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An Open Mic and Open Hearts

Every Tuesday at 9 p.m. a line wraps around the block at the Greenway Court Theatre, home to Da Poetry Lounge. Jan. 23, the fourth Tuesday of the month, was an Open Mic night, so poets from all over Los Angeles gathered to share their work and bask in the support from the community.

Da Poetry Lounge got its start in Dante Basco's living room in 1997. By 1998, the weekly crowd had grown so much they had to start looking for a new location. In 2000, Da Poetry Lounge came to the Greenway, where it has been ever since.

"What's cool about doing it here is that the sets constantly change, so we always kind of have a different feel based off what kind of production is going on in the theater," said Derrick Harris, the director of partnerships.

This week's backdrop was light colored wood with attention grabbing box shelves. The minimalist feel of the space itself blatantly juxtaposed the eclectic assortment of pillows strewn across the stage for patrons to sit on as they enjoy the performance. That's right, some guests elect to sit up on stage with the performers; getting up close during those personal stories seems to further enhance the community in the space.

"The community is such a vibrant place... every time you come here it's like you just feel so welcomed and you feel so safe to share your story, and you could just be as vulnerable as you need to be," said Praditya, a poet who performed that night.

Another attendee, audience member Angelica Gallegos, completely agreed. The community has made her feel so comfortable, she even brought someone there for their first date.

“Right away you feel the sense of community here... like for Halloween, everybody dressed up... it’s just a place to get inspiration for sure,” Gallegos said.

This week’s host was Edwin Bodney, a slam poet best known for their work “When a Boy Tells You He Loves You.” Combined with the talents of resident musician DJ Alwaysz, they electrified the crowd from the start, bringing the small space to life. Bodney did many bits throughout the show, including an on-going joke calling audience members out about their zodiac signs. Those moments were a nice relief from the deeper, darker subject matter of some poems.

The poems performed ranged from erotic to about family trauma, from love to social anxiety, from a speech about the destruction in Gaza to a song about smoking kush. One performer even brought a guitarist with him, and set his poem to music for the first time on stage.

One of the more amusing performances of the night was done by Jeremiah “Jay Jay” Payne, a LA based poet who has been frequenting Da Poetry Lounge since high school. His love for poetry was sparked by a class assignment, and led him to joining a teenage slam team who traveled around the world competing.

“That juice kept coming, and it became something I’ve made as a career, and something I love, and it just became like a counselor for me, you know?” said Payne.

He performed a love poem that night, filled with unexpected rhymes and lines made hilarious by his delivery like, “You turned a dog into a pig / I’m tryna hog you,” and “Just like a toaster / Imma pop up on you.”

Another performer, the aforementioned Praditya, showcased a piece about expansion and awakening to your true self. It ended with the line, “You’re more buoyant than you know.”

When asked what the inspiration behind their poem was, Praditya said, “The idea that came to mind is that you’re always rising. Buoyancy and rising go hand in hand and being able to float on top of the surface.”

Da Poetry Lounge has cultivated such an amazing, supportive, and creative community who come together week after week to share their art. Vulnerability can be rare in the modern world, but it is abundant in this place.