

# **Inspired by Langston Hughes: Poetic-themed restaurant ‘Busboys and Poets’ acts as a cultural hotspot in Hyattsville community**

By: Matthew Shea

From the countless books that grace the shelves, to the paintings and murals overlooking the main space, and even “The Howard Zinn Room”, Busboys and Poets has created a place that gives guests and employees an immersive and valuable experience in the world of art, politics, music and much more.

Established in 2005, Busboys and Poets is considered to be more than a restaurant, but rather a space that inspires social change and acts as a center for creativity within the community.

“We have quotes from Langston Hughes around the restaurant. We have books from Duke Ellington with jazz to the Harlem Renaissance to current issues and Nelson Mandela. We definitely live up to the standard of being a cultural hub,” said John Davis, a server who began working at Busboys and Poets earlier this year.



The nature of the ambience that surrounds Busboys and Poets revolves around artists and activists, both well-known and local. But that connection to art goes deeper than just the decor.

“We get a lot of inspiration from not only poetry, but from writing as well that we incorporate in the business, whether it’s coming up with names for cocktails or naming spaces in the restaurant after poets or activists in the community,” said Davila.



As a unique place in the community, many people are drawn to the restaurant, and with the University of Maryland close by, many students have taken notice.

“It’s a very literary themed place to eat which is interesting,” said Andrew Laub, a sophomore student at the University of Maryland. “I had never seen that before. It didn’t feel like an actual restaurant.”

While the main theme that guides the atmosphere at Busboys and Poets is art and culture, there is a primary focus on Langston Hughes, who the restaurant is named after.

“He was a writer, an activist and a civil leader that started out as a busboy at a hotel in DC. He knew one of the local writers, or about a local writer, and was coming to clean up the table when he asked the writer if he could leave him a piece of work. Lucky enough for him, the next day he was published as the busboy poet, so that’s kind of where we got our name from,” said John Davila, a general manager who is entering his eighth year with the restaurant.

Hughes is not just an inspiration for the restaurant itself, but it is his story that resonates with the staff, many of whom have similar goals and are heavily involved in some form of art outside of their job, much like Hughes was.

“Someone as great as Langston Hughes, a renowned writer and poet started out as a busboy. A lot of the staff here have dreams and aspirations. With Langston Hughes being our example, it definitely pushes us to push for our aspirations, our desires and as far as we can,” said Davis.

In fact, staff members are not only involved in art, but they are even able to use Busboys and Poets as a platform to get discovered by people in the community.

“They never discourage us from pushing our own work. Even in the hiring they hire a lot of artists and musicians. Up front you see all those business cards; you see all the flyers. We promote within the community,” said Davis.

The staff at Busboys and Poets not only have a platform for their own work, but they are also connected to those around them, living by what they call a “tribe mentality”, meaning that everyone sticks together, and the environment is always welcoming.

“We are a tribe. They adopt this idea of family as soon as you’re staff,” said Davis. “We provide a safe space for everyone. No matter your ideology on certain things, everyone is accepted here. My favorite part is being able to connect with other artists and musicians. It’s definitely a tribe.”

But Busboys and Poets is not just a valuable tool for staff, it also plays a vital role in the Hyattsville community.

“I think Busboys and Poets is a big neighborhood staple...It definitely gives the community a nice place, a safe place, to go and grow, and inspire them. Busboys and Poets is changing and inspiring people to be creative, to be themselves, and to love one another,” said Davila.

The outreach goes even further than the direct Hyattsville community, as college students nearby often come with their family, or simply go with friends to get a taste of the art and culture.

“It’s a great atmosphere for college kids to go and get a bite to eat. I think it’s an important part of the college town,” said Laub.



In addition to a lengthy library of books, Busboys and Poets offers many cultural events. This allows customers to have valuable and life-changing experiences beyond just eating food, such as getting to connect with artists and learning more about their community and the world around them. In some cases, guests even have the chance to meet influential figures in art and activism.

“We have private rooms named after both Angela Davis and Nikki Giovanni. Both of them were poets and activists. We had a full store event featuring them and hundreds of people lined up just to have a peek at them just for that one moment,” said Davila. “To see that for a lot of people that they are their heroes, it was really eye-opening.”

A landmark for college students and community members alike, Busboys and Poets continues to serve as an establishment that strives for social change and acts as a home for artistic creativity and expression for all people. Whether it's the food, books, cultural events, or perhaps something else, customers are educated and guided through a cultural experience not to be forgotten anytime soon.