

culture



The Bomb Squad

In seeking to find a film that mirrored its own mission of binding together children, families and their communities, the Family Awareness Network discovered a local documentary about teen poets called *Louder Than a Bomb* that is proving to have an explosive effect on all who see it. **By Robert Loerzel**

Glencoe resident Sharon Graboys received a phone call from her son's guitar teacher in 2010, canceling a lesson. She knew the teacher must have had a good reason, since he rarely called off a session. "I have to cancel because they're showing this film," he told her.

A film? What was this film, and why was it so important? The guitar teacher, Shinobu Sato, told Graboys it was a new documentary called *Louder Than a Bomb*, which shows Chicago high school students competing in an annual poetry slam of the same name. Intrigued, Graboys made a point of seeing the film, too. And once she saw it, she knew she had to see it again.

"I've seen the film no less than five times," she says. "Each time, my visceral reaction has not diminished in intensity at all. It's a beautiful and affirming film. You leave filled with hope."

Graboys was so inspired by this true story about a diverse bunch of teens finding their voice through poetry that she decided it needed to be seen on the North Shore. "I said, 'I'm not going to rest until this film gets seen by as large of an audience as it merits.'"

The Family Awareness Network, where Graboys serves as a board member, is bringing the film to New Trier High School for a screening at 7 p.m. on Jan. 12, with help from the New Trier Parents Association.

Earlier, a screening had been arranged by North Shore Country Day School, where students from seventh to 12th grade watched *Louder Than a Bomb*. “They were transfixed,” Graboys says. “Huge applause afterwards.”



Lamar “The Truth” Jorden, a member of the Steinmenauts from Steinmetz High School on the South Side, tries for a repeat championship in the year chronicled in the film.



Nova Venerable of the Oak Park and River Forest High School team performs intensely personal poetry drawn from her family’s experiences.



Nate Marshall, formerly a student at Whitney Young Magnet High School, leaned on his poetic talents to earn a spot at Vanderbilt University.



After the complimentary FAN screening on Jan. 12, Nate Marshall will join other slam poets as well as the film’s directors for a post-film discussion and performance.

Greg Jacobs, who directed the film with Jon Siskel, will answer questions after the screening, along with Kevin Coval of Young Chicago Authors, who started the *Louder Than a Bomb* program, and Nate Marshall, one of the film’s young poet stars.

Graboys says the film is a perfect fit with the Family Awareness Network’s mission, which helps parents make connections with their children, other parents, the schools and the community. “It’s about so much more than slam poetry,” she says. “It heightens people’s awareness about other people’s gifts. And you realize that we underestimate what kids are capable of.”

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It’s happenstance that Chicago filmmakers Siskel and Jacobs even made this documentary. Jacobs says he stumbled upon the subject. One night in 2005, he was driving past the Metro nightclub near Wrigley Field when he noticed

what the marquee said: “*Louder Than a Bomb* high school poetry slam finals.”

“And there was a line of kids down the block of all shapes and sizes and colors,” Jacobs says. “It just struck me it was such an unusual thing

to see that kind of diversity among teenagers on the North Side of Chicago on a Saturday night, seeing poetry for fun.”

Jacobs’ curiosity led him to find out more about the competition, which pits teams of poets



Greg Jacobs and Jon Siskel

from around the city against one another in an annual championship. Jacobs and Siskel spent a year filming four teams, capturing both intimate and private moments as the teens transformed their family, school and street experiences into verse — and then brought those words to life in dramatic, funny and thrilling performances onstage. While the poetry has its share of light moments, it’s most striking when it touches on the tough situations these kids have faced.

In a poem called “Look!” Nate Marshall talks about some of the difficulties he’d dealt with, and how participating in *Louder Than a Bomb* changed his life. “I got jumped, seen friends and both my grandmas die,” he says in a performance, “but a mic, a stage, a pen, a page, helped end my rage and mend my days.”

Marshall, who was a student at Whitney M. Young Magnet High School during the filming, is now a senior at Vanderbilt University in Nashville. He seems to be getting closer to a career goal he stated in the film: to become a “professor and/or rap star.” Speaking by phone, Marshall says the poetry slams made a “tremendous difference” in his high school years. “It’s

shaped what I want to do with the rest of my life,” he says.

Expect Marshall to perform a poem at the end of the Q-and-A in Winnetka. Although the film is showing on the Oprah Winfrey Network and will be available soon on DVD, Jacobs urges people to see it in a theater with an audience. “People actually applaud during the movie,” he says. “They’ll start cheering after every poem. It’s almost like you’re at *Louder Than a Bomb* — the poetry slam, that is — “in person.”

