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FROM SOUTH JERSEY TO YOU

Speakers display a way with words

By **JIM WALSH** · Courier-Post Staff · February 22, 2011

PENNSAUKEN — A teenager who came to America knowing just a few words in English was among the winners Monday in a speech contest devoted to historic figures who've overcome adversity.

"This represents success," said a smiling Jason Do, 15, after being honored for remarks that urged his listeners to believe in themselves at all times.

The East Camden youth, who arrived from Vietnam at age 5, was among participants in a Martin Luther King Jr. speech contest hosted by UrbanPromise, a ministry that works with city youth.

In his address, Do drew parallels between the accomplishments of Jesse Owens, the American star of the 1936 Olympics, and the efforts of himself and others to surmount steep challenges.

"Raise your hand if you've ever felt the odds were stacked against you," asked Do, drawing a response from dozens of listeners in the largely youthful audience of about 100 people.

Speakers at the 16th annual event discussed athletes and actors, poets and presidents. They cited pioneers in the efforts to end slavery and segregation, and they also urged audience members to support the struggle for a better society.

Some participants had to overcome their own challenge -- stage fright.

"I was so scared that I made excuses not to be here," said Joshua Rodriguez, 14, an eighth-grader at East Camden Middle School. "But what if Malcolm X got afraid and it held him back? Hopefully, like Malcolm X, I can overcome my fears."

"I felt so scared at first," allowed Giona Hance, 9, of Waterfront South. "But once I started reading my speech, I was happy."

Giona, a fourth-grader at Wiggins Elementary School, urged listeners to "show love to people by giving them what they need, like pencils and toys. If we meet hate with love, the world will be a kinder place."

"This is her first speech," said Giona's father, Darnell, as he sat in the audience at the Pennsauken headquarters of UrbanPromise.

"It won't be her last," predicted the girl's mother, Mickey.

The students developed their speeches over several weeks with help from UrbanPromise personnel.

"This prepares them to become a responsible researcher and it also teaches lessons about the people who have gone before them," said Promise Mchenga, an UrbanPromise intern from the African nation of Malawi. He assisted Bryan Estevez, a 9-year-old winner from the city's Davis Elementary School who talked about the poet Langston Hughes.

"He inspired me to write my own poetry," said the fourth-grader, who recited Hughes' verse as part of his presentation. "He made me happy and proud."

Christopher Williams, a 16-year-old senior at UrbanPromise Academy, also cited the impact of language in his talk.

"Words have power," he said. "You cannot control where your life takes you. But take pride in knowing that your very goals and your hunger for them to see daylight will add direction to your journey."

And Do, a sophomore at Camden County Technical Institute in Pennsauken, urged his listeners to act on what they had heard.

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that follows, by not giving up and by fighting back," he said.

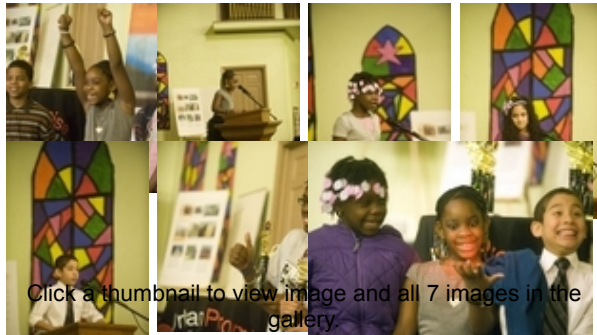
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Winners in Monday's speech contest include: Naquan Kato, 10, (from left); Shayla Ingram, 6; Heaven Lee Armstead, 7; and Bryan Estevez, 9. (AL SCHELL/Courier-Post)

Photo Gallery

Thumbnails from: **Dr.King Speech contest**



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