

THIS AND THAT: Sifting Through New York State Poets In The Schools

By Dale Davis

As Executive Director of the Association of Teaching Artists <http://www.teachingartists.com/> I hear from many Teaching Artists, academics, and graduate students on a wide range of topics. Last week, for example, I received an email from a doctoral candidate who is completing her dissertation on the intersection of the world of the arts and the world of education. She was looking for information on the "history/results/impact" of the New York State Poets in the Schools program. I worked in the program in its early days both as a poet who went into schools and as Coordinator of the Rochester region. The program brought many of us into public schools who otherwise would not have entered a public school classroom. As Bill Zavatsky recounted, "We were pioneers. We flew by the seats of our pants. It was baptism by fire." Our love of poetry drove us; we brought contemporary poetry and writing to children and teachers. It was ideal; we worked with what we loved, and it opened a new world both for our students and for us.

Looking through several articles written in the past ten years on the history of artists in education, I found the groundbreaking work in the writers in the schools programs, Teachers & Writers Collaborative <http://www.twc.org/> and New York State Poets in the Schools, missing from most.

This is not a straight-line story. This is by no mean a definitive or complete look at the emergence of these early programs that helped pave the way for Teaching Artists in public education. There are curves and detours everywhere. The story begins, I think, with public funding for the arts. Funding was made available for poets to go into public schools. Governor Nelson Rockefeller backed the New York State Council on the Arts, established in 1960 through a bill introduced in the New York State Legislature. The New York State Council on the Arts <http://www.nysca.org/> began as an arts council in 1961. It became the model for the National Endowment for the Arts.

In September 1965, President Lyndon Johnson signed the National Foundation on the Arts and the Humanities Act that established the National Endowment for the Arts <http://www.arts.gov/> and the National Endowment for the Humanities. An appropriation of \$2.5 million was signed on October 31, 1965. Among the initial grant recipients were the American Ballet Theater, The Martha Graham Dance Company, choreography fellowships to Alvin Ailey, Merce Cunningham, Jose Limon, and Paul Taylor, and a pilot program in New York City, Detroit, and Pittsburgh entitled Poets in the Schools <http://www.arts.gov/pub/nea-history-1965-2008.pdf>. The National Endowment established Poets in The Schools in 1966 through funding to The Academy of American Poets. The pilot featured Denise Levertov, Robert Lowell, Howard Nemerov, Allan Tate, and Robert Penn Warren, to name a few, who read their poetry and answered questions.

Teachers & Writers Collaborative, founded in 1967 by a group of writers and educators who believed that professional writers could make an important contribution to the teaching of writing and literature, received its initial funding in 1968 from the Office of Health, Welfare, and Education, along with some money from a Ford Foundation grant to Columbia University where it was originally housed.

In 1970, Galen Williams, the director of the 92nd Street YM-YWHA Poetry Center, with funding from The New York State Council on The Arts, started Poets & Writers <http://www.pw.org/> as an organization to provide fees for readings and workshops for writers. In 1973 New York State Poets in the Schools began as part of Poets & Writers. As part of Poets & Writers, New York State Poets in the Schools received funding from the Office of Health, Welfare, and Education. Funding was also received from the National Endowment on the Arts. This funding was folded into

funding for the first Poets & Writers Directory of Writers. In 1977, Poets in the Schools had become so big that Myra Klahr who had been at Poets & Writers for three years working with Galen Williams agreed to lead a new independent organization, New York State Poets in the Schools, as Executive Director.

1970 saw the publication of Kenneth Koch's, *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams: Teaching Children to Write Poetry* http://www.amazon.com/dp/0060955090/ref=rdr_ext_tmb. This event is an important part of the story <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/kenneth-koch>. Kenneth Koch began working with children at P.S. 61 in New York City in 1968. The Academy of American Poets funded his visits at first. Teachers & Writers supported his work following the initial Academy of American Poets funding. Ron Padgett's "Forward" to *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams* captures the excitement surrounding the first publication of *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams*.

By 1974, Artists-in-Schools, whose Pilot was Poets in The Schools, reached more than 5,000 schools in all fifty states, including hundreds of thousands of children and teenagers in the dance, crafts, painting, sculpture, music, theater, film, folk art, and design.

When New York State Poets in the Schools began, in addition to the New York City poets, Dick Lourie was the Ithaca Coordinator, Neil Baldwin, the Buffalo Coordinator, Jo Mish, the Oneonta Coordinator, and I was the Rochester Coordinator. This is not a complete list. My lens is memory.

