

## **Fighting Back with Words: SHARP Poetry Slam Helps Raise Awareness about Sexual Assault**

By: Jasmyne Douglas, The C3T Wire

The lights of the auditorium dimmed as the emcee instructed the audience to settle down. The first contestant made his way toward the stage, positioning himself behind the podium. He cleared his throat and began reciting *Changes*, a poem dedicated to his daughter. Nodding along to the ebb and flow of his intricately arranged words, the members of the audience showed their approval by snapping their fingers at the conclusion of his performance.

With topics ranging from prevention and investigation to consent and advocacy, the Sexual Harassment/Assault Response and Prevention (SHARP) Slam Poetry contest hosted by the Army Test and Evaluation Command (ATEC) gave contestants a platform to raise awareness about sexual assault and harassment.

“The overall response has been very positive,” SHARP Program Manager Dina Mabry said. “Some didn’t realize how powerful and how impactful sexual harassment and sexual assault is and how it can affect an individual. They really do not see it when they’re sitting in a classroom environment; it’s different when you bring it to life.”

The winner of the contest, Sylvia Core, drew inspiration for her poem, *Now I Sit and Wonder*, from the personal experiences of people whom she knows as well as her own.

“I woke up one morning, maybe about two weeks ago, and the Lord put it on my heart, to be honest, and I went and wrote it in 30 minutes,” Core said. “It was just something that was put on my heart to say.”

The contest ran concurrently with Denim Day, a day used to raise awareness about sexual assault and consent. Third place recipient Larry O’Neal relied on this cause for his poem, *Just Because She Wore Tight Jeans*.

“I looked at the history of why we do what we do here,” O’Neal said. “I realized that it was so important for that story to be told and I told that story through my work.”

The Denim Day campaign began in 1998 after the Italian Supreme Court overturned the rape conviction of a driving instructor who sexually assaulted a 17-year-old girl during her first driving lesson. The judge released a statement saying, “Because the victim wore very, very tight jeans, she had to help him remove them. And by removing the jeans, it was no longer rape, but consensual sex.”

Angered by the ruling, the women of the Italian Parliament protested by wearing denim jeans to

work. The display of solidarity motivated groups around the world to don denim jeans in protest of destructive attitudes about sexual assault, catapulting Denim Day to an international stage. Core believes events like these are effective in helping survivors of sexual assault heal because it gives them a chance to express themselves.

“It gives you a chance to put it down on paper, the things that you may not say to anyone in particular, but it helps with the healing to at least put your thoughts and feelings into words and journal it,” Core said. “It gives people a chance to know that they are not alone. That there are many, many stories out there and maybe it will inspire someone else next time to be able to open up about their story.”