

By EDWARD L. KENNEY • The News Journal • December 28, 2008

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## Poet laureate shares magic of expression

### Expert teaches Marshall pupils power of words

By EDWARD L. KENNEY  
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Ten-year-old Nicole Certesio had never written a poem before. But that was before the poet laureate of Delaware came to Marshall Elementary School in Newark for a residency program.

The result has been, as one might expect, pure poetry.

"I like it because it's an experience to open up different things for us," the fifth-grader said. "I learned that I like to write about animals. I wrote a poem about how I could see the silver bats flying through the night. You get to express how you feel, and it shows your personality and stuff."



Marshall Elementary School pupils, like Ayanna Sullivan are inspired by JoAnn Balingit (below), the poet laureate of Delaware, to express themselves.

JoAnn Balingit, 53, of Newark, who was appointed the state's poet laureate in May, also was a fifth-grader when she wrote her first poem.

"My teacher hung it up in the classroom, and it was so encouraging," Balingit said. She is giving fourth- and fifth-graders in the gifted program at Marshall Elementary a chance to flex their poetic muscles through the Artist Residency Program, which has been offered since 1985 by the Delaware Division of the Arts.



Earlier this week, in her second of 10 scheduled visits to the school, Balingit gave the children a poetry exercise. She set a time limit for them to write an anonymous "wish poem" about something they would ask for and told them they had to keep writing and couldn't stop until time was up.

Balingit read as many of the poems as she could afterward.

*"I wish for my family to be gathered around the fire, a memory that will never perspire,"* she said, reading one of the poems.

*"I wish my half brother wasn't so vicious, and that healthy food was actually delicious,"* she said, reading a line from another child's poem.

"My wish is they would keep writing after the residency is over, and they seem like they will," Balingit said.

Nancy Ventresca, an enrichment service teacher at the school who meets with the 33 fourth- and fifth-graders twice a week, said most of them are proficient in literature and language arts, and the poetry residency just seemed like a natural fit.

"Part of what we do is we try to bring the world into the schools," she said. "It was a good opportunity for them to work with language and play with words, and these kids like to write."

"These are kids who are very knowledgeable about literature," Ventresca said. "They read, we work on vocabulary a lot. A lot of them have very good voice in their writing."

She said she plans to put together a book of the children's poems when the residency has ended.

"I hope they come away with a value of the experience, and learning from an expert," Ventresca said. "I hope it's something they always remember. And it could open doors for them. Maybe they'll discover they like writing more than they thought."



Roxanne Farnum ponders a poem earlier this month during one of JoAnn Balingit's visits.

Sheila Dean Ross, program manager for arts and education with the Delaware Division of the Arts, said the residency program is designed as a supplement for the classroom.

"Sometimes, artists will add a different perspective to what's already being taught at the school," she said. "We provide about 75 percent of the funding for the artist, and the school makes up the balance."

Balingit is the state's 16th poet laureate.

"What comes from this is the urge to play with their words, and the confidence," she said of her residency. "You can't say it in a normal conversation or a book report. They're getting things out that are important to them. I just want them to have a strong confidence in their own language and their own voices. But I mostly want them to have fun."

Balingit's predecessor as Delaware's poet laureate was Fleda Brown, her mentor and professor emeritus in the University of Delaware's English Department. Brown served as the laureate from 2001 to 2007. There was a short gap in the program until Balingit took over. People apply to become the poet laureate, and it is run through the Division of the Arts.

"I intend to serve until I feel I've done a good job getting the word out about poetry," Balingit said. "I think it's important. It brings kids into writing and reading for the fun of it. If you can encourage kids to read and write, it's half the battle."

Joey Osicky, 11, a fifth-grader, said he enjoyed being able to express himself creatively.

"I think it's cool that only a few kids get to talk with the poet laureate," he said, "because not everyone gets to, and it's like a privilege."

## Additional Facts

YOUNG POETS

**Unedited lines from "Wish Poems" written by fourth- and fifth-graders at Marshall Elementary School:**

*I wish there were planets that separated boys from girls.*

*I wish I didn't have my little brother.*

*I wish this day, the color of rainbows, would turn the color of gray.*

*I wish Christmas was today, so I can run, laugh, and play with my red and blue toys.*

*I wish for no more homework for the rest of the year.*

*I wish for my family to be gathered around the fire, a memory that will never perspire.*

*I wish the stars were scarlet.*

*I wish I had a butler.*

*I wish I found true love.*

*I wish that anyone named Kyle turned into a frog.*

*I wish California could break off the U.S. and hang with Hawaii ... And Alaska can come too!*

*I wish that no child left behind means ... I CAN'T FAIL.*

*I wish my wishes come true.*

*I wish I knew why I have ashma.*

*I wish that I controlled the stars, the zodiac, constellations and even planet mars.*

*I wish I was always 10.*

*I wish my sister didn't like Barney.*

*I wish pigs fly and that I don't die.*

*I wish milkshakes were the healthiest drink on earth, and ice cream was the healthiest food.*

*I wish my half brother wasn't so vicious, and that healthy food was actually delicious.*

*I wish I had a body of Arnold Scwarszenagger, and the brain of Albert Eienstein.*

*I wish for world peace.*

*I wish I knew everything.*

*I wish my grandmother didn't die.*

*I wish all over the world was America.*

*I wish nobody has to toot gas.*

*I wish the ocean was orange soda and pepsi and coca cola.*

*I wish I had a pool with fudge and chocolate.*

*I wish my wish would come true.*

*I wish I could go inside my video game.*

*I wish the pufferfish could not puff.*

*I wish the wale wouldn't have to inhale.*

*I wish that this christmas eve all of you could believe.*

*I wish I could know how Santa gets down a chimney.*

*I wish Christmas would never end.*

*I wish I could ride on a sled down Mount rushmore.*

*I wish I wish I wish I could think of something.*

*I wish Santa was skinny and green.*