

Resident Poet Elicits Reflective Prose from Springhill Students

By Lou Fancher



Ruth Gendler

Photo Ohlen Alexander

Trolling through the boisterous halls of Lafayette's Springhill Elementary School, J. Ruth Gendler is a transformational teacher whose charm and skill has unleashed the writer in countless students.

The visual artist and writer, who came to the school under the California Poet to the Schools and Young Audiences of the Bay Area programs, began her student residencies in 1994.

"It started with a cold call to the former principal, Bruce Woodhams, who really loved the program," Gendler recalled. "There was a long period where there were poets in all the Lafayette schools' fourth grades. Springhill expanded it to three grades, which is how it remains."

Working with third- through fifth-graders allows Gendler to establish continuity and encourages students to develop untapped abilities.

"It's a wonderful opportunity for the kids who write well, but it's really great for the kids who don't like to write. To [see them] put their thoughts and feelings down and feel success at expressing themselves is one of the great joys for me."

Deborah Hungerford, primarily a fifth-grade teacher and at the school since 1989, responded about Gendler's work: "Ruth has provided not only a forum for deep reflection, but also a vehicle in which students can play with the rhythm, flow and visual nature of language."

Indeed, the key ingredients in Gendler's work with students and in the adult workshops she leads, are fun, imagery, and sounds. It all leads to imaginative and surprisingly personal poetry.

"Poetry is art from the world around us," she said, beginning to describe her life's work. "It's a place where there's room for feeling."

The Book of Qualities, an exploration of 74 human emotions Gendler first self-published and that was recently released by Harper Perennial (a subsidiary of HarperCollins Publishers), is the result of a thought she had in fourth grade.

"The first shopping center was being opened in Omaha, Nebraska. I imagined a store that sold qualities, which to me were associated with colors," she said. "Years later, I realized I had a book."

Pleasure, worry, fear, confu-

sion, and patience were the first five qualities she tackled. Today, at 250 million and counting, the book includes anger, terror, change, and more—all launched into a surreal land of possibilities through associations with color, food and moods.

Gendler teaches her students that writing is work, with revision and review playing a large role. She finds that young writers of today, reflecting the sped up world in which they live, are more impatient and slightly less skillful.

"But sometimes, I decide they are more squirrely, and then I go into the classroom and they pay wonderful attention," she said.

What she most appreciates and what has not changed, are their imaginations.

"I've had many discussions with third- to fifth-grade kids that say younger kids have more imagination and that adults have no imagination," she laughed, "but for me it's a lot about growing your imagination and increasing your powers of observation."

Gendler recommends walking in nature, listening to dreams, learning a foreign language, and her favorite, asking questions to foster creativity.

"Children are so casually profound," she said, suggesting that even on the "not-best days," young writers produce surprising results.

With adults, Gendler finds a negative experience most often has interrupted their artistic flow.

"People who had professors give them an F, or a brother who read their journal," she said, offering examples of creative stop signs. "A lot of it has to do with harsh criticism."

Hungerford described the safe, playful environment Gendler establishes, concluding that it is the primary reason students in her classes – even the less forthright writers – come forward with "deep, reflective poetry."

Gendler's students, whether young, mid-aged or senior, are what she calls "an unbelievably gorgeous part of my life." Narration, she believes, comes from trying to make sense of the world and courageously placing feelings into the open. Inspiration, her students might add, comes from the soul of a generous teacher.

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Writing Workshops and Camps in Lafayette

Author, Springhill Elementary poet in the school, and artist Ruth Gendler is offering a "Writing for Artists Workshop" from noon to 4 p.m. on Sunday, March 25 at printmaker Sherry Bell's Lafayette studio. The afternoon will be devoted to recovering the sense of writing as play--drawing the shapes of the letters, inventing conversations between colors, making up a dream for an artistic ancestor. The workshop gives a safe place to explore language, time to give voice to the textures, colors and shapes in our art, and a time and space dedicated to imagination and metaphor, art and soul.

Gendler is also offering children's summer writing camps in Lafayette. "Bones to Bridges: Children's Creative Writing Camp" will have two sessions this summer: Session One: June 18-23; Session Two: July 9-13. For information and to register for summer camp sessions, or for the Writing for Artists event, contact Ruth Gendler at info@ruthgendler.com or 510-525-7853.

My Heart

My heart holds the things my brain can't.
It holds the memories you want to forget.
My heart is a galloping horse running into the distance.
Sometimes it leaves me everything but sorrow.
My heart is a thunder storm. It is not forgiving.
My heart is a tear drop. It cools out the fire.
My heart is a space of air trying to grab on but failing.
My heart is a bird, singing melodies.
Never showing a sign of stopping.
My heart is my mother showing me the way.
My heart is a root insisting on growth.
-Sophia McManus, Springhill School

Untitled

I am the wind whispering around the edges
I am the intersections of the alphabets,
an outbreak of order, new directions,
I am a white rose,
a black bear,
a wristwatch keeping time on the moon,
a drawer full of socks,
a journal of paper made from mango and mulberry,
the applesauce my grandmother made from the apple tree on 58th street.
I am the silence in the forest after the storm
the memory of rain,
the shimmering spaces between words
I am indigo jackets and red skirts and purple coats
I am candlelight, the smell of lavender
sandalwood, rosemary, good bread.
-J. Ruth Gendler

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