In the beginning it was one day here, two days there, "Johnny Appleseed stuff," as Bill Zavatsky described it. The one day visits grew to where poets were paid \$75.00 a school day for conducting three hour-long classroom writing workshops for students and one workshop for teachers daily. The poet was in the school for the entire school day, available to meet with teachers and students during non-teaching periods. Five days was the minimum residency, later extended to six days. Coordinators were paid \$100.00 per school for setting up and reporting on a residency. In a few years poets fees were raised to \$100.00 a school day. \$75.00 in the 1970's is worth approximately \$325.00 today. \$100 in the 1970's is worth approximately \$430.00 today.

You never knew if you would see the child again. We did though. Some stayed in touch. We found some of those children later in the Iowa Writers Workshop, at Johns Hopkins, a book of poetry, a novel.

We learned from one another. The Executive Director called statewide meetings once a year. Some years school personnel were present, and we gave presentations on our work in the classrooms. Other years the poets met, and we presented our work in classrooms to one another for critiques. New York State Poets in the Schools developed a training program for poets that included mentoring new poets.

I hope that anyone reading this who was part of the New York State Poets in the Schools program in the seventies will email me their thoughts on the impact working in the program had on them, their careers, and their students. I am presently working on compiling the experiential knowledge of Teaching Artists in the artists' own words for the Association of Teaching Artists.

Results/Impact: Phillip Lopate's *Journal of a Living Experiment: A documentary history of Teachers and Writers Collaborative and the writers-in-the-schools movement*

<http://www.amazon.com/Journal-Living-Experiment-Philip-Lopate/dp/0915924099>

comes to my mind immediately, as does as did his *Being With Children*

<http://www.amazon.com/Being-With-Children-Phillip-Lopate/dp/0671676806>.

Being with Children, first published in 1975, was out of print for years. It is classic on a writer's relationship to writing and to working with young students. Many New York City poets worked for both Teachers and Writers and New York State Poets in the Schools.

Results/Impact: Writers in the Schools in Houston <http://www.witshouston.org/> was founded by Philip Lopate and Marv Hoffman in 1983, with support and guidance from Teachers & Writers Collaborative.

Results/Impact: An interview with Dick Lourie in the Somerville News Blog, 2005
http://somervilleneews.typepad.com/the_somerville_news/2005/03/talking_with_so.html.

"Doug Holder: 'Hanging Loose' makes a point of publishing High School age poets. Was there, and is there a big need for this in the publishing world?"

"Dick Lourie: We have been publishing these poets since the magazine started. Two or three of us were always involved with poetry in the schools. I worked with kids in New York State, for instance. So we've always been interested in this. We were seeing some astonishing high school work, so it seemed appropriate to give high school writers a place for their work, that was not just a high school publication, but a professional journal. We did it, we still do it, and we have put out three anthologies of high school writing."

Results/Impact: In 2006 Bill Zavatsky wrote in The Poetry Foundation on holding it all together to make a living as a writer in the schools and also be a publisher and writer
<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2006/08/journal-day-one-13/>.

"The only population groups that I haven't served are the unborn and the dead, and there *must* be ways for a poet to get to them!"

Bill Zavatsky became a teacher and taught at Trinity School in Manhattan for twenty-four years.
<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2006/08/journal-day-two-13/>. He does not think he ever would have become a teacher were it not for the poet in the schools programs, "programs founded on the fact that you were a writer."

Results/Impact: In 1979 I founded the New York State Literary Center <http://www.nyslc.org/> with the late Al Poulin. I did not plan to become an artist educator, a Teaching Artist. I somehow arrived when invited by Galen Williams to teach poetry in public schools in the Rochester area. I had no idea what I would do, but I said yes.

My education for this career was reading, writing, research, personal experience, and observation. I founded the New York State Literary Center based upon what I learned in New York State Poets in the Schools. I wanted the New York State Literary Center's programs to be interdisciplinary and project based. Experience taught me that children are empowered when their perceptions are validated instead of trivialized. I have edited over five hundred books and produced thirty-one CDs of the writing of young people based upon my belief that their voices are an integral part of NYSLC's work.

In researching for this column I came across "Lost & Found," a piece Myra Klahr wrote on New York State Poets in the Schools in 1978
<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/07320973.1978.9936625?journalCode=vzae20>.

The piece is about children and language. She included my work in a fourth grade classroom in a suburban school district. Alexander Rossi was a student in that class. Alex was ten and aware of his imminent death from leukemia. I visited him in the hospital. Before he died he wrote a poem and gave it to me when I visited him.

My lion grows old and wise.

He goes with me wherever I go.
He knows what I think. Whenever I
get lost in dreams
he comes and shows reality.
I'll never forget him ever.

I listen carefully. My experience has taught me that children carry important news.

Notes

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Kenneth Koch. *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams: Teaching Children to Write Poetry*. Harper/Perennial Edition, 1999.

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Phillip Lopate. *Being With Children*. New Press 2008.

Telephone conversation with Galen Williams, October 25, 2012.

Telephone conversation with Bill Zavatsky, October 26, 2012.

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