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Poetry project links New York, local kids

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sconstantine@repub.com SOUTH HADLEY - "I feel like I'm famous," 11-year-old Petra M. L. Shrieves said recently after hearing one of her poems performed as a song by seventh- and eighth-graders at the Pioneer Valley Performing Arts Charter Public School.

A fifth-grader at Public School 101 in Harlem, Petra was one of 10 students who had traveled from Harlem to the **local** school as part of the Music and **Poetry** Synchronized Program. It involves students in the Harlem school's **poetry** class writing poems last fall and in February sending them to the **local** school.

The art school's song writing and vocal technique students then set the works to music and performed the works recently when the Harlem students came for a visit.

Ten girls sang the poem "Growing and Rising" written by Petra to a peppy, rock 'n' roll type beat.

The poem reads: "I will rise to the occasion,/ Growing in my dreams./ I will grow to the occasion,/ Rising in my dreams./ I will follow my dreams to the mountaintop/ Star of fashion, of science, beautiful girl you cannot stop./ I can see into the future and it's gonna be stressful/ But I will rise to the occasion: I'm going to be successful!"

Petra said when she grows up she would like to be either a fashion designer, lawyer, scientist or poet.

She found the two-and-a-half-hour bus trip from **New York** City to South Hadley worthwhile.

"It's better than the city because there is not a lot of noise," Petra said of South Hadley. "It's calmer and it's so much more peaceful and nonviolent."

Thomas R. Willits, who teaches song writing and vocal technique at the **local** school, started the program last year with his friend Daniel J. Roberts, who teaches **poetry** at the Harlem school.

"We were looking to create a different kind of collaboration that would provide some meaningful artistic lessons and give the **kids** from both schools some insight into their fellow students' lives and experiences," Willits said.

Roberts said he teaches his students works by poets like Shakespeare and Dylan Thomas that would ordinarily be taken up the first year of college. He said his school has the lowest test scores in the city when it comes to English and grammar.

"It is an uphill battle, but we intend to win it," Roberts said.

Seventh-graders Julia F. Alpern and Robin Sillars said it was not hard to set Petra's poem to music as they had already written a lot of songs. The two seventh-graders are both 13 and live in Northampton.

Sillars said they chose to set Petra's song to music because it "was almost telling the story of a girl's life."

Students from Pioneer Valley Performing Arts Charter Public School in South Hadley perform a poem written by students at Public School 101 in **New York** City that they put to music. The event was part of the Music and **Poetry** Synchronized Program.

Students from Harlem and South Hadley sing a few songs together.