

## Poets In Our Schools



By Terry Blackhawk

May 1, 2014

“Since feeling is first”...the poet writes... “who pays any attention/ to the syntax of things/ will never wholly kiss you.” (e. e. cummings) Or, alternately, “A little Madness in the Spring/ Is wholesome even for the King.” (Emily Dickinson)

As we look back on a busy Poetry Month 2014, I want to raise a flag for poetry and express my sincere appreciation to Detroit Public Schools and Detroit Public Schools Foundation for helping to make a home for poetry together with InsideOut Literary Arts. [www.insideoutdetroit.org](http://www.insideoutdetroit.org)

2015 will mark the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of iO, whose mission (to encourage young writers to “think broadly, create bravely and share their voices with the wider world”) helps to realize the Michigan Department of Education goal of helping students “become enthusiastic about writing and learning to write.”

In schools where so much attention is paid, necessarily, to “the syntax of things,” I also make a claim for feeling, or for “a little Madness.” I am glad that so many DPS principals have recognized the importance of feeling (i.e., self expression through poetry) and have made room, despite challenging budgets and tight schedules, to bring iO into their schools. This year iO serves 22 DPS Schools, in addition to several charters and out of district schools. A separate literary magazine for each school is now at the printer, and we eagerly look forward to year-end galas celebrating titles such as *Star Brisas* (Bennett), *Jambo* (Marcus Garvey), and *Ink on the Tracks* (Western). These books give students an authentic purpose for writing and connect them with readers across the city, who gain insight into the souls and spirits of our children through their poetry.

There are growing numbers of excellent sites where one can learn more about poetry: The Poetry Foundation, the Geraldine R. Dodge Poetry Program, the Academy of America Poets, to name a few. One of my favorites for classroom use is this one—from Edutopia, <http://www.edutopia.org/blog/five-reasons-poetry-needed-schools-elena-aguilar>. Here are some key reasons to bring poetry into our classrooms:

- (1) Poetry helps us know each other and builds community, allowing us to paint and share sketches of our lives.
- (2) It's kinesthetic. The rhythm of poetry is "full-bodied and activates your heart and soul."
- (3) It opens venues for speaking and listening. (Think poetry slam.)
- (4) It provides scaffolding and expression for English Language Learners.
- (5) It builds resilience and fosters social and emotional learning.

As a DPS teacher, at Mumford and then at CMA, I saw first hand how students learned to appreciate one another through their poems. I also saw how a "real" guest writer could galvanize creative and critical thinking. Those who scoff at poetry—asking: Isn't it just a time waster? Don't our youth have more pressing needs?—would do well to heed Principal James Hearn of Marcus Garvey Academy, in this clip that featured iO on the PBS NewsHour. <http://insideoutdetroit.org/watch-io-on-pbs-newshour/> Mr. Hearn had some of the same reservations, but then he saw how enthusiastic "even (his) football players" were about poetry.

We in Detroit are not alone in this work. Since 2005, iO has participated as a founding member of the National Writers in the Schools Alliance, and we count WITS Houston and New York City's Teachers & Writers Collaborative as important mentors and friends. Their websites also provide terrific creative writing resources for the classroom.

<http://witsalliance.org>

<http://witshouston.org>

<https://www.twc.org>

Internationally, the Arts Council of England, a country that **actually invests** in creative writing in education, puts it this way: *In the last few years, there has been an emphasis on creativity as a vital skill for young people. The central tenets of creativity – supporting imaginative activity based on exploring alternatives, taking risks, developing original ideas and solving problems – fit well with what writers in schools offer.*

iO is a home-grown project with deep roots in DPS. Since 1995, when—at Communication and Media Arts High School—I received the grant from Mumford alumnus Bob Shaye that helped me to found iO, we have enjoyed strong relationships with DPS. From a handful of classrooms in five high schools, iO has become a nationally recognized youth arts program. We have twice sent students to the White House. Citywide Poets, iO's after school performance poetry workshop, has put Detroit students on stages from Washington D.C. to San Francisco, where, in 2011 at that city's Opera House, our team took fourth place in the Brave New Voices Poetry Slam. iO's Citywide Poets has grown substantially this year, thanks to the generous support of the DPS Foundation, which understands how the arts promote the healthiest possible development of young people.

Last October, U.S. Poet Laureate Natasha Trethewey showed the world how poetry empowers and gives voice to our students. I was especially moved by her story about how African American poets sustained her as a child, and gave her inner strength in the face of discrimination. Langston Hughes's "I, Too," which she mentioned, has served as a model for many iO student poems. In my February blog for Detroit Huffington Post, I include a student's poem inspired by "I, Too" and reflect on the power of poetry to connect us all.

[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/terry-m-blackhawk-phd/black-history-month-musings\\_b\\_4751058.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/terry-m-blackhawk-phd/black-history-month-musings_b_4751058.html)

Detroit literary icon, Bill Harris, Kresge Eminent Artist for 2011 and a founding member of the iO Board of Directors, was one of the first writers to visit my creative writing classes at Mumford. He has been an important mentor me and for iO, and we were honored to have him serve as keynote for iO's recent 4<sup>th</sup> annual high school writers conference. Bill's message, that **we need writers in order to continue to exist**, resonates for us all. I hope readers will heed his message here, visit my other blogs,

[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/terry-m-blackhawk-phd/poetry-month-2014\\_b\\_5187828.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/terry-m-blackhawk-phd/poetry-month-2014_b_5187828.html)

<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/terry-m-blackhawk-phd/>  
which explore the richness and beauty of this work.

Please also visit the iO Facebook page, which posts daily iO happenings and delights from the youth of Detroit.

<https://www.facebook.com/InsideOutLiteraryArtsProject>

"The Next Poem I Write"

The next poem I write  
will soar through the sky  
will dance like the wind  
will shine like the sun  
will walk a two-mile marathon

The next poem I write  
will ride into the sunset  
will sing as loud as a siren  
will climb as high as a mountain  
will paint on a canvas so much you can't see  
The next poem I write  
will raise the sun

Robertlina Huff  
*Here, There and Everywhere*, Vol. 2  
Mann Elementary School, Spring 2012