

THE ARTS

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POEMS ON THE RANGE

Harvest Moon Artisan Market funds student adventure to Nevada poetry gathering

By WILLIAM HAM
FOR COAST WEEKEND

Every three years or so for the last 20, Mark Mizell, an English teacher at Seaside High School, gathers up a couple dozen of his charges for a unique expedition.

“We take a beautiful yellow school bus over to Portland, hop on a train, take it to Sacramento, walk around town a bit, then take another train through the Sierras and the Great Basin Desert up to our destination,” he said.

That destination: Elko, Nevada, which has hosted the annual National Cowboy Poetry Gathering every January since 1985. Described by organizers as “six days of poetry, music, dancing, workshops, exhibits, conversations, food and fellowship,” the Gathering began as an opportunity for Western ranchers and cowboys to share poems about their lives on the range. (Think FisherPoets, only dustier.)

With 25 students and several chaperones in tow, this will not be an inexpensive jaunt. To offset costs, Mizell and his kids have organized the first-ever Harvest Moon Artisan Market, which will take place in the gymnasium of the Broadway Middle School (1120 Broadway St.) 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Saturday, Oct. 28, and 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Sunday, Oct. 29.

Between 25 and 30 vendors — local artists, chefs, and musicians among them — are scheduled to participate. Mizell and his wife, Becky, have worked alongside many of them while manning their own stalls at the Astoria Sunday Market and the Saturday Market in Ilwaco over the last 20 summers.

Students pull shifts

“I’ve known Mark and Becky for quite a few years now,” said vendor Leslie McCray, whose own business, Sweater Heads, does what the name implies: She fashions stylish headwear from a variety of castoff pullovers. “We’ve worked together at a number of different markets in the area, selling our art.



PHOTO BY ERICK BENDEL

Mark Mizell, an English teacher at Seaside High School, at a beatnik poetry reading in 2015



SWEATERHEADS.NET

Leslie McCray, owner of Sweater Heads, will be a vendor at the Harvest Moon Artisan Market.

He’s done fundraising for these trips in other ways over the years, and this year he decided to give this a try, since this is what we do.”

Each vendor pays a \$70 admission fee, every penny of which will help defray the students’ travel expenses.

Mizell has ensured his students are part of the process. “Everybody gets to take a shift,” he said.

In the run-up to the market, Mizell’s kids can be found handing out fliers from Astoria to Cannon Beach, making signs, helping vendors and practicing a “mini-traveling show” called the “Let ’er Buck Chili Feed Revue,” which they hope to perform before

and during their trip, as well as at the Gathering.

“I think the trip winds up being more meaningful for them the more they’re involved in the preliminary stages of it,” Mizell said.

A long tradition

All of this hard work and preparation, with the promise of a celebration at the end, is in keeping with the spirit of the National Cowboy Poetry Gathering.

“Cowboys and cowgirls getting together like this is not a new thing,” Mizell said. “During the spring, summer and fall, ranchers tend to be quite busy, of course, so when there’s a lull in the winter, that’s their time to celebrate their life and their work, through storytelling, music and everything else. It’s part of a long tradition, and I’m proud to be able to share it.”

The Gathering’s remit has grown exponentially, expanding to include writers and

performers of all stripes from throughout the American West and beyond. Performances from the likes of Ian Tyson (of 1960s folk duo Ian & Sylvia), Michael Martin Murphey (of “Wildfire” fame) and Grammy-winner Ramblin’ Jack Elliott are not uncommon.

At the most recent Gathering attended by Mizell and his students, the keynote speaker was Temple Grandin, a world-renowned animal science professor and autism activist.

In addition, the 34th Gathering, which runs Jan. 28 through Feb. 3, will focus on a less-heralded aspect of cowboy culture. This year’s theme: “Basques & Buckaroos.”

“There’s a big Basque influence throughout the Great Basin region, from Utah and Idaho right through to eastern Oregon,” Mizell said. “In fact, you can go to Steens Mountain and still find carvings the original Basque sheep herders left in the aspen groves up there. It’ll be great to have that tradition represented at this year’s event.” CW