Learning to 'unlearn'

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Tulane senior and spoken word artist Mwende Katwiwa (aka FreeQuency) captivates the audience at TEDxTU. (Photos by Cheryl Gerber)

Everyone knows that the purpose for young men and women going off to college is to learn. On Tuesday night (Nov. 12), however, for a couple of hours, just the opposite held true.

"Unlearning" was the subject of the fourth annual student-organized TEDxTU conference in Dixon Hall on the Tulane University uptown campus.

The event featured nine speakers, four of whom were Tulane faculty or students, as well as three prerecorded TED talks. Each speaker presented on how unlearning applies to his or her life, work and worldview, drawing on their very diverse backgrounds, experiences and expertise to lend a unique perspective.

In its broadest sense, unlearning is characterized as the process by which one begins to reexamine and reevaluate notions he or she has accepted as fact for years.

Among the most poignant moments of the evening involved Tulane senior and spoken word artist, Mwende Katwiwa (aka FreeQuency).

Political science professor Sally Kenney, left, enjoys the presentations. The executive director of the Newcomb College Institute, she also spoke at the event.

Her parents, immigrants from Kenya, understood the importance of education and made certain that Katwiwa attended reputable schools in America. At the age of 18, however, she used her gap year between high school and college to volunteer at New Orleans' John McDonogh High School through City Year-New Orleans, an affiliate of AmeriCorps.

It was then, she said, that she realized not all parents play as active a role in ensuring their children's education and future, and she described the hopelessness she witnessed at that school. FreeQuency then shared a powerful and searing piece of slam poetry entitled "For John Mac," the name by which she and her fellow volunteers referred to John McDonogh High, and received the loudest applause of the night.

TED, which stands for "Technology, Entertainment, Design," is a nonprofit that holds lectures around the world focused on what the organization considers "ideas worth spreading," which is TED's slogan. The "x" identifies the TED event as organized by Tulane independently of TED.

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