

Delaware Poet Laureate teaches self-expression to middle school students



By Shauna McVey

Delaware's Poet Laureate JoAnn Balingit helps Ryan Tudor and Landon Carroll write poems during Alfred G. Waters Middle School teacher Mary Koster's second-period class.

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Middletown, Del. -

Sixth-grader Jennifer Murray used a line so unique in her alphabetical pantoum poem that Delaware's Poet Laureate JoAnn Balingit asked to steal it for her own works.

Murray began each line of her poem with a different letter of the alphabet and had to get creative when she got to X.

In her poem about competitive cheerleading, she described the excitement of winning with this line – "X-ray my heart and it says first place."

Balingit said it's an interesting choice of words because the heart doesn't show up on X-rays.

"The idea of X-raying a heart is interesting," she said. "It makes you think about the physical and also emotional. It's a really cool image."

Balingit visited Alfred G. Waters Middle School to help students in Mary Koster's classes write poetry.

"The kids are really enjoying it and she's encouraging them to take a risk in their writing," Koster said.

Sheila Ross, program manager for Arts in Education at the Delaware Division of the Arts, said Balingit will visit any school in Delaware that can work poetry into the curriculum.

"It gives the students an opportunity to see the artist in person instead of being talked to about it," Ross said. "It brings a real-life experience into the classroom. She can really take them to another level with what poetry is about."

Murray said she liked the poetry exercise and working with Balingit.

"You get your emotions out and it doesn't matter what you write," she said. "Just write it."

Jasmine Destine and Kristen Erb collaborated on a poem about friendship for one poetry assignment.

"We're trying to put together what we've experienced and what friendship means to

us,” Destine said. “[Balingit is] giving me encouragement. She gets me more into writing.”



Jasmine Destine and Kristen Erb collaborate on a poem about friendship

Balingit worked with Ryan Tudor to help him explore the image of roses to depict bloodshed during hunting. Instead of just “roses,” she suggested he write “roses slowly open up” in one line of his poem.

“She helps me put things together and it makes more sense,” Tudor said.

One exercise Balingit had the students work on was to take lines from other poems and write a poem based around it.

Landon Carroll wrote an entire poem based on a line from a poem he read.

“I took the line and wrote a poem around that,” he said. “It talks about never looking back, keep looking forward. The idea just popped in my head.”

Balingit read several of the students’ poems aloud to the class. Topics ranged from going to the beach and spring to recycling and war to surfing, friendship, April Fool’s Day jokes and more.

Each class also collaborated on a class poem.

“I’m totally impressed,” she said.

Balingit told the class she uses a lot of verbs because they carry more weight than adjectives, and punctuation can be conventional or unconventional.

“You make those decisions while you’re writing and the poem dictates that,” she said.

Balingit said sometimes the subject isn’t known when the student begins, but it will

develop throughout the writing process.

She said rhymes are fun, but not mandatory, and the most important thing about writing poetry is to write it.

Balingit writes in a notebook every day, even if it's just two lines. Her poems are usually about her family, memories, landscapes in Delaware and her ancestry.

She said on the first day she had the students write freely for 10 minutes about whatever they wanted, but no one wanted to share their work. A week later, they were proud of what they'd accomplished and many volunteered to share their poems.

"They have learned so much about each other," Balingit said. "It gives them a minute to reflect on who they are in relationship to the world. I want their poems to be the beginning of a conversation with the world."

She said she taught the students it's OK to write whatever they are thinking or feeling.

"They're not used to having permission to say whatever they want to say and it's a little scary, but they see connections between each other," Balingit said.

She said by teaching students to take ownership of their poems, they learn that writing can be fun.

"Getting their thoughts down, expressing themselves and being proud of themselves, that's the key to getting students to graduate with strong writing skills," Balingit said.

"Getting them to want to write. Once they realize they are authors, they'll approach all their writing assignments differently."

She said poets frequently use lines of other writers as inspiration for their own work.

"Poets have been doing that for ages. It's in the best of intentions," Balingit said. "I'm going to steal a bunch of their lines. I'll get a poem out of it."

The following poem consists of lines written by students in Mary Koster's second-period class at Alfred G. Waters Middle School:

Who am I?
What face do I see
As I watch the darkness?
Do I lie or tell the truth?

What face do I see
On that shadow-covered path?
Do I lie or tell the truth?
Can I be trusted to make a decision?

On that shadow-covered path,
Which way do I turn?
Can I be trusted to make a decision?
Will they listen?

Which way do I turn?
Should I do this way?
Will they listen?
Help me choose the right path.