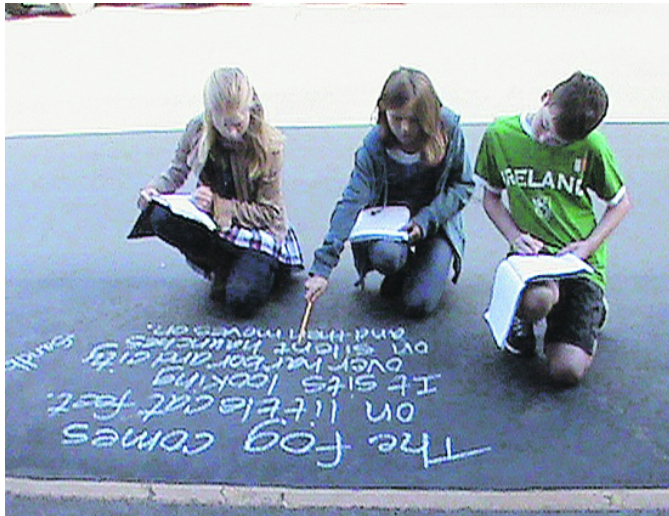


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Poetry - A Team Sport at Del Rey Elementary

Laurie Snyder



Chloe Liljegren (left), Brigette Finger (center), and Brendan McFeely (right) ponder Carl Sandburg's "Fog," one of the famous poems chalked around the schoolyard for Del Rey Elementary's National Poetry Day celebration April 16, 2012. Photo Laurie Snyder

"Hey! Over here," came the call, followed by the unmistakable sound of sneaker-clad feet slapping against macadam - their many fifth-grade owners bolting as one in pursuit of the prize.

Gym class? Soccer match? Trotting tootsies signaling the start of recess?

Nope. Those were the sounds of poetry - in motion - as boys and girls actively engaged in celebrating National Poetry Month at Orinda's Del Rey Elementary School April 16.

Sedentary students suddenly set free to skip and sleuth gestured gleefully at words written in chalk on walks and walls by some unknown crusader for creativity: "Today Is Very Boring," by Jack Prelutsky; "The Road Not Taken," by Robert Frost; "Who Has Seen the Wind?" by Christina Rossetti; "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," by Wallace Stevens.

Kids ran from stanza to stanza, jabbering joyfully and even forming up teams to help locate lines of verse more quickly - not because they wanted to get the assignment over with - but because they were having a blast and wanted to encourage each other to have fun learning, too.

Nowadays, it's not really news to hear that teachers employ resources over and above the traditional classroom basics. Many do - even though they must often pay for such extras out of their own pockets - because they're forced to compete for the hearts and minds of their students against flashy video games, smart phones, and other high tech toys.

But what happens when those same resources fall into the hands of truly gifted educators? Those resources become something special - magic wands that call forth a sense of wonder in children, transforming merely satisfactory students into enthusiastic, lifelong learners.

Kristin Rasmussen, the brain behind Del Rey's poetry day, credits www.poets.org as her inspiration. "This is a great resource for parents, teachers, and anyone who loves poetry," she said of the web site.

Known affectionately by the kids as "the library lady," Rasmussen began working at Del Rey more than six years ago as a classroom assistant, and has been the Library Technician for the past two.

"The wonderful people at the Educational Foundation of Orinda (EFO) and the Del Rey Parents' Club raise the funds to keep the district libraries open and staffed with library techs like me. I am so grateful for their support."

Rasmussen's 'partner in rhyme' on this special day was fifth-grade teacher John Moran, who turned his young Sherlocks loose and then held a classroom response session later in the week to keep his kids' passion for poetry percolating.

"I love to pick things that they may not be familiar with - things they might not see normally," said Rasmussen, who not only put a great deal of thought into which poems to chalk around the school - but worked out where best to place the lines of verse to help the fifth-graders truly connect with what they were reading.

Asked for his thoughts in the midst of poem-hunting with a buddy, one fifth-grader did not hesitate as he recalled lines from "Nothing Gold Can Stay" by Robert Frost. "I think this is my favorite. 'Nature's first garden is gold.'"

Rasmussen listened thoughtfully and then planted a new seed as she tipped the boys off to S.E. Hinton's "The Outsiders" - a wonderful book waiting for them in a future classroom experience.

"They love the chase of it, I think," said Rasmussen, who noted that even the school's littlest ones got into the act, tugging moms along as designated readers when they noticed that something was different upon arrival at school that day.

Later, fourth-graders were suddenly sleuthing as well after their teacher spontaneously seized a learning opportunity too good to pass up.

Teachers at Del Rey just took the road "less traveled." Someday, their students may find that decision "made all the difference" in how they look at the world.

Reach the reporter at: laurie@lamorindaweekly.com

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