that (sense of), 'Wow, I actually can not only really play with language the way that I choose and creatively, but I can choose what I want to write about,'" he said.

For Lewiston Middle School students from Somalia, playing with language

wasn't even a possibility at first. They had to learn what poetry was.

Then they had to get comfortable writing it.

"It was difficult to find rhyming words for the words you want," Ahmed Mohamed said.

Many Lewiston students focused on emotional topics. One fifth-grader penned a poem about bullying. Another wrote about homelessness.

The middle school 12-, 13- and 14-year-olds tended to write about their lives before coming to America. Zahara Abdi wrote about her father's death. Hamza Ali wrote about leaving his brothers and sisters behind in Africa.

They weren't easy experiences to express.

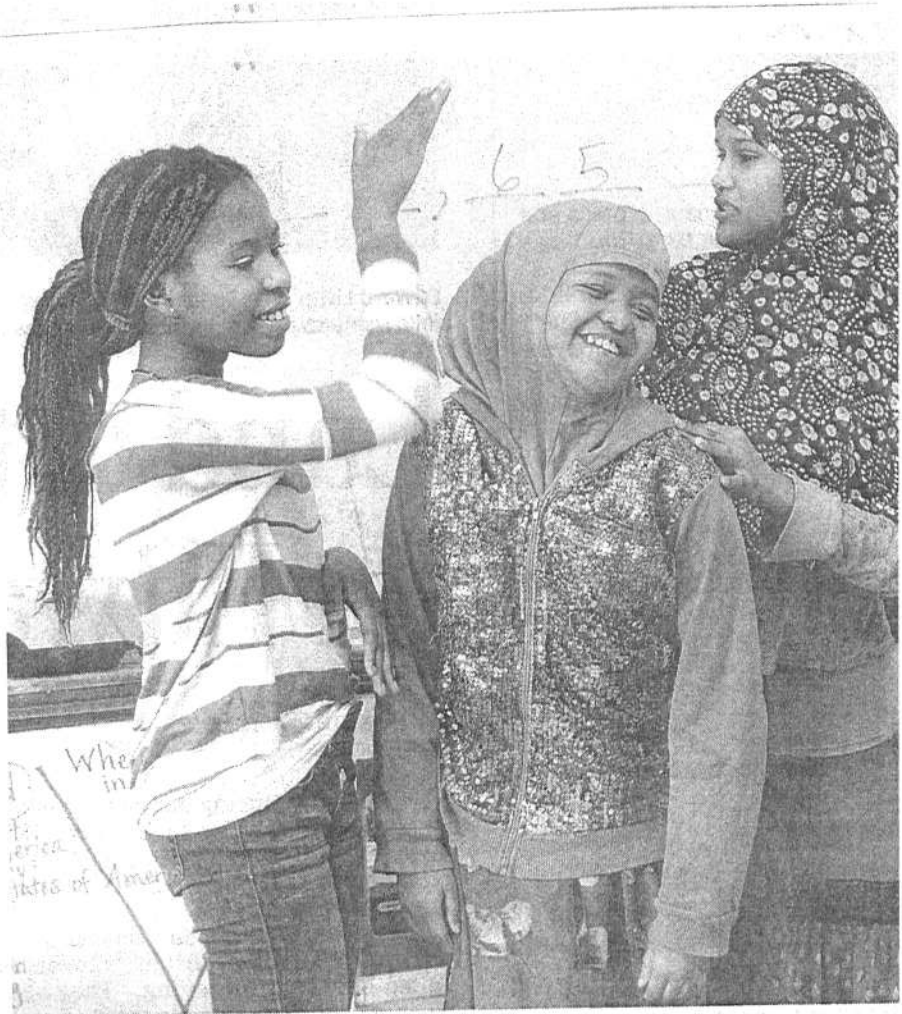
"We were so scared to share," said Isse Tawane, who wrote about losing his father's goats in a refugee camp.

When their poems were finished, the middle school class chose six students to participate in the poetry slam. They would have to memorize their poems and perform for the competition.

Some of those six are natural performers. Others, not so much.

"I'm about to have a heart attack," Hamza announced before practicing his poem in front of the class Friday.

The middle school and Montello students will compete against students from



Dembo Orthens, left, ZamZam Mohamed and Zahara Abdi will tell stories from homeland of Somalia during the first Maine Writes poetry slam this week. Students on Page B3.

the Bronx on Tuesday and Farwell students will compete against Bronx students Thursday. They will use teleconferencing equipment at Lewiston Regional Technical Center so the two

sides will be able to see and hear each other.

The individual poets will be judged by three adults and two students. The team with the highest scoring poets wins.

The middle-schoolers aren't sure whether they will win or not.

"We're going to do our best," Zahara said.

