

Poetic justice

BY DEVAN SCHWARTZ
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Street poets break down stereotypes and prejudice with the power of words

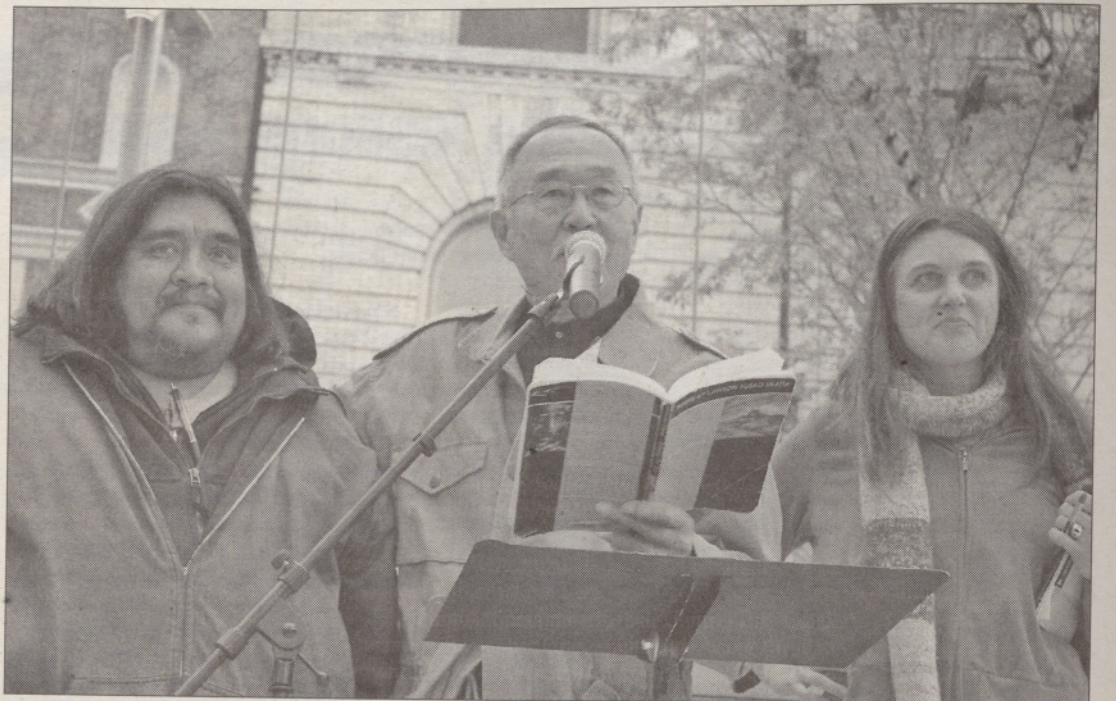
The audience is quiet. Lights rise slowly, backlighting the stage. There are silhouettes of men and women seated there. A woman steps to a stage-right podium, a man to another.

She recites a poem, the proscenium illuminated by a burnt orange filter; he begins to read his own. One after another, like a revolving door, the poets share original work. Their words puncture the audience's egos, drawing us into their worlds. Some are nervous reading aloud. Others are seasoned performers who wait for laughter, the sinking in of emotion.

We are occupying the Sellwood Masonic Temple in Southeast Portland. The event, co-produced by Lunacy Stageworks and Street Roots, brings to life some of the most affecting voices of local homeless and street writers.

In a way, it's an awakening to hear the poetry, which transcends the basic needs of food, shelter and employment so often paramount to survival. The poets' desires for basic needs certainly come out in the writing, though an array of content inhabits the event's atmosphere: from salient political issues (sit-lie ordinance, City of Portland's camping ban), to drug addiction and love affairs that withered on the vine. There's desperation to the words, resigned humor, an overt hopefulness. Their poems are as simple and complex as the human spirit itself.

"Poetry breaks through classes," says



Ann Singer, fundraiser and special events coordinator for Lunacy Stageworks. "It can come from anywhere. And if you have that talent you can break through class boundaries. Audiences say 'that's a great poet; that's a great writer.'"

Singer contacted Street Roots and the non-profit organization Write Around Portland to find this eventual group of poets. Five weeks were spent rehearsing and assembling slides and musical accompaniment. Singer notes how "the poets wanted people to really understand who they were, that they're a strong community of people not to be pitied, that it's something that's happened to them that could happen to anyone."

Anyone experiencing homelessness, whether for a single night or for multiple years, gains particular perspectives. These insights are as indelible and important as they are uncommonly heard within the general public, where narratives of drug or alcohol abuse or laziness often pervade, no matter how flimsy or misunderstood their evidence. The poetry serves to qualify and

rebut such judgments: yes, such instances occur and, no, this confirms nothing beyond the difficult times of the Great Recession.

Given high levels of adversity, Portland's homeless and marginalized poets also offer a surprising amount of levity. "You have to eventually find humor in that situation (homelessness), in order to survive it," says Ann Singer.

These sentiments are echoed by Leo Rhodes, a Street Roots vendor and one of the poets who read at the "Stories: From the Streets" performance in Sellwood.

"When a homeless person tries to write or speak it often comes out angry," he says. "I'm reminded every time I want to write to be nice; I have to be for people to understand. It's hard for homeless people to express themselves in a nice way."

Rhodes grew up on the Gila River Indian Reservation in Arizona. He spent years as a homeless organizer and advocate in Seattle before moving to Portland, poetry notebooks in tow. While taking an outreach

Leo Rhodes, left, with Oregon Poet Laureate Emeritus Lawson Inada, center, and Kaia Sand at the Poetry Excursions event in June. Rhodes, who is homeless, went on to share the stage again with Inada at the Japanese American Historical Plaza rededication ceremony.

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 **Saturday WRITE!**
April 30, 2011

Two-hour FREE community writing workshops!

Journals, pens and light snacks will be provided. *One workshop per person and pre-registration is required. To register: Call 503.796.9224.*

1 Dexter McCarty Middle School, 10am-Noon, 1400 SE 5th St, Gresham	4 East Portland Community Center, 2-4pm, Multipurpose Room #2, 740 SE 106th Ave, Portland
2 Mercy Corps Action Center, 10am-Noon, 45 SW Ankeny St, Portland	5 Café au Play, 10am-Noon, 5633 SE Division, Portland
3 Eastminster Presbyterian Church, 10am-Noon, 12505 NE Halsey, Portland	

Go to writearound.org or call 503.796.9224 for more info

Saturday WRITE! is made possible with support from the Multnomah County Cultural Coalition and the Oregon Cultural Trust.


Workshops are ADA-accessible. Call 503.796.9224 if you need specific accommodations.




Join us for a **MARCH & RALLY** on May 1st!

MAY DAY 2011

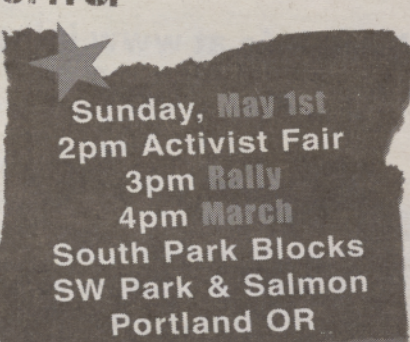
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Sunday, May 1st
2pm Activist Fair
3pm Rally
4pm March
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We tip our mugs to Coffee Bean International for donating coffee to Street Roots and keeping our vendors warm in the morning!

Thank you!