

## people



The 29th Street Writers have been writing, learning, supporting and critiquing each other's work for 20 years.



## This Is the Welcome

29th Street Writers release spoken word CD

by Pat Young

The 29th Street Writers recently released a spoken word CD titled *This Is the Welcome*. It's more than just a collection of their original poetry and prose. It's an opportunity to "spotlight and highlight some of the good writers we have here in Portland," says Renee LaChance, who helped the producer, Shirley Kishiyama, in a consulting and advisory role. "I'm hoping the CD will get some national attention and that the works of these women will be appreciated."

The 29th Street Writers have been meeting in various configurations for 20 years. While the membership has changed a bit through the years, one thing remains constant: a commitment to writing. It's not a drop-in group. These women are committed to writing, learning, supporting and critiquing each other's work. They have public readings once a year, and this CD grew out of their 2004 reading.

Amy Schutzer lays claim to being the longest-running member of the group. Not the oldest, she adds with a laugh, just the one who has been around for the longest. The group gave her the self-confidence to take herself seriously as a writer. "I

really didn't have that until I started working with the group," she says, "and saw around the table women who were exploring themselves as creative people, and that really meant so much to me. It gave me a way into taking myself seriously as a writer, and over the years it has evolved into helping me hone my craft."

Ila Suzanne also appreciates the support that the group gives her. "Writing is isolating by nature," she says. The group provides her with a place to share her work. "We spark each other and keep each other going around our writing."

Suzanne's poems have appeared in anthologies, yet working on the CD was a new experience. It was the first time she had ever been recorded. While she considers herself to be a pretty good reader, she says she read one of her poems six or seven times before getting it just right for the CD. And she had no problems doing that, thanks to Barbara Bernstein's expertise in sound engineering. "I sort of turned myself over to Barbara and Shirley. They were listening with professional ears, so that was an interesting experience," she says. "I'm proud to be part of a project that I think is of quality."

Naomi Morena has a strong background and

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—Ila Suzanne

long history in women's music, so she had seen the inside of a recording studio many times before. But this time it was different, for she had her son with her. Her partner gave birth to him shortly before the CD was produced. Trying to fit the recording session into her schedule—being a new mom as well as her regular work for Multnomah County—was quite the challenge. But she did it, reading a selection from her biography.

Morena has been writing ever since she was a kid. "I find that I have drawers and drawers of things that I start to write and never finish, and being invited to be part of the writers group gave me focus. It gave me something to hold on to so I could discipline myself to start finishing some of these pieces and not just let them lay around," she says.

The group has also been an inspiration to her. Whenever she hears the other members of the


group read, "it puts me in this other place of my being where my spirit goes that is just a lot lighter and not so contained or defined by what I am supposed to do in my workday life," says Morena, a parole and probation officer. "It is a role that doesn't have as many boundaries and there is a lot more freedom to think outside the box, so it has meant a lot to me especially because I stopped doing music professionally."

One thing Morena learned from the group is that she missed the performance aspect of being a musician. "Writers don't generally get to perform," she notes.

There is a difference between writing and then reading what you have written. For example, some poets don't read well, even though they write great poetry. Some poetry is better not read and belongs on the page.

While being a writer and not a recording artist is an important distinction for Ellen Goldberg, she notes that poetry for her is something that has always had an oral tradition. She started reading political poetry during the early 1970s. "The women's movement, the political left, the anti-war movement all had a group of people who were cultural workers as well as political workers," she says. "We blended our art with our politics, and so it was something usually shared out loud."

With this new CD, she says: "It's neat for people to get a chance to hear the writers' voices, to hear how they are hearing in their own heads, because that is sometimes different than it looks on the page. I think that all good writing is something that we hear in our head, or we even say it out loud as we write it and so the music of it—the sound of it, the meter of it, all of that—is something that you don't necessarily get unless it is read out loud."

Schutzer puts in a lot of work before a reading. "The challenge for me for this reading was I wanted to recite one of the poems and not have my safety net of having the poem in front of me. And that was the first time I have done that in public," she says. "It was such a challenge just to have that confidence. It really pushed me, and it went off fine." 

THIS IS THE WELCOME is available at Powell's Books, In Other Words, Broadway Books, Annie Bloom's Books, Looking Glass Bookstore, Music Millennium and CDBaby.com.

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