

“Poetry makes me look at everything in the world from a different perspective. It lets my brain open and lets my imagination grow.” – Ben, 4<sup>th</sup> grade

## ROMANCING THE WORD:

### TOP POETS WORK THEIR MAGIC IN SKAGIT SCHOOLS

Anyone who thinks of poetry as quaint, as quiet, as something flat on a page has never witnessed a word artist work a classroom into a literary frenzy. That feat takes only minutes for irrepressible Irish poet Tony Curtis, who arrives in a third grade Anacortes classroom with

a strumming guitar and wicked grin, warning children he is a wee bit “mad.”

Within seconds, words are flying, images bouncing off walls. “Everybody here knows the earth is round, right? It makes you a bit dizzy, right?” he begins, working the room at a fast-forward pace. He draws a picture of a one-haired newborn on the board. “Did you know poets can talk to babies...and trees...and flowers.

“Me, I like best to talk to babies. They have great stories to tell!”

He mesmerizes the children with his humor, lilting voice, swinging arms, and non-stop word play, challenging them to identify the five best words in the world, as determined by his own unscientific survey of 6,000 kids. “Penguin? Vacation? Sleep?” they ask.

“No... No.”

“Love?”

“In the top five, with bubbles.”

Once the whole room is squirming, with hands waving like fronds, he tells the rest: smile’s number four, sausage is number three, noodles is number two and – ta-da! -- bellybutton takes first place.

Bellybutton? The class explodes in giggles. What magic and power words have!

Curtis and other top poets from around the globe have become familiar faces in Skagit County classrooms over the past decade, sharing their love of language with more than 10,000 students through the Skagit River Poetry Project. Their names read like a who’s who of contemporary poetry: Lorraine Ferra, Elizabeth Austen, Billy Collins, and Kurtis Lamkin, who comes calling with a 21-string West African kora, plucking, pulling students into a lively groove, laying luscious lines atop the music:

*ol men sittin in their lincoln  
tastin and talkin and talkin and tastin  
young boys on the corner  
milkin a yak yak wild hands baggy pants*

The Skagit River Poetry Project artists help teachers develop instructional methods and lesson plans, work one-on-one with students from elementary to college level in week-long residencies, lead group discussions, and share the accumulated knowledge of lifetimes spent romancing the word.

It’s a program with profound impact.

“The poets bring the written word to life,” says Anacortes High School English teacher Janet Clark. “The students are never the same. They want more – the poets leave them hungry for more.”

On a sunny spring day in Clark’s classroom, one teenager writes of stones she picks from the soles of bare feet. She writes of the single rock, on the windowsill, high up where children’s hands cannot grab it. Washington State poet laureate Sam Green is visibly moved by the images. He calls this a “poem of coming to terms” and compliments the student on her openness.

“Those who are willing to be vulnerable move among mystery,” Green tells the Anacortes High School English class, citing an ancient Sufi saying.

The students nod. Vulnerability. Mystery. This poetry digs deep, hits hard.

Students have always been at the core of the Poetry-in-the-Schools project, launched in 1998 by organizers of the Skagit River Poetry Festival. The goal is to promote high literacy standards with poetry as the vehicle. The results can be breath-taking.

Green emits “Wows!” and “Whews!” as the high-school English students read the poems he has assigned them -- journey poems that explore figurative language and sensory imagery within a formal structure.

Green shakes his head in wonder as images swirl up from pages under the room’s fluorescent lights: students write of greasy tears, a glittered tutu, a grandmother with “warm hugs that are ice cold,” the clump-clump of shoes on a dusty stairway, a smell of weedy detritus that suggests dead flowers and slugs.

The poet, between mini-lessons on Keats and Joyce and Heaney, picks provocative phrases from the student poems and writes them on the board in a beautiful calligraphic hand -- “rogue snowflake,” “sliver of herself.” Calligraphy, he says, makes him look at words in a new way.

His letters loop and dive, circle and curl, the hood of an “S” dipping like a swan’s head. He takes his time. “The act of making letters is sacred,” he tells the students. “It’s not something I ever take lightly.”

Students begin drawing their own calligraphic letters as he talks. Their hands move slowly. They’ve seen the care given a single letter. They’ve seen the attention paid a single word.

They’ve witnessed the passion for a craft that puts those words together.

They’ve, once again, experienced the power of poetry.

“We are not the same when we finish writing a poem as when we begin,” the gentle poet from Waldron Island tells the class. “Every poem I write, I am willing to be moved, I am willing to be different at the finish.”

The Poetry-in-the-Schools project is both magical interaction and logistical challenge. In one school year alone, poets led residencies in 56 K-12 classrooms and 20 college classrooms. The program requires intense organization, hours of volunteer time, and consistent funding.

This school year has been especially challenging, with a shrinking economy and school districts cutting back on money for the arts. Yet organizers are adamant that this remarkable program must continue.

Skagit River Poetry Festival director Molly McNulty cites the words of poet Lucille Clifton: 'Poems come out of wonder, not out of knowing.'

Says McNulty: "These master poets change students' lives when they enter our area classrooms. They help students see inside themselves, help them find wonder in the world around them, lead them in the joy of discovering all that poetry makes possible."

"Everyone on the Skagit River Poetry Project Board is committed to doing whatever it takes to make sure these extraordinary interactions continue."