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Giving children their say

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That proverb about children being seen and not heard needs some context.

No, they shouldn't be in grown folks' business. And when they get to sassing, kindly remind young'uns that their lips will grow back after you slap them off.

But all of their retorts aren't back talk. Young people have questions, and we grownups shouldn't get frustrated and squelch their voices just because we don't have all of the answers.

Got issues with your boy or girl? Bring the child to Teen Verse Night this evening at Ideas! Coffee House, 2105 E. Highway 54 (behind the Pizza Hut).

Similar to music taming the savage beast, art could calm down your kid.

"It's like being in a box, and if you can't find a hole to get some air, you'll suffocate."

Simple concept. Deep, though.

"If you're not able to channel that hatred, it's going to trap you and suffocate you," Katrice Williams continued. "Either way, it's going to get channeled. The question is where."

Have you read this newspaper lately? Teens killing each other. Or storming into a convenience store and murdering the clerk.

And you're telling me art is the emotional elixir that can keep kids in check?

"Poetry was that for me."

Katrice is a thoughtful 18-year-old at a place called Atlantic College, a prep school in Wales, in the United Kingdom. She's from Durham, actually went to Hillside before crossing the big pond to finish high school.

While in Wales, Katrice keeps tabs on Durham by perusing the newspaper online. She's disturbed by what she reads, especially as it relates to young people, particularly that her disaffected peers seem to be languishing as a result of limited opportunities to simply be themselves.

Knowing the power of poetry in her own life, Katrice put together the pieces for tonight's poetry slam. Sign-up starts at 5:30 p.m. The spoken word will flow from 6 to 8 p.m. No charge. The only cost is an ample measure of honest creativity.

Makes me think about "Rize," a new movie about competitive dancing known as krumping, where you move real fast, and it looks violent, except it's all a matter of artistic expression created in South Central Los Angeles in response to the 1992 Rodney King riot.

Some krumpers dress as clowns. Which has evolved into an aspect of the anti-gang movement, because dudes in rubber noses and rainbow colors aren't easily pegged to specific street posses adorned in certain hues.

What we're talking about here is expression. Self-expression. Making young people comfortable with looking Mama in the eye and dealing with some things.

DeWarren Langley, a student at Hampton University in Virginia, is another who looks in on Bull City youth from afar.

Impressed with the newly founded Durham Youth Council, DeWarren, 20, said it'll only work if the City Council advisory group is more than a token assembly. Seeing them at the meeting table is one thing. But will we actually hear them?

"Trying to get young people involved in this complex matrix of politics is going to be difficult," DeWarren said.

See, it's gotta be about more than kids having a say on school lunch menus. They need to tell us how best to craft a public comment-policy for school board meetings. They're the ones affected by the rancor.

I mean, are we ready to let them suggest some things about downtown development? Because they very well may tell us that the \$31 million performing arts center is good only if there's room for poetry slams. And krumpers must be welcome.

John McCann's column appears Sundays, Wednesdays and Fridays. Contact him at jmccann@heraldsun.com or 419-6601.

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