

Random of Acts of Poetry strike Saanich

On our way down the hallway into the resource room, I ask Susan Stenson the one question I probably shouldn't.

"Are you nervous?"

A pause.

Our eyes meet.

"Yes," she says. "I always am right before."

Two weeks before Stenson's first day reading her poetry to high school students during Random Acts of Poetry week, the poet and Claremont secondary school teacher read to a packed art gallery at her book launch oozing confidence behind the podium. But that audience was an easy sell. Gallery guests, clinging their freshly printed books and sipping punch were already sold on the merits of poetry. Teens need a little more coaxing.

Random Acts of Poetry is an annual event, that sees poets from across the country randomly stop in on the lives of strangers, recite to them a poem and leave them with a book of their poetry. The seventh annual poetry blitz is co-organized by the Victoria READ Society and poet and author Wendy Morton, who founded Random Acts of Poetry after her run as Poet of the Skies, where she read her poetry to West Jett passengers.

Morton and Stenson both agree that their feedback has been almost completely positive, but I'm picking up on Stenson's nerves. This is poetry in the wild.

We slip into a learning assistance classroom where Stenson will read and I'll observe, maybe take a few photos. She assesses the scene.

Students notice the tall woman, striding through classroom with a conspicuous "Random Acts of Poetry" sign. They eye me with a camera around my shoulder. They are curious, but not vocal.

One boy lifts his eyes from his work.

Stenson asks if him she may read him a poem and give him a book.

He is uncomfortable. Still curious, but the answer is no.

"That's fine, you can just think about it," she says and moves on to another student.



Susan Stenson 'poems' students at Claremont secondary school with a reading from her book *Nobody Move* during Random Acts of Poetry week.

Natalie North/News staff

A girl in a green sweater who had been working quietly lifts her eyes from her book to look at Stenson.

"Can I read you a romantic poem?" Stenson says. "I know you like romance."

The girl in the green sweater agrees and the boy who had denied the one-on-one reading keeps a close watch on the activity. When the first reading is through, and when the girl has her book signed and "I've been poemed" sticker affixed to her green sweater, Stenson approaches the boy again.

Finally, he accepts the offer.

After his former English teacher reads him a poem, the boy who had struggled with language smiles and poses for a photo. Stenson displays the sign beside him.

Another girl at the end of the table watched the rogue reading. "Who's the poet?" she says. Stenson raises a sheepish hand. "I am."

Later, the same girl holds Stenson's book in her hand. "Are these everybody's poems in here?" she says.

"Nope. Just mine," Stenson says.

On our way from the classroom to our next sneak attack of poetry, Stenson says that these are the kids with the stories to tell, the kids who have struggled and get hit the hardest with funding cuts.

"For A students, success means asking questions," she says, "and for other kids, fear of ridicule prevents them from speaking up."

Stenson approaches four students taking a break in the student lounge.

They look uncertain as the teacher suggests she read them a poem, but they give their blessing and Stenson begins to lure them in with the rhythm in the rise and fall in the inflection of her voice and her ever-present sense of humour.

When Stenson has read her last words, signed the book and stuck them with stickers, one of the girls at the table asks a familiar question: "Whose poems are these?" she says.

The initial suggestion of a private poetry reading over lunch is a bizarre proposition for most anyone, but the idea that a real live published poet is padding through the high school hallways and leading English classes is even more foreign.

Random Acts of Poetry is special this year because it puts poetry books in the hands of teens who might not otherwise have them and bridges the disconnect between the reader and the anonymous writer of the words on the page. Claremont secondary has a long reputation of producing talented writing students, through its creative writing classes and production of their student literary journal. But even at a school like Claremont, the connection students make with

literature is one that doesn't often come naturally. We need more regular acts of poetry, fiction, drama and creative nonfiction.

If students met more of the writers in their own town and were able to experience the power of somebody else's words live, they might be more inclined to hone their own craft and keep Victoria's writing community strong into the future.

Piquing interest in poetry after only a two-minute reading is not only quite captivating to observe, but as one student remarked of Stenson's new publication: "It's something to be proud of."

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Gala fundraiser aims for \$40,000 for literacy

The Roatry Club of Saanich and the Victoria READ Society have teamed up to raise \$20,000 each in support of literacy initiatives in the Greater Victoria Area, including Rotary scholarships and Random Acts of Poetry (which also receives support from the Canda Council for the Arts).

A live auction, dinner and entertainment from the Esquimalt Jazz Band, the Pearson College Dancers and local dance band Loose Change is slated for Oct. 23 at 6 p.m. at the University of Victoria's University Club. Tickets are \$100 (with a \$60 tax receipt) available at 250-388-7225. As the registered charity enters its 35th year, staff continue to revamp programming and make way for new volunteer opportunities on the way later this year.

For more information, check out www.readsociety.bc.ca.