

MIETRO

A Creative Teenager Mourned, Celebrated

Escaping Violence Was Play's Theme

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Tuesday, May 22, 2007; Page B03

Edwin B. Ventura, a senior at Bell Multicultural High School, thought so much about escaping the violence of his Northwest Washington neighborhood that he wrote a play about it.

Ventura's play, "Moving Out," has a scene in which a character is shot by a masked robber. He survives, and the family moves on to a safer place.

Ventura wasn't as fortunate.

The 18-year-old was shot and killed April 22 while standing with friends near Columbia Road and Sherman Avenue NW in Columbia Heights.

Last night, at the Busboys and Poets restaurant, about 10 blocks from where Ventura was shot, actors -- including a few of Bell's classmates -- performed his play and recited poetry that had inspired the teenager.

The tribute was organized by the Young Playwrights' Theater, which sponsors a program at Bell to teach playwriting to 11th-graders.

Violence and its effect on family life were recurring themes in Ventura's writing, although he seemed to express optimism that he would not be ensnared by it.

In a college application essay that was read aloud last night, he wrote about a cousin who lived with Ventura's family. The cousin had been shot and later was sought by police as a suspect in a murder. Ventura witnessed his mother's anguish over the situation and vowed not to emulate his cousin.

"Even though I grew up in a bad neighborhood, I still grew up knowing what is right and wrong," he wrote in the essay. "I always tried to make good decisions in life -- like trying not to get into drugs or gangs."

The teenager's view of Columbia Heights as a "bad" neighborhood and a place to escape was a point of reflection for several members of the audience, including D.C. Council member Jim Graham (D-Ward 1), who represents the area.

Graham said later that gang activity among Latino youths in the neighborhood is "below the radar" for most residents until a violent incident on a city street puts them in harm's way.

Marina Iraheta, a Bell classmate of Ventura's who at-



Xiomara Lopez of Bell Multicultural High breaks into tears as she reads a poem written for slain student Edwin Ventura. With her is Wendy Nogales. (Photos By Lois Raimondo -- The Washington Post)

tended last night's performance, said she is concerned about gang activity and violence in Columbia Heights.

"It has calmed down, but it's still out there," Iraheta said.

Ventura seemed almost prescient in his writings. In "Moving Out," he wrote about a family that is trying to leave a neighborhood beset by gunfire and other violence. Although he set the play in the Bronx, Patrick Torres, Ventura's playwriting teacher, said the teenager was really writing about his own experience.

Just hours before he was killed, Ventura and his family had visited a house they planned to buy in the Maryland suburbs. Members of the family thought the neighborhood was safer than the 1400 block of Harvard Street NW, where they live, and the larger space would allow Ventura to live with his 4-month-old baby and her mother.

In the play, the children are afraid to spend time outside their apartment because of random violence. The parents, Joe and Jenny, take on extra work to save money to buy a house in Florida.

In one scene, Jenny asks her husband: "Do you think we are going to get out of this neighborhood before something worse happens?"

They don't. But Joe survives being shot by a masked gunman in a robbery. By the end of the play, the family is looking forward to sunny Florida and a trip to Disney World.

Ventura was shot by masked gunmen, witnesses told police.

Police have not made an arrest in the slaying, Graham said.