

## POETRY, from page 8

writing class with Portland poets Kaia Sand and Lynn Grannan, he wrote a draft of a soon-to-be-important work of art. This quickly-composed poem put him onstage with Oregon's former poet-laureate Lawson Inada; Inada wrote a poem about a Japanese internment camp situated on Rhodes' reservation. The two men read together at 2010's Japanese American Historical Plaza Rededication ceremony.

*I didn't know their names or faces  
I really didn't know too much of their history  
All I've seen was slabs of concrete in the ground  
Foundations I was told for people long ago.*

— Leo Rhodes

Leo Rhodes writes about events outside of himself as well as those personal to him. He does so, he says, in order to foster greater communication between people, to show how we all share more than we think. "We need to start hugging each other again. No matter what anyone's monetary status is. With writing, people see that we are all the same. People come up to me and say 'I have those problems too, only I have a house.'"

Many of Portland's street writers mention how writing allows them to express things that would otherwise remain unvoiced and left to fester. Michael Vance is a good example of this. Though not homeless, he's spent many nights in treatment centers, shelters and on couches. Having previously published writing in Street Roots, an experience he counts among the most important in his life, he now works at a packing plant on Hayden Island.

I met with Vance in a Barnes and Noble coffee shop. The other patrons were noticeably uncomfortable, the veins on his shaved head tensing while he speaks about his writing, emotional turmoil, his addiction struggles. Occasionally Vance's Tourette's Syndrome kicks up in sharp wheezes, like a bull exhaling. Vance says his writing helps undo emotional blockages.

"When I write it's basically venting anger, sometimes at society, sometimes at life in general. I know I was stupid. I overdosed twice. When I'd been clean long enough I started writing."

*"All the joy and all the pain  
absorbed silently within steel structures  
look at those trackmarks  
so proud of them scars."*

— Michael Vance

Shirley is another poet whose content trends toward the personal. Her work emphasizes visceral powerlessness. Seated at Sisters of the Road Café in downtown Portland, Shirley wistfully watches the light rail trains pass by. Her coat is a vinyl impression of leather, the waves in her hair streaked a orange-blond, like a pop star at 50. Though periods of addiction and homelessness mark her life, once upon a time she had been stable and a homeowner. Shirley tells me how the man in her life had invited over a friend to stay with them. Then two friends. Then many. They abused drugs, she says, and forced substances on her as well.

"Before I knew it there were 20 to 25 people at any one time running around. They fed me just enough dope to keep me frustrated and kept my

mind going crazy. I found writing as a way to vent my rage rather than kill somebody. I was really close to committing homicide on these people. It helped me get the rage out."

It doesn't take a close, exegetic reading to sense Shirley's emotions, just empathy. Bitterness forms a salty exterior, a protective shell built up around her. But there is also a sweetness which manifests as we talk about the man she dates. "We're taking it slow," she says, hopeful he'll be the one, and hopeful she won't experience homelessness again.

*No peace of mind  
No quiet to embrace  
God does exist  
But so far from this place*

*Who are you? You sleep on the sidewalk  
In front of the building I live in  
There you are*

— Shirley

Shirley attends meetings at Central City Concern and is on the list for permanent housing through the Housing Authority of Portland. In addition to reading onstage, her poems were featured in Write Around Portland's Fall 2009 anthology, "More Than a Book," foreword by Dave Eggers. For her next project, Shirley hopes to write her own poetry collection — one about recovery, happiness and joy. "Writing," she says, "helps me find a voice within myself."

Sisters of the Road Café serves as a meeting point for many street writers, in organized writing workshops as well as informally. One of Portland's most vocal poet/activists works there in a cramped upstairs office. Julie McCurdy is a housing organizer and speaks with the pragmatic urgency of someone knowledgeable, first-hand, about homelessness. She sees her writing as part confessional and part as a shared voice for others in similar situations.

After a traumatic event, McCurdy became terrified of unfamiliar men. She tells me how Native American writer and activist John Trudell eventually inspired her, finally demonstrating a way to transform pain and trauma into creative self-expression.

"Before being unhoused I had no background in writing. Then I felt I had to write about the difficulties of women experiencing homelessness. My writing let me be heard in a place where I was invisible. I write as a form of therapy, just like every other writer. It felt like I mattered to someone. Writing is a go-though-you process. I vomit poetry. I write poetry on napkins. I don't write unless something moves me."

McCurdy speaks also of the empowerment of having one's writing read, especially for the homeless. Her own work has appeared in local publications, including the website poMotion, which she helped create. Love Letters from the Concrete Jungle is a CD McCurdy recorded of her poetry set to music.

*Somewhere along this bumpy road  
other peoples opinions lost their ability  
to define who I am  
and the rules that society lives by  
slipped away*

— Julie McCurdy

Portland is a convergence zone, a modest city with a high per-capita homeless population and a strong culture of non-profits and artists. The act of writing and art-creation are elevated to fundamentally important ones rather than ancillary concerns.

One such group is the Colored Pencils Art Collective, whose monthly art shows and open mics highlight visual art, writing, music and storytelling. The all-volunteer staff works closely with the artists, gaining trust and teasing out works that would otherwise never be shared. And though the Rose City has a reputation for a lack of diversity, this organization breaks the mold.

Nim Xuto, Colored Pencils' executive director and co-founder, gives a short list of their participants' cultural backgrounds: Bhutanese, Cambodian, West African, Mexican, Iraqi, Thai, Samoan, Palestinian, Burmese, Laotian, Togolese, Cameroonian, Chinese, Japanese, Brazilian, Native American, African-American, Indonesian-American, Indian, Nepalese.

"Music and art are within us, they are of our souls," Xuto says. "Art is a universal language. It doesn't come out in the conference room or over a coffee table. The stories that come through art and music touch our hearts. Portland should be proud that we'll grow into a city filled with diverse communities that can work as one."

"Writing and art and community building are vital," corroborates Robyn Steely. She is the executive director of the non-profit organization Write Around Portland. "We're complex people," says Steely. "We all have to create and express ourselves and make connections with other people to be fully human."

Since 1999, Write Around Portland has facilitated writing workshops, partnering with over 170 social service groups and more than 3,000 individuals. Steely explains how their classes are accessible and centrally-located, with transit passes provided to participants.

"We've worked with JOIN, Julie West House, Sisters of the Road, as well as Central City Concern — lots of folks who are homeless or who've been homeless and are transitioning to more stable housing situations."

Write Around Portland compiles writing from workshop participants into three yearly anthologies. The Spring 2011 anthology will be released at a May 26th event, the foreword written by Street Roots' executive director Israel Bayer, himself a poet.

The empathy inherent to writing and art brings people together, revealing differences as well as universal experiences. "Stories: From the Street" perhaps gave Portland's homeless and street writers their due, though it was just one event. The lights went down at the end of the night and everyone went home — those of us with homes of our own.

There are a number of responses one may have to fight. The first is self-congratulation, feeling good about yourself for going to an event or reading the work of homeless writers. Another is pity, thinking how awful it must be to live on the street. Then there is hopelessness, forgetting all the ways we can, and must, support the disadvantaged in our society. We have as much to learn about ourselves as we do about others. People are people, whether they're onstage, in the audience, inside the office building or crouched on the sidewalk.

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