

Flying poet rewarded with funding for youth project

BY GRANIA LITWIN, TIMES COLONIST SEPTEMBER 30, 2010

Several years ago, as official Poet of the Skies for WestJet Airlines, Wendy Morton read poems to entertain passengers, and sometimes wrote them on the fly, too.

One man, who requested a verse on one of those jaunts and was granted a poem by Morton, was so delighted he returned the favour by sponsoring a national project she had envisioned.

"He's been the anonymous sponsor ever since," she recalled. "He put up his hand for a poem -- and changed my life."

Her project, called Random Acts of Poetry, takes place from coast to coast in Canada and is much more down to earth than her previous gig. It features about 30 poets across the nation giving impromptu readings in bus stations, schools, curling rinks and cafés, and handing out 50 tomes of their own poems.

This year, Victoria's poet laureate is encouraging her colleagues to water the roots of young human shoots in juvenile detention centres, alternative schools and youth groups.

"We are focusing this event on vulnerable youth," Morton said. "We will choose poems that speak to young people and hope to encourage them to find poems in their own lives."

She will read at Lauwelnew Tribal School. She said that working with First Nations youngsters is the most wonderful thing she has ever done.

Why vulnerable youth? "Because poetry is a way into language," she said.

The event runs from Oct. 4 to 9, and also features local poets Susan Stenson and Carla Funk, who will read in alternative education classes. In other cities, poets will visit detention centres.

The program, which started in 2004 with help from the Victoria READ Society, previously targeted adult literacy and ESL groups, as well as random crowds.

"We are now visiting places where youth may be marginalized, or may not have had as many opportunities as others," said the society's Claire Rettie.

"It's a lovely fit and we get amazing responses from people who have never owned a book before, who have never been given anything in their lives. This day has changed them."

glitwin@tc.canwest.com

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