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"GOATS"

By Isse Tawane

Somalia
at camp refugee
my big brother Ali
walking with me
caring for dad's goats
fluffy white coats
on a bright day
other kids said hey
talking to them a lot
until the sun got hot
when we turned around
our goats were not to be
found
they were gone
lost
I felt so scared
my dad will be angry
angry with me
Ali climbed a big tree
what did he see?
long green trees
with big flat leaves

a dry sand
hot bright land
the goats ran away
we looked all day
and sweaty
we were so tired
finally
we went back home
we said
dad we lost the goats
we're so sorry
my dad said come
look what is here
he showed me the goats
inside their fence
snuggled together
like they were cold
in the hot sun
still fluffy and white
they were alright
dad yelled at us
but he didn't do nothing
right now I remember
that day we lost the goats

"AFRICA DJIBOUTI"

By Hamza Ali

I thought
in America
no problems
no wars
more money
like I saw on TV
movies in New York City
we want it easy
then the day came
to the airport we go
little did I know...
Mom told me
"Hamza,
say good-bye to
your brothers
your sisters
your Abba.
they are not going with us"
I didn't know what to feel
this can't be real

I just cried
hoping she had lied
but my dad did not cry
brown army uniform
white gloves
red hat
on each shoulder
three shiny gold stars
thick
strong
big
eyes crinkled
looking down
he said
"don't worry, you will be fine"
but I worry this is the last time
that day
far away
we left my dad
and five small children behind
but they are always on my
mind

"SOMALIA"

By ZamZam Mohamed

Early one morning
before the sun comes up
the rooster crows
and everyone knows
get out of bed
and get to work
Somalia
My beautiful home land
where I feel the wet sand
under my bare feet
as I walk down the street
cool
dark
quiet
I am alone
carrying the jugs
going to get water
at the village pump
I'm the first one there
but they don't care
girls fight

who got there first
we're all dying of thirst
my family gets five gallons
better not lose my balance
as I walk home
again alone
only little girls have this job
I think it is cool
boys go to school
friends big and small
playing soccer with a ball
made from old rags
tied up with plastic bags
women working
talking and laughing
building a house
with sticks and mud
singing Somali songs
all day long
pour the water in the pot
my mom said
you did a great job
proud of myself

"MY DAD"

By Zahara Abdi

I was walking home
a calm sunny day
birds singing
leaves blowing away
through my refugee camp
Degahale
at my house
many women
hugging and crying
I ask my sister in fear
"what's going on here?"
I didn't believe what she said
"our dad is dead"
I threw up my hands
and cried in anger
"NO! you lie"
"my dad did not die!"
but then

I saw my crying mother
and I knew it was true
He had been sick
for a year
far from here
on that Monday
he passed away
he left us
his three wives
ten daughters
and six sons
My father
protector
funny and kind
always and forever
on my mind
I will always love
and miss him
"allah haa u naxaristo"
may he rest in peace

"KALEMIE"

By Dembo Orthens

Congo
where I was born
we left when I was four
because of the war
I saw people dying
my mom was crying
she was so afraid
we couldn't leave our home
many kids are small
they can't carry us all
soldier comes in my house
his face covered in black
walking all around
feet stomping the ground
tall gun
across his chest
I was hiding
under the couch
with my baby sisters
It was too dark
I felt so scared
I hugged them tight
will it be alright?
when the soldier went away

we knew we couldn't stay
we fled to Dodoma,
in Tanzania
a camp for refugees
for people like me
now people walk free
among many trees
I didn't understand
this different land
we went to the lake
I feel the fresh air
blowing through my hair
we were walking
my sister and I talking
feeling so happy
we looked up in the sky
light rain makes it less dry
my little sister started to cry
rainy muddy ground
that dripping sound
smells like home
we will go back
that's a fact
Now I'm 14 years old
I'm dreaming of Congo
the war there is done
but my life has just begun

"HOME"

By Aden Aden

This story is true
it didn't happen to you
I want to share
I hope you care
here it goes . . .
I was a little boy
In Africa
Somalia
me and my mother
my cousins and my brother
sitting outside
at my house
in the garden
where we planted trees
squishy red tomatoes
it's almost night
everything's alright
laughing and talking
my sister cooking for us
fresh and delicious
suddenly
gun shots in the air
powpowpow!!
I was feeling so scared
"Ca'a, Ca'a!!"
yelled my mom
Get up, get up!!
I was horrified
terrified
everyone yelling
Mom put me under the bed

all by myself
will they take me first?
I thought they would kill me
and what did I see?
through a hole in the wall
I saw my uncle fall
a man walking with a gun
he was having fun
yelling "mashallah!!
mashallah!"
he shot my uncle dead
a bullet to his head
there was blood all around
spilling on the ground
the man who shot him
his head was covered
and I never saw his face
my cousin
a kid
came running outside
saw his dad had died
with her hand
my mom closed his eyes
she told us we have to go
where to?
I didn't know
I left my home that day
we all ran away
this is how I became a
refugee
they took my home away
from me
I hope Africa is okay
I will go home again someday