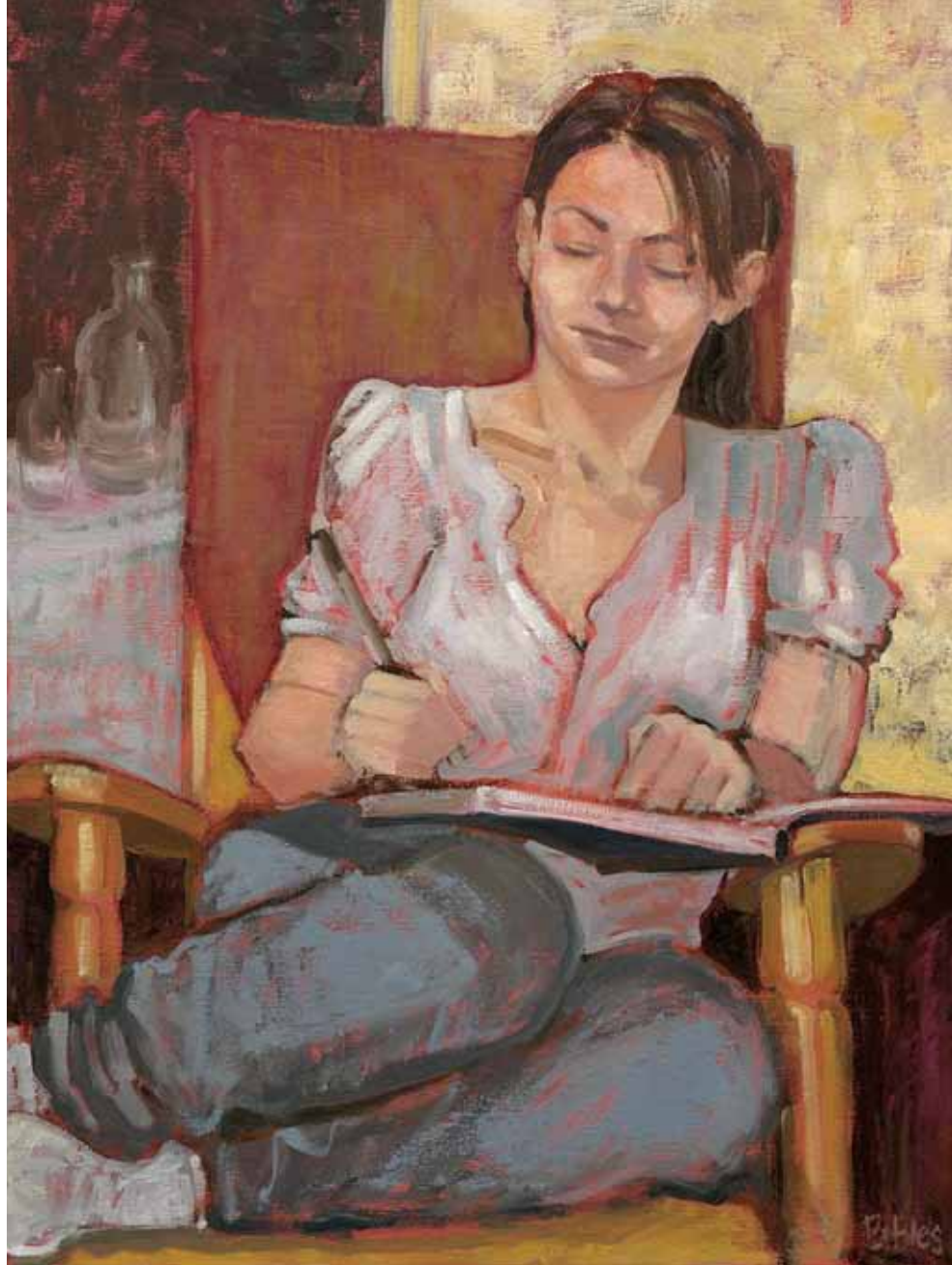
The slam is a competition, but Jacobs says the competition isn’t the main point. “It gives them a goal,” he says. “They’re convinced when they’re practicing for months and months and months that they’re going to a competition, where they’re going to beat these other teams. That’s the idea.”

But when the poets finally face off against their rivals from the other schools, they often feel inspired by the words they hear from the opposing teams. They start crossing boundaries and connecting with those other kids. “The competition really starts to fall away,” Jacobs says. “As much as they still want to win, they

realize, ‘Oh, wait a minute. It’s not about that anymore. It’s about this kid from the North Side, whose story totally resonates with me, even though I’m from the South Side.’”

