

January 3, 2011

Dear Library Board and City of Benicia:

It has been my pleasure to serve the City of Benicia as Poet Laureate since July of 2010. My term will be ending in the coming July and the selection process for a new poet laureate must begin now. As part of my duties, I have been asked to provide a summary of my activities in my term and to reflect on the future of this program.

It has been my hope as Poet Laureate of Benicia to bring an increased awareness of poetry and the wealth of cultural richness it offers to the greater Benicia community. We have a loyal and active group of poets in Benicia and also in the surrounding areas who have met as the BENICIA FIRST TUESDAY POETRY GROUP since 2005 to read their original poetry and enjoy poetry readings by others. In my term I have reached out and through this group to students, arts organizations, families, and in public events.

Chief among my efforts was starting the use of the POETRY OUT LOUD national recitation competition in the Benicia High Schools. I have also continued the BENICIA LOVE POETRY CONTEST, co-sponsored by the Benicia Historical Museum. I have paired with ARTS BENICIA on several events including the very successful exhibit, I READ THE NEWS TODAY, OH BOY which has now gone on tour to the Pacific Grove Library where it will be up through January. The poets recently worked with the Benicia Public Library on the BEN FRANKLIN centennial exhibit providing poems based on Ben Franklin's proverbs. This is also the second year of the POEM HOME project which offers free poems-for-the-taking in nine locations throughout the city. There have been many other efforts both big and small on behalf of poetry that I have made during my term. On the following pages you will find a summary of some of them. You will find my comments on individual aspect after each section in italics.

I will leave my post feeling satisfaction in the robust program I have been able to foster, elaborate and invent. My second year's effort will continue to be making sure programs are understood and delegated to members of the group so that they may continue no matter who the board chooses as the next Poet Laureate of Benicia or what wonderful skills and projects they wish to undertake.

The strong support of the library and the Friends of the Library are essential to having a poet laureate program that matters. The funds the Friends provide are absolutely essential if the program is to function in the greater community. My own many hours have been as a volunteer but the ability to offset the costs of printing and event costs has made it possible for me to serve. I am more than grateful to the library and Friends and particularly to Fran Martinez-Coyne, my library liaison, who has helped me month after month realize my own dreams for poetry in our community.

Sincerely, Ronna Leon

ONGOING PROGRAMS:

Monthly First Tuesday Poetry Group Meetings

18 Meetings to date 2010- Jan. 2012

Added Features:

Featured Poet reading each meeting. Selected poets work is featured in a 10 minute special reading each month. Bio and sample poem given on website before meeting

Poetry Exchange with another poet reading your poem.

Microphone for group use with new set up of at-podium reading.

Web site and calendar page with information on events: BeniciaLibrary.org/poet

NEW web site for group BENICIAFIRSTTUESDAYPOETRYGROUP.com features announcements from other groups' events, contest information, poet pages etc. A rich new resource. All thanks to poet Peter Bray.

Free donated Poetry Books for the taking each meeting (given away over 150 volumes)
We ask people to pass them forward when they are done with the book

Poem of the Month selected and posted each month from those heard at meeting

Bulletin Boards for announcements by PL program and group members. Shortening announcement time.

6:30 social half hour before reading around at 7 - 9. Strengthening the personal bonds of the group.

A monthly reminder of the meeting with details on other parts of the programs has been sent out. Extra notifications to member mailing list on special events and contests were also made. Flyers and Newsletters to date total: 32

Average attendance is now between 30 and 40 each month. New poets and interest still being shown. New faces almost every meeting held. Age demographic is shifting to younger. Good balance between female and male voices etc.

COMMENT: The group meetings are the foundation of poetry in our community. Their importance is without question. If a new laureate is not already involved in this group they should become so, in my opinion. The generous volunteers who will make the poet laureate program a success are to be found here. The more the Poet Laureate reaches out to this group and encourages them to realize their dreams for poetry through these programs, the more long term success the programs will have. A great deal of my time was spent in making notices and flyers, purchasing and arranging for refreshments,

organizing and running these meetings. The positive results has been increasing the attendance from an average of 10 - 20 poets in the past, to 30 to 40 poets attending today with a mailing list of about 250. Each day I answer between five to ten emails that relate to the programs.

