

Q & A



Dan Newth

Street Roots vendor and writer Dan Newth shares how poetry changed his life.

Newth's poems will be featured in the upcoming anthology, "I Am Not a Poet: 15 Years of Street Roots Poetry and Art" to be published Feb. 27, 2014.

You can hear more about Dan's poetry on KBOO's "Between the Covers" Jan. 23, 2014.

Q How long have you been involved with Street Roots?

I first got involved in January of 2002. I was homeless at the time.

Q Have you taken part in SR's writing group?

I used to lead the writers' group, my wife and I did.... When it was in Old Town, random people would wander in, sometimes from off the streets. So, [leading the group] is dealing with different personalities, trying to be inclusive, coming up with prompts and just letting the group flow.

Q What inspires you to write poetry?

I never understood poetry. I started writing journalistic articles. My first article was an easy, positive one on the Portland Rescue Mission. I'd call it a soft, fuzzy piece. I was writing journalism and columns, and I didn't really understand poetry.... It was kind of a competitive thing with Israel [Bayer], I guess, because he would write a lot of poetry and get it in the paper, so I just decided to start.... So I originally started writing poetry so I could get my byline in the paper more often. Having your byline in the paper really helps sell the issues. People will ask, "Have you written anything in there?" My poems tend to be very simple. I try to make them so they make sense to me and so I think other people can read them and understand what I was writing about. Some other poetry I read, I have no idea what it's about.

Q So you try to write poems people can relate to?

Yeah, "Dragonfly Dance" I wrote about a time in the summer when I was sleeping outside. I was homeless. It was late summer, it was dry and there were dragonflies flying around above me, at a spot down the hill by OHSU that I used to sleep at. "Room with a View," I wrote that on my honeymoon. We were at Lincoln City, and our room was up on a bluff where we could look out... You know how the waves get efferves-

cent, or, phosphorescent? They glow white. My poems tend to be political.... I think my first poem was called "That Old Little Jones," and it was about America's oil addiction.

Q Do you have a specific time or a place where you write your poems?

It's not that easy for me. It can hit me when it can hit me. There's no way I can force it. I'm not that skilled a writer where I can force myself to come up with something.... Something's gotta strike me.... Everybody's got those moments in life where your brain lights up, and things seem brighter.... Those tend to be the times I can write about.

Q Has writing poetry made a positive impact on your life?

Definitely on my self-esteem. I flunked English in high school. I had never been diagnosed dyslexic, as far as I knew.... I remember first grade, they had to put me with a tutor to enunciate letters and vowel sounds.... I never got English in high school. I never graduated high school because of that, and ... you can't really do college or anything if you can't write ... I never really learned to spell, and the [Street Roots] volunteers worked with me a lot, sitting down in front of the computer and pounding out something, and then working through the mistakes. When you write it out by hand you repeatedly make the same mistake or a different mistake, and it's very frustrating. You never seem to come up with a workable piece of writing. But on a word program, you only have to fix an error one time, and then it's done. I'm still a much slower writer than some people, but I eventually pound it out. Also, my wife, she was working on her MFA in writing. She was in an emergent journalism class, and she went to Dignity Village and Write Around Portland and Street Roots, looking for homeless writers to do a story about, and she ended up doing it with me, and we ended up getting married after that.

Q Wow, that's how you met?

Yeah. So, writing has improved my life.