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2017 marks the 20th year of the FisherPoets Gathering in Astoria, and it shows no signs of slowing down. Not only does the festival bring together renowned fisherpoets and musicians from around the North Coast, it also welcomes talented fisherpoets from all points of the compass such as Alaska, California, Hawaii, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Idaho and British Columbia.

With its rise in prominence, it has garnered plenty of media attention, having been featured in media both national and international, including The New York Times, Smithsonian Magazine, the Wall Street Journal, NBC and the BBC. The U.S. Library of Congress has recognized the FisherPoets Gathering as a “Local Legacy” project, and the event has even spawned a genre, fisherpoetry.

Hobe Kytr, director at Salmon For All, was involved in documenting many of the stories from now-deceased fisherman when he was on staff at the Columbia River Maritime Museum. The resulting audio-visual program was a national award-winner from the American Association of State and Local History.

“It was the first real opportunity to get an inside look at the gillnet fishery,” he says.

Pretty heady stuff for an event whose original intention was largely to give far-flung friends a chance to gather in one spot.

In all, close to 100 participants are expected in 2017 — up from about 40 at the original 1998 gathering. “It speaks to the connection commercial fisherman have to their work and one another,” says event founder Jon Broderick.

### ‘Unique and relatable’

The festival program includes a wide variety of performances including original songs, essays, riddles and poems. Each piece is delivered by men and women determined to keep the oral tradition alive while illustrating the abiding love they feel for a life that can be at once heartbreaking and rewarding.

Above all, the Gathering is a chance for participants and audiences to enjoy the opportunity to connect and reflect as they listen to poetry.

Broderick says the closest parallel comes from Western cowboy culture, where ranch hands would gather in the bunkhouse after hours of long, hard work and swap stories.

“It’s a chance to bring kindred spirits together and tell stories about the work they love,” he says.

The idea of celebrating work is part of what draws people to attend the event, despite the majority of them never having set foot on a commercial fishing vessel.

“Their stories are human stories, set in an



PHOTO BY JOSHUA BESSEX

People watch video shot by Portland-based photographer Corey Arnold projected on a building during last year’s FisherPoets Gathering. Arnold will return this year.



PHOTO BY JOSHUA BESSEX

Jeff Stonehill, of Seattle, Washington, reads his poetry last year at the Fort George Lovell Showroom. This year he will perform around 9:30 p.m. Friday at the Voodoo Room and during the 8 p.m. set Saturday at Wet Dog Cafe.

environment that is familiar yet unfamiliar,” says Joanne Rideout, General Manager at Astoria’s KMUN Coast Community Radio. “Their stories are intriguing, unique and relatable, all at the same time.”

Stories heard at the FisherPoets Gathering can range from comedic to somber. There are graphic accounts of death and peril at sea, legends of buried treasure, melancholy love songs of a sailor, odes to herring scales, and musings on the thoughts of various marine creatures.

“Everything you hear is real,” Kytr says, adding that people are often struck by the realization that fisherman are “truly deep.”

“Occasionally I’ll talk to one, and they’ll say, ‘Well, I’m just a dumb fisherman,’” he says. “My response is always ‘I’ve never met a dumb fisherman.’”

Rather than being intimidated by the festival’s material, laypeople have the change, Rideout says, to come away with not only a deeper understanding of what commercial fishermen deal with but also how it might be applied to their own lives.

“They can learn about loss, strength in adversity, longing, triumph, failure. What it means to be human,” she says. “The stuff



PHOTO BY JOSHUA BESSEX

Last year, Anjuli Grantham, of Kodiak, Alaska, talked about growing up fishing on the west side of Kodiak Island at the Astoria Event Center.

of human experience, set in a challenging environment.”

### A new generation

As the event hits 20 years, Broderick is not worried that enthusiasm will fizzle out any time soon, despite the fact that the fishing industry generally laments a lack of younger skippers.

In fact, he says, a new generation of fisherpoets is already making their voices heard, something that pleases Broderick immensely. “I think if all the old guys just stepped aside today, the gathering would go on without missing a beat,” he says.

Kytr, a musician, has been involved in the gathering since its inception and performs original songs. He likes what he sees for its future, not only at the event but in the profession. He sees it in the Columbia River gillnet fishery, at meetings with the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, and at Salmon For All.

“We see an astonishing number of young fishermen, and most of us say, ‘I had no idea!’” he says.

With that in mind, local support for the FisherPoets Gathering takes on a deeper



PHOTO BY JOSHUA BESSEX

FisherPoets Gathering organizers Jay Speakman, left, and Jon Broderick will emcee and perform together Friday at the Astoria Event Center and Saturday at the Liberty Theater. Speakman will also lead a Story Circle at 1:30 p.m. Saturday at the Astoria Event Center, where commercial fishing veterans tell tales about their work.

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importance. Broderick says support has been there from day one and is only growing stronger. “I’ve never had to twist anyone’s arm in this community to help,” he says. “It’s always been ‘yes.’”

Rideout agrees and feels that Coast Community Radio’s role as an arts and information organization with a community service mission makes it a good fit at the festival. Coast Community Radio will broadcast live both nights from 6 to 10 p.m. from the Astoria Event Center, streaming on KMUN 91.9 FM, KTCB 89.5 FM and online at [coastradio.org](http://coastradio.org)

“When we do this event we are showing off one of the gems of our community,” she says, adding that with KMUN’s broadcast and streaming ability, people all over the world can and do listen.

More than anything, the event is meant to be fun.

“It’s the highlight of my year,” Kytr says. “And I’m certainly not the only one in town who says that.”