POETRY CLINICS: for adults and teens. Drop in clinics 2 hours, for those wanting help with their poetry writing or understanding poems. One on one attention

16 have been given in the past year and a half. Expert support from Joel Fallon and Bob Shelby in recent months. Monica Tapiarene has lead the groups since July 2011.

Four to eight poets, different group attending each session

COMMENT: These have been useful to the few people who have been able to attend. I have enjoyed the more one to one exploration of poetry and the time to discuss small points which an open reading do not allow. However, this seems like the kind of writing and reading group that might be delegated or formatted to serve a particular small group of poets rather than something with the more public stamp of the program. It should certainly be encouraged in the future but I see it as a frill to the main efforts of the PL.

HOW-TO WORKSHOPS

Sept. "How to self publish a poetry chap book": Joel Fallon, Bob Shelby 45 attendees. Asked to present again.

January "Public Speaking for Poets" Joel Fallon, Ronna Leon with help from Sandra Lee Stillwell, Bruce Moody, 30 attendees

COMMENT: In my second year I have cut back on these workshops. They are labor intensive and while welcome by the poetry community and bringing in new members to the group, were not something I could find a willing volunteer to continue. I have been working with the newly formed BENICIA LITERARY GUILD which has already undertaken a public POETRY READING. It is my hope that this new group will work with the next poet laureate to provide other literary workshops and events that also showcase poetry and bring this welcome kind of event to our community.

COMMUNITY EVENTS

July: Ice Cream Social after swearing in as Poet Laureate 25 attendees

Nov. WINDOWS OF SOUND: Arts Benicia and PL Program held at Arts Benicia: Thomas Stanton directing 30 attending

Dec: Event. Ho, HO, HO Family Poetry Party: Word Games, Riddles, and humorous poetry 40 attendees. Volunteers from the teen group.

April: Event Art and Poetry for Families with Sandra Stillwell and Bonnie Weidel 10 attendees.

July: Exhibit: "I Read the News Today, Oh Boy": Pairing poets and visual artists to respond to the news. Events around Exhibit: Opening Reception. Symposium. Poetry Reading Each event over 100 attendees. Many members of the public saw and enjoyed this exhibit. Traveled to Pacific Grove Library. This incarnation of the exhibit is open from from October 2011 through January 2012.

THE POETS PICNIC: August Poets Laureate and their communities are invited to join us for a do it yourself picnic. We provide lemonade and watermelon. Poets Laureate past and present from all communities reading . 100 plus attendees 2011. I am planning a 2012 Poet's Picnic as an opportunity to introduce the new poet laureate to Benicia and to the greater Bay Area poetry community. Broadsheets were displayed of participating Poets Laureate poems -- these were displayed in shop windows for the month leading up to the Picnic.

Dec-February- Daily posting of poems submitted to the Benicia Love Poetry 2012 contest on Benicia Patch.com, an online newspaper.

COMMENTS: Posting flyers, getting into event calendars, writing and getting publicity in newspapers and local magazine is both an important way to increase the awareness of poetry in Benicia and a never ending task with few prior models for our programs. The help of a publicity chair, Jady Montgomery, brought order to this effort. Hopefully she will be able to pass this information on to the next laureate so that this aspect may be continued. The Benicia Herald, Benicia Patch, Vallejo Times Herald, Benicia Magazine, Contra Costa Times and The San Francisco Chronicle have all run articles on the community event programs we have offered. In the future I would hope that the BENICIA ART AND CULTURAL COMMISSION would be able to help all our arts organizations including the poetry group in a more organized effort to get the word out about our Benicia events.

COMMUNITY PROJECT

Sept -Jan Poem Homes: nine public locales in Benicia. Program started in Late Sept. We have given away over 7,000 poems since the beginning. The idea has been taken

up in the City of Alameda which now has two Poem Homes (constructed by Peter Bray) Emeryville is also interested.

April Benicia Herald: Published a **POEM A DAY** during month of April> Selected by Colin Amato from those in the POEM HOME BOXES. In February poems from the Love Poetry Contest were featured. In July and August Poet Laureates of California Communities will be in the boxes. Currently a series of Best Loved Poems are in our Poem Homes, this features poems remembered from childhood and youth from our citizens and poets. I am working with the city to have a POEM HOME at the new Community Center.

