

February 19, 2009

Senate Appropriations Subcommittee for History, Arts, and Libraries

Good Morning!

My name is Margaret Charette and I'm here to speak to you about Poetry Out loud, which is directed by the Michigan Humanities Council as a partnership with the state arts council. Poetry Out Loud is a recitation program that provides teaching materials, lesson plans, and state competitions to schools across the nation. As an eighteen year veteran teacher in MI public schools, I have seen the value of Poetry Out Loud and implore you to continue its funding.

In 2006, I was teaching a fledgling poetry class at Holt Senior High School. One of my students' least favorite assignments was the recitation of a memorized poem. Now, as any teacher can tell you, we are constantly searching for ideas that will make learning the curriculum not only relevant but also fun. So, when I received information from the Humanities Council about Poetry Out Loud I knew it was the incentive my students needed...a chance to complete locally and maybe even nationally. I can't begin to tell you how exciting it was to see students who might not be interested in poetry, sign up for my class because of the Poetry Out Loud competition. Students from all interest groups became involved. Indeed, in that year, our Holt student who won the state title was best-known around the school for his athletic abilities and took a bit of ribbing for his interest in reciting poems—that is until he went to DC for the national competition.

Again in 2007, Holt High produced the state champ for Poetry Out Loud, Sarah Harris. She is now at Dartmouth where she is very involved in writing and performing poetry. But her win transformed the culture of arts in our building. Poetry was “cool.” Sarah performed in buildings throughout the district, at board meetings, and other school functions. She was a superstar.

The 2008 competition was especially rewarding for me as a teacher. Our school didn't have the state champ, but we had something better: full participation. By that I mean we had Advanced Placement students, art students, athletes, special education students, and if-my-parents-would-let-me-I'd-drop-out students sharing the stage in our school-wide competition. Cheering each other on, sharing the experience of poetry—its power. On that stage was one of my shyest students. A deaf student who, through her interpreter, told me that poetry was difficult. Those of us who hear take the rhythm and cadence of speech for granted. So it was with some hesitation that Jessica agreed to participate in Poetry Out Loud. But she did so because one poem in particular resonated with her—Poe's “Alone”. And on the big day of competition, a very nervous but eloquent Jessica signed and recited this:

From childhood's hour I have not been  
As others were--I have not seen  
As others saw--I could not bring  
My passions from a common spring--  
From the same source I have not taken  
My sorrow--I could not awake  
My heart to joy at the same tone--  
And all I lov'd--*I* lov'd alone

Now her interpretation of it was much better than my reading of it, but I'm sure you can imagine how that poem gave us a glimpse of Jessica. Through Poe, she touched everyone in the room and moved many of us to tears. Without Poetry Out Loud, she might never have had the opportunity to express herself to her peers in such an honest and open way. And her peers might never have understood her as well as they did on that day. Might never have realized the potential of a good poem. That's what Poetry Out Loud does.

For years, in my classroom, I've posted quotes, literary and otherwise, on my walls as a sort of inspirational nudge for all of us. One of my favorites is by Hasari Pal: "All that is not given is lost." What a challenge that is for all of us: students, teachers, parents, and legislators, especially in these difficult times. But today, I don't want to contemplate what might be lost if Poetry Out Loud isn't funded. Instead I want to imagine Michigan's own Robert Frost, Rita Dove, or Billy Collins right here in one of our classrooms, waiting for the next Poetry Out Loud lesson. Waiting to have poetry in all of its challenging, rhythmic, uplifting, experiential, and profound complexities brought to them. Waiting to learn about and share in the human experience in a way that only the arts can do.

I'm just one classroom teacher representing thousands across the state. And I've told you about only a few of the tens of thousands of Travises, Jessicas, and Sarahs across this state who have been or could be positively impacted by Poetry Out Loud. But I hope my stories of the success of the Poetry Out Loud program will convince you to continue its funding.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

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My name is Yvonne Healy. I'm a member of the Michigan Arts & Humanities Touring Program, which is directed by the Michigan Humanities Council as a partnership with the state arts council.

I fear sweeping loss to each of our hometowns due to the proposed cuts to arts and cultural organizations statewide. Most of us in this room are lucky enough to have opportunities that many in Michigan lack. I'm a performance artist, a storyteller, so let me tell you a story.

Last winter, some teens approached me after my performance. That happens a lot in the small towns and villages where the Touring Arts program sends me. Out there it's a rare child who's ever seen a live performer. For them, art belongs only to 6 inch high figures on a cold TV screen. Adults, too, often push to the front after a show, thrilled to see and talk to a real, live artist. Most of these grownups find live performance only through sour whiskey fumes from the cover band at the smoky local bar.

But on that winter day, in a small town with only one traffic light, teenagers crowded around me. "*Don't I know you?*" asked one. Silently I recognized him from a past Touring Arts residency I'd led in an urban homeless shelter downstate. The next second, clouds covered his eyes because he'd placed me. He remembered the kids following me to transform the lead of their homelessness into gold by creating and recording stories onto a CD. Now a year later, he'd moved yet again and was hoping, finally, to carve a new beginning, a new life in this small town. Quick as a rockslide, his face collapsed with the fear of being "outed." Imagine that boy's future branded with the shame of homelessness?

I looked him in the eye. "*Yeah, you made the CD.*" In awe, his friends echoed "*CD?*" looking at the rockstar in their midst. The boy walked away 10 feet tall. Imagine that boy's future now.

That's only one of the thousands of true stories about people changed by Touring Arts programs in hundreds of villages, towns, and cities in each of Michigan's 83 counties. Please go back home. Look around. Each of your communities is richer thanks to arts and cultural programming.

Those stories are our real value.

Yvonne Healy  
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