Jacobs and Graboys are confident the film will resonate across the city-suburban boundary. It might even inspire someone sitting in Gaffney Auditorium to take up poetry. “It’s about humanity and connections,” Graboys says. “It is, in the end, a love story.”

The Family Awareness Network (FAN), in conjunction with the New Trier Parents’ Association and The Wilmette Theatre, offers its free screening of “Louder Than a Bomb” on Jan. 12 from 7 p.m. to 9:30 p.m. in Gaffney Auditorium at New Trier High School’s Winnetka Campus, 385 Winnetka Ave., Winnetka. After the screening, the film’s directors, Greg Jacobs and Jon Siskel, will join slam poets Adam Gottlieb and Nate Marshall, in addition to Louder Than a Bomb Artistic Director Kevin Coval for a discussion and performance. RSVP for the screening — up to four tickets maximum — by logging onto FAN’s website, www.fan-ntts.



Homework

Seeing the Light

Once legally blind, Winnetka artist Nancy Behles now paints stunning portraits and landscapes that bleed light and shadow together, while coaching artists in a series of workshops at the North Shore Art League. By Abigail Foerstner

For years, artist Nancy Behles perceived the world as smears of color brushed over indistinct shapes, a world blurred far beyond the lyrical impressionism of her own paintings. Legally, she was blind, carefully budgeting periods of what she called “eye time,” those few precious hours each day when her eyes could tolerate contact lenses. It was just enough to manage the kids and get to the grocery store, to run a family and continue some work.

She created window designs for the boutique Mostly Handmade in Evanston and a few other select clients as well. But painting, a lifelong passion, was pushed aside, a luxury she couldn't fit in. Did she have two hours of eye time? Four? How long before the discomfort would return, the painful bulging of her corneas that meant the contacts had to come out?

This was her life — for some 30 years — the result of keratoconus, a disease that changes the

shape of the cornea. A series of corneal transplants that she underwent starting at age 25 made little difference — the world remained hazier than Monet's mists at Giverny. But in 2002, a cornea implant gave her the opportunity to finally place a paintbrush back in her hand, bringing new sight to a fresh canvas.

“I always waited for that magic moment, like in the hospital, when they take the bandages off and you say, ‘Oh my God, I can see,’” she says. “That never happened. But this last set got me out of being legally blind — it got me further than any other pair of transplants I've ever had.”

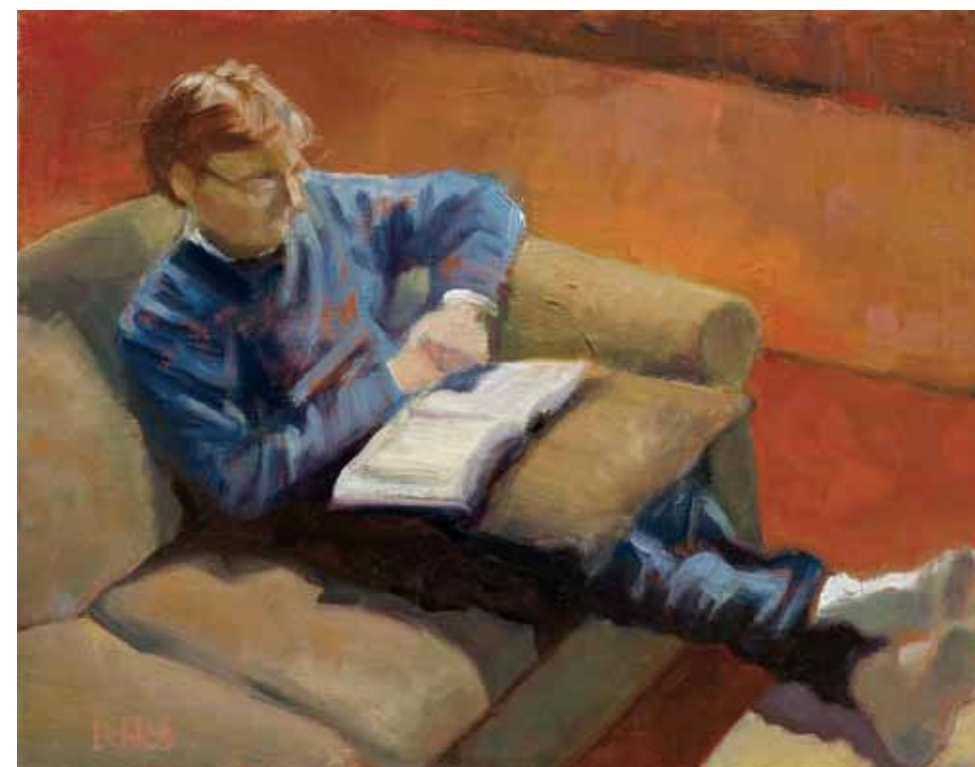
At first the old roadblocks — the mental barriers — persisted. Deep-seated fears, entrenched for 30 years, are hard to break. It had been too long for her art, she thought. But then a persistent friend convinced her to teach a kids' class at the North Shore Art League in Winnetka and the light once again began to shine. “All good things came from that, and I thank her often because it opened up many doors that I had closed,” says Behles. The brush was hers once again.

