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Poetry reading at Old Skool's shines the light back on young and old poets

- By RODNEY HARWOOD staff writer and photographer



Anna Baldwin reads a few poems at Old Skool's Headlight-Children's event



Jampa Dorje is associated with the Berkeley Street Poets and the Poets of the Pacific Northwest.



Headlight Children Present “pOetry opening to the infinite.” emcee Kama Camarata was also one of a number of local poets to read Friday night at Old Skool's.



Xavier Cavasos reads before his psycho-poesis performance at the conclusion of Old Skool's event.



Prowl coordinator and the lead organizer for Inland Poetry Joanna Thomas has been active in local poetry presentations for many years.

Words have a way of being heard, rising above all rhetoric, cultural clash, and social injustice, bringing meaning to a world in transition.

The city's inaugural Poetry Prowl in 2016 helped usher in a new crest on an old wave, giving poets and writers their place in the sun. Baudelaire's

Birthday Bash was called and it set in motion alternative thinking to a city known for rodeo and its annual jazz festival.

The Poetry Prowl gained momentum through its first four years, but in the fifth year the three-day, multi-venue event ran up against the COVID-19 pandemic and has been sitting idle, waiting for a jumpstart.

But a group of writers comprised of old and new poets has things back on track with their first poetry reading this past Friday night at the Old Skool's Back Room on North Main Street, called Headlight Children Present "pOetry opening to the infinite."

"I think it's important to have a counterculture," said Xavier Cavazos, whose terrifying, heartfelt words in defiance of the battle with drug addiction reached a climactic finale, bouncing back from bouncing off the walls as it were, similar to Velvet Underground's "Heroin" in the late 1960s.

"Sometimes other ideas dominate the ideals of the community, but the counterculture is a way to make space and access for everybody. (Old Skool's owner) Carol (Cox) is really important in making a space where art and language and performance can be validated. She offers a space for people to add to the culture of the community."

The night included the Old School writers like Cavazos, who is a Moses Lake native but has lived in Ellensburg for over 20 years. It also included work by Ellensburg Arts Commission 2022 Arts Treasure Award winner Jampa Dorje, and Prowl coordinator Joanna Thomas, who is the lead organizer for Inland Poetry.

Ellensburg Poet Laureate Marie Marchand was a part of the night that included some 10 poets. Marchand read from her newest release "Gifts to the Attentive," which was published in May by Winter Goose Publishing and is available at Jerrol's and Amazon.

"Jampa and Xavier did something over at Gallery One, but this is the first poetry reading since the shutdown," said Thomas, who was heavily influenced by the work of Bob Dylan, whose vocabulary and ability to string words together were especially influential to her creative process.

"Tonight is very important. We have our Poet Laureate Marie Marchand, who is our literary ambassador. We're trying to raise awareness. I've been making visual art for 30 years, so now I'm combining my poetry with my visual arts."

The evening was a combination of spoken word with an intermingling of music. The next generation of poets included Anna Baldwin, Kama Camarata, Quintin Ragan and recent Central Washington University graduate Quinn Vrrivernek, who mixed his poetry with guitar.

"There was a handful of people, but tonight was my idea. It took Jampa and knowing people to help put it together. It's an opportunity to bring up people with different styles and see what Ellensburg has to offer," 2022 CWU graduate Quentin Ragan said. "When we think of the Beat Poet, we think of them coming from congested areas like San Francisco or New York.

“But we have poets here in Ellensburg and this is an opportunity for the poets to come out and read what they’ve been doing. Personally, I like to capture some sort of experience of the common reality that other people can relate to.”

Dorje is associated with the Berkeley Street Poets and the Poets of the Pacific Northwest. He is the founder and operator of dPress, which has published over 200 titles, mostly of poetry and most in chapbook format.

In 1965, he attended the Berkeley Poetry Conference where he had the opportunity to study under such avant-garde poets as Allen Ginsberg, Jack Spicer with the San Francisco Renaissance, Beat Poet Lewis Barrett Welch Jr. and Carolyn Ashley Kizer, who Pulitzer Prize in 1985.

Poetry is the theatre of the mind. It captures and expresses the moment through the spoken word, he says. Friday night’s poetry reading was an opportunity to that continue the journey.

“When I came here the first person, I met was John Bennett. He owned the Vagabond Magazine and published poets from all over the country,” the former owner of the Four Winds Bookstore, who took up the practice of Vajrayana Buddhism in 1972 said.

“He was considered an Outlaw Poet. He worked for Dick and Jane. Mark Halperin was teaching at CWU, so there were a lot of both academic and counter-culture poets here. We’re just trying to keep that going.”

The room was full, poetry lovers came from as far away as Yakima to join in on what will hopefully continue to provide a space for the counter-culture and its rising stars.

"It was pretty well advertised I thought. We had fliers up everywhere. I Googled all of my friends and let them know, even some deceased," Dorje said with a twinkle in his eye like there was a poem formulating somewhere down the road.



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