Oregon Writing Festival

Portland State University (PSU) becomes a pre-college institution every first Saturday in May, when a thousand children, grades four through twelve, descend on the campus to practice and celebrate writing. They come from all parts of Oregon, bringing a sample of their best writing as their admission ticket.

The Oregon Writing Festival was created in 1985 through the cooperation of language arts specialists Tim Gillespie (Multnomah County Education Service District), Mary Bothwell (Portland Public Schools), Frank Mazzio (Oregon Department of Education), Ulrich Hardt (Oregon Council of Teachers of English and PSU), and teachers from around the state.

The festival was held at the University of Oregon from 1985 to 1989. Since then, it has been at Portland State, whose Graduate School of Education now co-sponsors the event with the Oregon Council of Teachers of English. The festival celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary in 2009, making it one of the longest-running writing festivals for students in the United States.

At the festival, more than 150 adults work with the students, who are placed into sharing groups of ten to present and critique their writing. Students also participate in two writing workshops conducted by teachers and professional writers. In a general session appropriate for their age group, they listen to award-winning authors such as internationally known children’s and young adult authors Jane Yolen and Gary Soto; Oregon Poet Laureate Lawson Inada; National Book Award winner Virginia Euwer Wolff; and Oregon Book Award winners Eric Kimmel, Susan Fletcher, and Craig Lesley.

Norah Palmer, who had attended four festivals while in elementary and middle school, wanted her "writing-prone peers at Gladstone High School to have this same wonderful opportunity" and sought permission for them to attend. Long-time Pendleton High School teacher John Scanlan wrote: "The OWF is a life-changing event for students, especially those from rural areas who feel isolated until they meet all these other young people with whom they share so much. My students have returned and conducted their own writing workshops for peers and for children in Pendleton elementary schools." Rebecca Phinney from Umatilla County attended five times, "taking away more from each experience. The first time I was too shy to read my own story; now I'm the first to volunteer, eager to share raw, just-written drafts. I'm looking forward to returning to the OWF as a teacher."

Written by Ulrich H. Hardt

Further Reading:

Oregon Council of Teachers of English. "Oregon Writing Festival." http://octe.org/writing_festival.html.

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