In the years since, the Winnetka artist has composed rhythmic portraits of her two daughters, her friends, children and alluring strangers who cross her path. Her cast of characters radiates light, as though Behles can't get enough of it.

She paints landscapes but focuses on the “figurative landscapes,” as she calls her portraits. Joyfully quiet, contemplative or even sleeping, her figures curl into cushy chairs or walk with somnambulant grace. Children making snow angels and skipping on the beach capture the action of life sifted through simple, vivid rituals. Behles keeps the brushstrokes loose and spontaneous, revealing an aura of inner self in the flow of body language and the folds of fabric and shadow. Yet, her people — and especially her women — take a strong commanding center stage in each work.

Like many artists, Behles paints from photographs. But she isn't trying to reproduce a photograph in paint, and she prefers impressionism to the sharp-focus realism the might celebrate her restored vision. The way she paints isn't about her sight, she says. “It's probably about the sight in my head.”

But her new eyes did give her a new outlook on landscapes. “I never wanted to do landscapes.



Nancy Behles' unique vision of the world moves seamlessly from outdoors (*Hillcrest Road*, top) to in (*Nonfiction*, below).

painting in a single session at the league, Behles launched a one-stop art class for adults. “At Ease at the Easel” features wine and cheese and all the materials necessary to finish a painting in a single evening workshop.

Carol and Jeff Comeaux of Winnetka came to the fall class after a trip to Italy that steeped them in art. Susan Katz of Lake Forest, financial administrator for the North Shore Art League, takes the class every season. Former costume designer Kendra Cunningham of Kenilworth, painter Anne McNerney of Winnetka and several other students also joined the session. Behles shared basic tricks of the trade, and then everyone started drawing on their canvas, sketching a tabletop vignette of flowers in a vase set on a small table with pears.

“Draw in a horizon,” Behles advised. But they could later paint in the highlights and the shadows dramatically cast by a floodlight. With sketches in place, Behles provided palettes of paints to blend, mix and apply. Greens, purples and golds seeped across each canvas in unique bursts.

“How do you make brown?” someone asked. “Pour some red wine into it,” Jeff suggested.

Behles moved from artist to artist to coach in those highlights, shadows, brush strokes, lots of color and confidence. This was the place to let go and follow an intuitive interpretation of form and space. And, as promised, everyone finished a painting, expressing personal palettes of whimsy, modernism and invention.

“She's a great teacher, very inspiring. She brings out the best in you,” says Katz. And the best seems symbolic of Behles' journey — art as a looking glass to see the world with fresh eyes and capture vivid details we so often barely notice.

Paint your own masterpiece at Nancy Behles' next “At Ease at the Easel” workshop, Tuesday, Feb. 28, 7-9 p.m., North Shore Art League at the Winnetka Community House, 620 Lincoln Ave., Winnetka. For fees, registration and other league classes, check out www.northshoreartleague.org/index.html.

I didn't see leaves on trees — trees are lollipops,” she laughs. Door County changed all that. Behles and her family have traveled there for 20 years, since she and her husband Ken, an architect, drove there to meet with a client who wanted a home addition.

For years, the drive to Door County amounted to a trip behind a thick veil. Waves crashing on the deck of the cabin she couldn't see first sold her on Door County, and the family bought

the cabin. But after 2002, she began painting the barns, bays and bluffs, the sunset rippling into kaleidoscopes on the water. “The ride to Door County and finally seeing out of the car is what changed my mind (about landscapes),” she says.

Behles grew up in Chicago and then Skokie, started painting as a child and taught art in elementary school before her vision failed. Inspired by how kids in her Art FUNDamentals class can rev up their creativity to complete a