Oct- Dec. Community Action Council meal delivery program has also give poems with each senior meal delivered.

Comments; This is a program I am particularly proud of and hope to see continue. It takes funds and willing volunteers to refill boxes and prepare the new series of poems for the boxes to keep them fresh and interesting. I personally LOVE having poetry readily available for that walk in the park, or moment with a cup of coffee, or when leaving the library. The POEM HOMES liberate poetry to me and make it available to anyone who wishes to take and read a poem during their day here in Benicia. It gives poems a place in our community life.

CONTESTS AND PUBLICATIONS

Sept - Feb 2011 and 2012 **Love Poetry Contest**: co-sponsored by the Benicia Historic Museum Over 90 poets entered the contest this year. Feb. event with publication of a booklet (2011) and broadsheets (2012) with award and reading of the winning poems. In a special event. This year FEB 12, Sunday, 2012.

Sept- Jan 2011 **Benicia in Art and Poetry** : co-sponsored with Benicia Community Arts. Student Contest Elementary thru high school. Pizza prizes donated by Pizza Pirate. Very Low Response. Also offered special poetry class for 2 thru 4rd grades with Sandra Lee Stillwell. No response.

Sept-January 2011 and 2012 **POETRY OUT LOUD**: National Endowment of the Arts, Solano Arts Council and The California Arts Council all sponsored. Memorization contest for High School students. About 300 students took part on the classroom level, winners from each class a public event. Student winner and runner-up also appeared before the Solano Board of Supervisors, The School Board, The Benicia City Council in 2011. In 2012 the Poetry Out Loud event will be FEBRUARY 4, Sat. 2012.

POET IN SCHOOLS A matching grant from the Benicia Rotary Club with fund offered through the California Arts Council has allowed for a poet in the schools to helps Liberty High School Students and Benicia High School Students to be taught by a poet trained for the better understand of poetry and preparation for the Poetry Out Loud contest. This is a new component of this program in 2012.

BEN FRANKLIN EXHIBIT As part of the Benicia Public Library Ben Franklin Centennial exhibit, I was asked to run a small poetry competition with poets submitting poems written in response to Franklin's proverbs. The poems were prepared on Broadsheets that were mounted on the end caps of the library book shelves during the course of the exhibit and a public vote for best poem held. Award were given for the Best Poem and Most Popular Poet at the end of the exhibit run.

Dec: Launch Party 3rd **First Tuesday Poetry Anthology**. "Windows and Skylights" Carole Dwinell publisher, designer. Reading by the poets. Reception 50 attendees.

January thru April: **4th Benicia First Tuesday Poetry Anthology "Sign of the Times"** co-sponsored by the BENICIA LITERARY GUILD publishing. Lois Requist, designer. Book will be published and launched in April 2012 in time for the National Poetry Month. Special Reading planned April 28.

Comments: Publication is important to the poets who take part in poetry groups. The anthologies that the Benicia First Tuesday Poetry Group has produced both draw attention to the serious nature of the group and encourage the recognition of our poets. However, all publication is an expensive and labor intensive effort. Attempts to do less book publication and more broadsheets and Poem Home sheets has been somewhat successful and are clearly less expensive to undertake. Publication in our on-line websites and newspaper has also served a purpose to decrease the pressure on the publication model of print. However, for the group itself, the every two year anthology remains an important component of our poetry program. Each of the poet laureates who have served would attest to how much time this effort has taken and how much resource of time and funds. The new poet laureate may have new ways to satisfy this.

Public READINGS:

Oct. San Rafael Art Center: at Marin County PL invitation 40 attendees

Jan: Benicia Poet Laureate: along with Joel Fallon.(Bob Shelby ill) 75 attendees

Feb: Alameda Island Poets: Barnes and Noble Joel Fallon and Bob Shelby reading our love poems

Nov. Reader of Contest Winning Poems for Ina Coolbrith Circle, annual event 70 attendees

May: Valona Deli: Featured Reader Bruce Moody 45 attendees

May: Sonoma Poetry Group, Sonoma Library Reading with Michael Watterson 10 attendees.

