

Talent at play in the classroom

Coastal Life

Story by MATT LOVE

A monthly student and teacher open mic is filling Astoria High School with music, poetry and creativity

“It’s a bit of a moment to show there’s more to you than everyone thinks,” said Astoria High School junior Evan Lemmy, about his recent inspired performance of an original rock song called “Just a Taste” at the campus’ open mic. “It’s also a chance to show what matters to you and that you’re not so apathetic,” he added.

Last year I started a monthly lunchtime open mic in my classroom at Astoria High School, and it quickly caught on. The idea was to create an intimate and informal space where students could perform music and poetry for their peers and teachers during school hours. For the inaugural event, I enticed (some might say “dragooned”) students into the lineup, slapped up a few posters, wrote some energetic announcements promoting the gig, lit up my classroom like an underground rock club, and then told students to spread the word.

They did. My room filled up, well past capacity, and a new campus tradition was born. On Friday, Oct. 30, we staged the first open mic of the 2015-16 school year, and it was bigger and better than ever with new acts and an Edgar Allen Poe impersonator reading a riff from “The Raven.” There was even free candy and cupcakes.

Astoria High School boasts some extremely talented young people, and several of them have become stalwarts at the open mic. Lemmy has shaken up the room with his stellar electric guitar and bass fretwork. Junior Nate Hawkins has entertained with his acoustic guitar playing and smooth soulful vocals.

Sophomore Lidija Sovulj has written and performed an original song on acoustic guitar for every event. Her plaintive “Blood and Bones” captivated the audience on Oct. 30. “I’m very emotional,” she said, “and when I play it allows me to express myself without actually having to tell anyone. That’s important to me.”

Junior Dylan Hauser-Schalk has wowed his peers with beatboxing, a form of making rhythmic sounds with your mouth. To him, “performing at the open mic is a big opportunity to show



Astoria High School sophomore Lidija Sovulj performs an original song on acoustic guitar at the Oct. 30 open mic at AHS.

my peers that I have something to offer and that I have a talent I am committed to.”

One of the thrills for me of holding the open mics is witnessing students sing, play music, or read a poem before an audience for the first time. To see them come alive as a fledgling performer and conquer stage fright in front of their peers is something wonderful to behold. Sometimes the experience becomes transcendent for the young person. I’ve seen it on their faces and heard it in

their voices. A lot of other people have seen it, too.

Over the years, I’ve started several open mic events at the schools where I’ve taught. Each one is a little different, but what distinguishes the one at Astoria High School is the enthusiastic and highly talented participation by my teaching colleagues.

Andrew Fick, Scott Cuthbert, Matt Pierce, Scott Perkins, Craig Randall, Jenni Newton, and



Submitted photo

Astoria High School junior Trevor Primmer performs at the Oct. 30 open mic.

Gordon Thomson are some of teachers who have got up on stage and performed. Students seem to get a kick out of watching their teachers do something creative that often flies in the face of a particular teacher’s usual teaching persona. I like to think adult participation in the open mic setting encourages young people to take more risks in showing their creative sides. It also helps build a special rapport between staff and students that makes for a fun vibe around campus.

As for myself performing at the open mic, I always begin the show with a pickup band of teachers and students playing (butchering) some classic three-chord rock song. I can’t play the guitar worth a lick, but that’s not the point. The point is getting up there and strumming the guitar with as much conviction as possible. “To keep on rocking in the free world,” as Neil Young so memorably put it. My opening shtick gets us all going and settled into the packed space. After my band finishes, the student performers take it from there, and the music and poetry often transport everyone in the audience to magical places.

To view the most recent performances from Astoria High School’s open mic, visit their YouTube channel called AHS Open Mic at <http://tinyurl.com/ahsopenmic>

The AHS open mic series could use a donation of a keyboard of some kind for students and teachers to use. Email Matt Love at nestuccaspitpress@gmail.com to help out.

Matt Love teaches at Astoria High School and is the author/editor of 14 books about Oregon, including "A Nice Piece of Astoria: A Narrative Guide" and "The Great Birthright: An Oregon Novel." They are available at coastal bookstores and through www.nestuccaspitpress.com