Written by By Rick Abasta For the Sun
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Literary fans gathered at the Second Street Events Center April 14 to hear featured poet Roanna Shebala perform her work at the Gallup ArtsCrawl Poetry Slam.

Shebala, 35, has competed at national slams, women's poetry slams, and the annual Individual World Poetry Slam. She recently returned from the "Women of the World Poetry Slam," which was hosted by Poetry Slam Inc, a non-profit focused on organizing and promoting slams.

Shebala was the only Native American poet to compete.

“It was cool, but it was kind of overwhelming, disappointing. The poems I performed, nobody could understand them,” Shebala said of the audience’s lack of exposure to natives.

Shebala has built her career around traveling and introducing her work to people unfamiliar with her voice, and others like it. Originally from Fort Defiance, Ariz., Shebala has performed her poetry across the country, places such as Oakland to Phoenix, Denver, Albuquerque, Boston, and more.

“I get to travel, meet different people and speak my truth,” Shebala said.

Her slam poetry piece “Love You Some Indians,” garnered national acclaim. Shebala’s performance of the piece at the National Poetry Slam in Oakland, Calif., in 2014 was recorded and is available for viewing on her website: rowieshebala.com.

The poem addresses Indian mascots, kitschy native roadside crafts, social stereotypes, and the cultural misappropriation of American Indians today.

The piece opened doors, Shebala said, and her performance at La Casita for Lincoln Center Out of Doors, a summer poetry and music festival, served as an indication that she was on track with her writing.

“That poem got me to New York City,” she said of “Love You Some Indians.”

Shebala’s slam poet lifestyle involves copious amounts of writing, reading and performing. She said she is constantly training.

During slams, the verbal pugilism lasts three minutes, just like a boxing match, as the competitor lets loose with a barrage of words, gesticulations, and emotions.

Shebala described her writing process as straightforward.

“I pick a subject that I want to write about and I just rant about it as long as I can,” she said. “I rant and write and write. I go back, re-read it and I take out lines that I like and lines that I don’t like. It starts to organize from there.”

Shebala researches the topics of her poems and proudly affirms her work’s accuracy. For ArtsCrawl, she performed “Love You Some Indians,” “Indian Phoenix,” and a new poem about Pocahontas.

“People think of her as the Disney princess, with her hair in the wind,” Shebala said of Pocahontas. “With this epidemic of murdered and missing Indigenous women, nobody ever puts the two together. How (Pocahontas) is the most famous murdered and missing Indigenous woman. How she was taken and she was only 10.”

ArtsCrawl Slam Dunks

During the April 14 ArtsCrawl Poetry Slam, it was a local Gallup man who took home the prize.

Brian Donnelly, originally from New York, performed a personal piece that he wrote more than 13 years ago while serving in the military. It was his first time performing the poem in public.

A U.S. Army veteran, Donnelly served as a combat medic with the 47th Combat Support Hospital in Mosul in 2003 and later in Baghdad in 2005.

“I was a heroin addict as a teenager before joining the Army, Without the Army, I would probably still be an addict or dead or in jail like a lot of my friends,” Donnelly said. “That poem was probably from them.”

When he wrote the poem, Donnelly said was up for three days straight dealing with mass casualties. He was tired but could not sleep until he wrote that poem down about his friends back in New York.

Today, disabled from his time in combat, Donnelly describes writing as therapeutic.

“Write as much as you can,” he said. “It doesn’t matter how silly it is, just write because in that is going to be some gems. Find yourself in writing.”

The organizer of the poetry slam, Mariya Deykute, is also an accomplished poet, writer, and teacher. She also hosts the First Friday poetry series and open mic at ART123 Gallery.

“April is National Poetry Month, so we wanted to do a poetry slam for the Gallup Community,” she said.

An English teacher at Tohatchi High School, Deykute has been living in the area for around four years. She has been published in over 20 journals and a few anthologies, including “The Southwestern Poetry Anthology.”

“I would love to have an anthology or even an annual or biannual journal, even if it’s partially print and partially online,” Deykute said. “I’ve been working with UNM-Gallup and ArtsCrawl to see if we could get it funded and off the ground for next year.”

For Deykute, poetry is important because it challenges beliefs.

“It asks the hard questions and it gives us comfort of not always knowing those answers to those questions,” she said. “It lets us slow down and appreciate the world for what it is as opposed to what we want it to be.”

Her love for the craft has brought her in contact with many local poets, to whom she offers guidance and advice.

“There is a market out right now for any kind of poetry, so I would say do your best and don’t be afraid to get yourself out there,” Deykute said, as advice to those following in her path. “Essentially submit as much as possible, read as much as possible and really try to be a part of the poetry community.”

Deykute added that poetry is a valuable resource in many lives spiritually, if not financially, and encouraged those interested in the art to look inwards.

“Poetry doesn’t make the big bucks, but it can really enrich your life and give your life meaning,” she said.

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