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## Student poems greet city bus riders

By Linda Conner Lambeck



Central High School students Anajah Belcher, left, and Alasia Robinson, right, look at their poems posted on a Greater Bridgeport Transit bus with teacher and contest organizer, Ron Rapice in Bridgeport, Conn. on Friday, May 24, 2013. The works of 50 city students have been placed inside city buses as part of the the district-wide project called Words on Wheels.

Cry

by Anajah Belcher

I cry, I cry

Until my eyes get dry

I just want to borrow your heart for a while to ease the pain

I cry, I cry

At night I stay awake with dreadful  
thoughts knowing that my heart is not complete.

Sometimes I feel hollow like I don't exist

I cry, I cry

Home Sweet Barbados

by Alasia Robinson

Pretty bright white sand with waves so blue.

Tiny streets filled with cars zooming by.

Hot air with warm breezes going down your spine.

Makes you feel at home with no cares.

Fruit trees swaying in the wind: with fruits so ripe. Day turns

to night, the stars shine bright,

No sound, no lights just sweet dreams in Barbados.

BRIDGEPORT -- Anajah Belcher really didn't think about her audience when she wrote "I Cry," a poem inspired by the 5-year-old brother she is often asked to babysit.

"It was just something I wanted to get off my chest," said Belcher, 15, a Central High School freshman.

Then she boarded the No. 5 bus headed down Fairfield Avenue and watched as eyes glanced up from cellphones to rest on poetry written by other city students like her.

"I hope on this kind of day, when it's rainy, someone gets on the bus and reads my poem. I hope it takes them to somewhere warm and makes them happier," said Alasia Robinson, 15, another Central freshman.

Her poem, "Home Sweet Barbados," was inspired by her mother's birthplace.

In all, the works of 50 city students have been placed above windows, and alongside advertisements and public service announcements, inside Greater Bridgeport Transit buses.

"Words on Wheels," as the program is called, is a district-wide project in its third year. The program is run by Ron Rapice, a teacher of the gifted, who is stationed at Roosevelt School this year.

The program is jointly sponsored by the bus company, General Electric and the Bridgeport Public Education Fund. The only rules are that the poems be 10 lines or less.

This year's contest drew 636 entries in all grade levels. Of those entries, 90 came from students of Vae Champagne, a world civilization teacher who joined librarian Barbara Oliver and teacher Mary Connors to encourage students to write poetry as part of a unit on poet Langston Hughes and the Harlem Renaissance.

Of those students, 11 were chosen as winners, including poems by Belcher and Robinson. Champagne, meanwhile, doesn't think it is odd that a social studies teacher would assign students to write poetry.

"Poetry is highly engaging and this was an opportunity for authentic learning," Champagne said. "Give them a creative outlet and they will run with it."

She saw the contest not only as a confidence booster, but also as an opportunity to put students' work on public display.

"I do read them," said Pilar Camacho, catching the bus on her way to work Friday morning. "They are beautiful."

"It's something that makes you stop and think for a while," added Joseph Lauriston, who said he takes the bus a couple of times a week. "I look forward to them. One I read the other day said something like 'Life is a story.' It was true."

Phil Moales, another passenger, said he reads the poems all the time.

"Sometimes, I'm like 'Wow, a fourth-grader wrote that.' They should do it more often," Moales said.

Robinson, who set out to give the reader a detailed picture of how Barbados looks, said she doesn't think of herself as a good writer.

In fact, Robinson was surprised that she won.

"I read it to my mom before I turned it in and she was like, 'It really didn't rhyme.' I told her poems don't really have to rhyme," she said.

Belcher was also uncertain of her chances, especially since she decided to skip happy subject matter and write about a hard-to-handle little brother.

What mattered, Rapice said, is that both poems were expressive, very deep and passionate.

"He gets in my head a lot and makes me sad. I have to take care of him a lot, and sometimes, he can be really bad," Belcher said.