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A professor's love affair with poetry

■ From rubbing elbows with poetry guru Allen Ginsberg to helping students find their muse, Robert Long has covered the poetry board

By Sarah Bartlett
for the Emerald

University creative writing professor Robert Long sat behind his cluttered desk, in an office covered with black and white photos of family, Einstein and alligators. He wore a jumble of second-hand clothing, a floppy baseball cap and a knowing smile.

"The only interest in a story like mine is what makes a poet not just an odd person, but an odd, isolated player with words," Long said.

Sitting comfortably in his office in Columbia Hall, Long admitted that he never expected that he would become a liberal poetry

professor — a far cry from where he began his life.

"My whole life has been about tolerance, inclusiveness, and not judging people based on differences," he said. "That way I've participated in the main story of my generation."

Long's story began in Wilmington, N.C., where he was raised in a community that thrived on discriminating against Jews, homosexuals and blacks.

"That was the air I breathed," Long said. Something in him rebelled as he was exposed to music groups who addressed social issues.

"I grew some of the ethical dimensions of my heart by listening to songs that had to do with justice and injustice," he said.

Long hadn't considered poetry as an outlet until a friend brought some to class one day.

"One of my friends, a girl I liked, brought in a poet or two that she was reading. We started sitting together and reading poems," Long said.

Her influence changed the

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Robert Long
professor, creative writing

course of his life.

"She came in and she said, 'Look, the Duke-Carolina basketball game is coming up. Let's

make a bet. If Duke wins, I'll write you five poems. If Carolina wins, you have to write me five poems.' Carolina won. I started writing poems at [age] fifteen. They didn't make her fall in love with me, but writing them made me fall in love with poetry," Long said.

While studying at Davidson College during the Vietnam War, Long heard that Allen Ginsberg was visiting his school, and that he wanted a student to play the guitar for him. Long jumped at the chance.

Ginsberg held a free-form political discussion and singing session while sitting on the carpet of the student union.

"He sat cross-legged and extemporized about the ills and injustices of American society. About us being a nation of petro-chemical junkies," Long recalled.

Later in the evening, Long played at Ginsberg's formal reading.

"What I learned as a singer and as a young poet from that meeting with a gay, Jewish poet affected the way I've behaved in my life since then," he said.

During college, Long participated in several anti-Vietnam rallies in North Carolina.

"When President Nixon came to North Carolina, I was in the contingent of students that went to hold up signs that said 'Get out of Vietnam, get out of North Carolina.'"

One day in a poetry workshop, the Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Gwendoline Brooks stopped into his class, and Long read one of his poems out loud for her. She told him that he would be a great writer.

"I can't say enough about how being recognized even slightly by a Jewish poet and a black female poet helped complete the driving out of the part of me that was part of the racist status quo," Long said.

Long graduated from Davidson College and earned a master's degree in creative writing in 1983. After working on the East Coast for years, he moved to Oregon and began to teach at the University of Oregon.

His first book, "The Power To Die" was well-received by the literary community.

"Robert Hill Long's poems have the feel of land and history seen in moments of personal definition, seen through the lens of a family," said poet Robert Morgan.

Long has published several books since then, including "The Work Of The Bow."

It isn't only published poets who appreciate Long and his work.

"Never in my writing career have I met any teacher so willing to spend a good deal of time with a student poem. After a long discussion, the student goes away from a session with Robert excited to rework the poem and make it the best it can be," said poetry student Bryan Gates.

Long's poetry workshops are known for a focus on social and political issues, where he shows students that poetry isn't just an emotional outlet.

"Writing social and political poems has given me a different perspective on life," said student Kira Diner.

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