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Rachel Hatch
Illinois Wesleyan University

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Students Take Poetry Off of the Page

June 15, 2010

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – A class at Illinois Wesleyan University recently pulled poetry off the page and placed it into the community.

One of the May Term sections of Introductory to Creative Writing challenged students to not only write poetry and fiction, but to come up with ways of sharing it in the community.

“In the class, we talk a lot about why creative writing is important, and why it is out there. I wanted the students to have the chance to see more than just their own responses to the work,” said Brandi Reissenweber, an adjunct faculty member who was the instructor of the four-week class. May Term is a time when students can take intensive classes within the compressed time period, as opposed to the usual 16-week semester.

The project, called Act of Art, required students to write several works individually, then come together in groups to decide what pieces should be presented to the public, and how their work should be disseminated, said Reissenweber.

Several ideas came to fruition – including plastering a car with poetry and fiction and parking it in various spots around town; and holding a lemonade stand on the Constitution Trail with poetry pasted to the cups. “We thought that a lemonade stand would be a good idea since it was a hot month of May,” said Elise Anderson, a sophomore from Wheaton, Ill. She and fellow student Nicole Taylor led a group of students who wrote poetry in chalk to draw people to the stand, and then gave out lemonade with their poetic creations attached to the cups. “Most people who approached us seemed very interested in our project. They liked to ask questions. Some people even saved the poems that were on the cups.”

Taylor, a sophomore from Lake Zurich, Illinois, remembered one man who came up to to the table after he had his lemonade. “He walked past us after throwing away his cup and held out the part of my poem that was taped on his cup and he said, ‘I am going to pin this on my wall. This is a really good thing you guys are doing,’” said Taylor, who is a biology major. “We all thought that it was really special how he was impacted by our work and appreciated what we were doing.”

The efforts of the students impressed Reissenweber, especially due to the fact that the majority of the students are not majoring in English. “In many ways, it was more difficult for the students to generate and share the work because a lot of them had not written before,” she said. “Perhaps it was more unnerving, but also more rewarding.”

Anderson, an elementary education major, said the experience was challenging and gratifying. “At first I was nervous about sharing my writing with the class, but the classroom atmosphere made me feel more comfortable, and it was fun to share and hear other people's work as well,” she said, adding that bringing the work to the community added a new dimension. “Our work seemed to brighten some people's day, and seemed to make other people think.”

Though Reissenweber has taught the class for four years, this was her first time assigning the students to put their poetry and fiction in front of community members. The experience was a positive one, she said. “One woman from the community sent me an e-mail that said she was overjoyed to ‘see poetry bloom in front of her when she least expected it,’” said Reissenweber. “Students talked to me about the

conversations they saw taking place about the work.” One student let Reissenweber know about an intense conversation two people had over a line of poetry that was pasted to a car in the parking lot at Wal-Mart. “They were debating a line of fiction our students created,” she said. “People really seemed exuberant about the work they saw and experienced,” said Reissenweber.

Contact: Rachel Hatch, (309) 556-3960