Feb: Alameda Island Poets: Barnes and Noble

July: Folsom Prison

Aug: Marin Traveling Poetry Show, reading in Petaluma

Dec.: Mayor swearing in Ceremony

April: Solano County Poets Laureate reading in Fairfield

Interviews in the SF Examiner on line edition, the Vallejo Times Herald, The Benicia Herald, Patch, Contra Costa Times

Comments: The readings that I have done have all been solicited by other poetry groups. I have done one reading in our community to introduce myself at the beginning of my term. Many more possibilities of reading would be possible if the laureate made an effort to know of their availability. . However, this is an area where reimbursement for travel has not been available. I think this is a shame as these readings increase the awareness of Benicia in the greater Bay Area and of the poets who are part of our group. These connections are helpful for all the poet laureate communities that serve our town and counties in California. I would advise that the new and future poets laureate be reimbursed for travel to readings or attending events that support the poet laureate program and poetry in Benicia.

OUTINGS

Oct: Cemetery Tour Francis Jackson 0 attendees

Nov: Tao House Outing: Tamra Amato six attendees

Comments: Another set of events that were tried but will not be continued in 2012. The number of attendees did not warrant continuing to offer.

Sample of Meetings attended : Speaker for Rotary Club, Meeting with English Teachers at High School, Meeting with Principals of Benicia and Liberty High School, Meetings with the Library Director, Meetings with the Arts and Cultural Commission, Meetings with Arts Benicia, The Benicia Historical Society, The Mayor, The Solano County Commissioners, Solano Arts Council, Benicia Community Arts, The Friends of the Benicia Public Library. City Council Meetings.

Comments: A high degree of visibility in our community and its organizations strengthens the relationship of poets into the fabric of our daily life. These meetings and contacts should be encouraged and new poet laureates encouraged to participate in all public events in our community.

THANKS

GREAT THANKS TO MY FABULOUS VOLUNTEERS: John Goory, Sandra Lee Stillwell, Joel Fallon, Robert Shelby, Kathy Stewart, Lois Requist, Frances Jackson, Teresa Finn, Jady Montgomery, Marie Morris, Thomas Stanton, Nikki Basch-Davis, Larnie Fox, Bonnie Weidel, Fran-Martinez-Coyne, Joannette Sorkin, Sherry Sheehan, Carole Dwinell, Jeremy Cantor, Nancy Atkins, Rosie Switzer, Mary Eichbauer, Jeff Kingman, David Ryan Palmer, Anita Falltrick, Sue Wilson and the generosity of the Friends of the Benicia Public Library. ALL THE REST OF YOU who brought food for the receptions, cleaned up after meetings, cheered me up, ETC. If you aren't on this short list it isn't because I didn't appreciate your effort, it is just my old addled brain and inability to make LONG lists of names. THANK YOU ONE AND ALL FOR A GLORIOUS TERM IN THE SERVICE OF POETRY and POETS.

THE POET LAUREATE PROGRAM FUTURE: Final Comments

The recognition of literary art and literary artists in Benicia goes hand in hand with our pride in being a well known "art" town. To keep that presence in community life and consciousness the Poet Laureate Program can do much. Within the Benicia First Tuesday Poetry Group are strong supporters of our library, of the newly formed Benicia Literary Guild, of Arts Benicia and the Arts and Cultural Commission. The laureate program is now in its sixth year and each year it has gained a stronger and more meaningful presence in Benicia. Tied as it is to the library and the City it will never be a non-profit or able to fund raise for itself. To keep it healthy each year a budget for events and operation costs must be recognized. Members of the local poetry group have been willing to give time and resources for events that directly benefit them, like for their meetings and publications but as the program reaches out into the greater community other funding is essential.

In the future I would like to see a public art project that incorporated poetry in the form of something along the line of the poetry walk in Berkeley or a poetry garden in one of our local parks. Each new Poet Laureate will bring a new understanding and new goals for the program and it seems important to be open to what they have to offer rather than a rigid set of future goals.

My own efforts to reach the school age populations (with the exception of the Poetry Out Loud program) met with a whole series of difficulties lead mostly by the fact that I no longer have school age children myself and lack the direct contact with teachers that I think would be needed to place more poetry experiences in the schools. That said, perhaps the next laureate will have just those contacts and skills.

I wish you well in the process of finding and then supporting the next Poet Laureate. I will do all I can to help the new Laureate to realize their program.

Thank you for the opportunity.

Ronna Leon

