**Getting to know crows; Boys & Girls Club of Lawrence hosts art and writing program around annual visit**

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A teen writing leader from the crow program read his poem to the room at the Boys & Girls Club of Lawrence, telling families he's a collector of experiences, especially firsts.

John Omosefe, a senior at Central Catholic High School, said he collects hope, joy and stories, including those he has heard his parents tell of their journey to America to build better lives. "For, like the crows, I collect things that gleam bright and shine light out into the world," Omosefe said. "Because it is these things, these memories, stories and smiles that catch my eye ...." An eye-catching spectacle of crows, which gather by the tens of thousands for their winter roost in Lawrence, evoke a range of emotions in different folks — from fear to fondness. Just as people do.

The aim of the club's art and writing program — led by art therapists with LA (Lawrence Arts) House and writers with the Andover Bread Loaf Program through Phillips Academy — was to enlarge Lawrence children's perspectives of the birds and themselves. The vehicle was projects that contemplate unique qualities that crows — and people — possess.

Next, on this winter's night, Feb. 28, kids and a few moms followed Omosefe's lead, making a line at the mic to read what they had written about themselves and what they collect or would collect. A girl with red hair named Kennedy was too shy to read what she had written, but she stood by Lawrence High School junior and writing leader Kaylee Sostre as she read Kennedy's words.

“I collect love and throw away hate," Sostre read. "I collect hope for other people because they might need it." Another girl, with a high voice, said if she collected anything, it would be toys and art and rocks because they have different colors." A boy said he collected coins because he likes money.

Mom Sandy Gabin said she does not collect anything now. "If I was given the opportunity, I would collect trash, not for me, but for everybody," she said. "I want my city to be clean for everybody."

The gathering in the big education room upstairs, called Family Bread Loaf Literacy Night, showcased the crow art and writing that 17 club members, ages 7 to 11, had done over the four recent Fridays in January and February.  It also shined a light on writing they had done earlier this night as children and parents sat together at their tables, tapping pencils or in silence as they thought about the ways in which they are unique and what they like to collect or would like to collect.

The children's program sprang as a creative response to the Essex Art Center's winter art exhibit celebrating the Lawrence crow roost, said Craig Gibson, who regularly photographs the birds with his Crow Patrol group. The kids' art projects "opened up a space where they viewed their city as a home for all of the humans and creatures that live and pass through the city," Gibson said.

Gibson, a Roman Catholic chaplain at Lawrence General Hospital, is fascinated by the arrival each winter to Lawrence of American and Fish crows. They sleep together at night in a line of trees along the Merrimack River by the Duck Bridge. Come morning, they fan out in all directions, traveling a 50-mile or so radius of the city. Ornithologists do not know why crows roost in such numbers in urban centers. Some experts speculate the intelligent birds communicate information on where they have found food, or that they sleep in large numbers near light sources as a precaution against predators or that they are drawn to warmth radiated in urban cores.

Over the earlier sessions, the children had been guided by writing leaders, also including Lawrence High junior Maribella Ortiz, and LA House art therapists Issa Van Dyk and Fernanda Lopez. Activities included art, writing and talks on how the birds share many social characteristics with humans.

The kids' crow art decorated the education room. Feathery crows sculpted from cardboard and wire hung from the ceiling. Framed crow drawings were displayed on tables and walls.  A white paper border stamped with crow imprints stretched above the windows.

Lopez said in a later interview that she and other program leaders presented children the crows as an extended metaphor for community and migration — a look at the city from a bird's view. Crows are smart, she said. They recognize faces and share strategies with fellow crows to protect them from those who would do them harm, Lopez said.

The idea of thousands of perched birds communicating at nightfall was chilling to some people and warming to others at the family literacy event.

Count mom Amaryllis Torres among those who are warmed by the crows' presence. "I love seeing them," she said, sitting at a table with her son, 10, and daughter, 6. "I live near the river and I see how they get all together, and I feel like family should be like that — united and together. That is what we are doing now." Her son, Yadiel Gierbolini, drew crows on white paper as his mom talked. She said the club program helped him express himself and become more social.

It was a powerful sight, seeing parents and children writing and talking about their lives at tables throughout the room, Andover Bread Loaf director Lou Bernieri said in an interview.

After the crow program's second class, on Feb. 1, several children and adults got a mighty fortuitous surprise, said Jarad Harris, assistant director of education at the Boys & Girls Club.

Over at the windows in the education room, someone saw that a few thousand of the black birds were perched right there in two big trees beyond the framed glass and hollered, "There are the crows!” Children charged the windows, pressed close and, whooosh, the birds lifted from the branches and flew into the sky, said Harris. lifting his arms and widening his eyes.

It was astonishing. A memory forged — for kids and, who knows, maybe crows.