

Loudoun County Public Library: Try Poetry 2010

by Linda Holtslander

In 2009, the Loudoun County Public Library adopted a five-year strategic plan that included a goal of building community to be developed through programming at the libraries and other locations. Given this mandate, the library looked for opportunities to bring citizens of all ages together through public programs of varying themes and formats that would reach out and appeal to a wide audience base. These offerings have been presented by both staff and professional presenters in library branches and venues in the community. The strategic plan also called for an enhancement of the educational partnership between the libraries and school system. While in the past library programming had been offered in many of the schools, a more consistent focus on reaching high school students and Juvenile Detention Center detainees was now regarded as a challenging priority. Given these directives, the library brainstormed to identify the one programming theme that could run throughout the year and would have the potential to accomplish many of the goals of the strategic plan.

In 2010, the library system elected to commit their major programming efforts to providing new ways for the community to “bump” into poetry. This would be the first time the library sustained a single theme throughout the year. The deciding factors in select-



Nick Grzeda, Loudoun County English teacher, leads the weekly poetry slam at Rust Library's A. V. Symington Teen Center.

ing poetry as the main vehicle for programming were:

- The possibility of sparking borderless conversations within the diverse community through the use of poetry and poets.
- The opportunity to dismantle the often self-imposed barriers to poetry and show the reader/listener that, within a few short lines, poetry can evoke in each of us the emotions to laugh, smile, think, and feel.

Critical to the focus of the Try Poetry 2010 project was the facilitation of mini-workshops and

Linda Holtslander is the division manager for programming, community relations, and development for the Loudoun County Public Library. She was a Fulbright Scholar to the Helsinki City Library in Finland from 2008–2009. While there, she participated in the Next Library initiative, whose main purpose is to share and build knowledge together. Try Poetry was the 2011 winner of the John Cotton Dana Award, the most prestigious award given for public relations. The award is sponsored by the American Library Association's Library Leadership and Management Association and the H. W. Wilson Company.

brainstorming sessions with library staff. These sessions stressed the goal of poetry saturation in all programming presented by the library. From children's storytimes to teen and adult programs, elements of poetry would be discernible. These sessions also allowed for various individuals with talents and an interest in poetry to share their expertise with other library staff. From these sessions came support, enthusiasm, and a commitment from staff to market the initiative to their customers. Try Poetry reached out to Loudoun County Public Schools and, working with key figures that included the English department, specific English teachers, library media staff, and the management of the Loudoun



Left, more than 600 people heard and met Loudoun County Public Library's 1Book1Community author Nikki Giovanni on October 20.

Above, students at Loudoun County High School (Leesburg) present poet Nikki Giovanni with a remembrance of her visit to their school.

County Juvenile Detention Center, plans were developed to weave Try Poetry into the schools' curricula during the year. The team identified specific programs that the library and schools would cofa-

cilitate, including the Poet in Residence project, poetry slams, poet visits, and the 1Book1Community program. One issue fundamental to the initiative was how to maintain and sustain the energy and

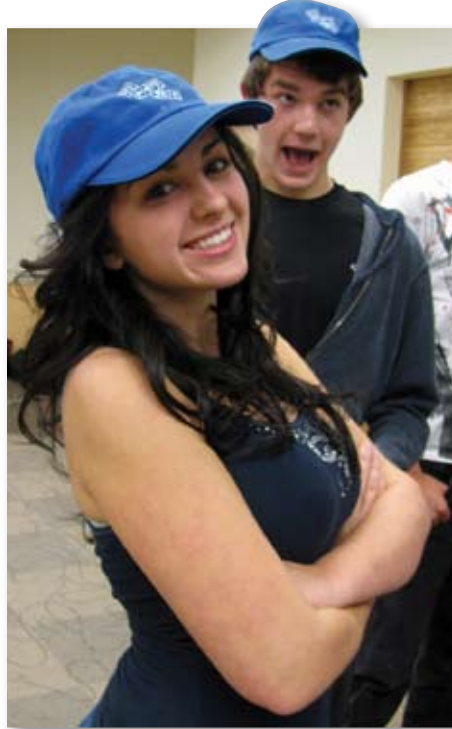
interest in poetry during the year. The library had never attempted a project of this scope: one theme that required yearlong attention to its promotion.

A strong marketing campaign

was designed for the community, building on the concept that every culture has a form of poetry. Community partners representing the diversity of Loudoun County were invited to participate, such as La Voz, a Hispanic/Latino organization. Likewise, the library staff was instrumental in the public relations operation. By consistently channeling information on forthcoming programs to the staff and encouraging them to contribute to program development and word-of-mouth marketing, the library created a powerful formula for success.

The library built social capital through verbal and visual branding that was directed at all aspects of the initiative. The winter edition of *Pages*, the library's magazine, introduced the community to the concept. Through the easily recognizable, non-age-specific image of magnetic poetry with the tag "Try Poetry 2010," residents began to see the theme of the library's invitation to poetry. Every issue of *Pages* carried the theme throughout and included a feature page with consistent branding to highlight the programs and poets.

Paramount to the success of the year of Try Poetry was the regular generation of appealing, multifaceted communication materials that relayed the message to the intended audiences and the general community. These items ranged from the inclusion of the Try Poetry logo in staff email signature lines to printed materials, T-shirts, hats, and ephemera. Particular care was given to the selection of programs that would appeal to the various target-age audiences. Mindful of the often-misplaced belief that poetry is esoteric, the programs were designed to change that perception and make poetry approachable. The library, through its intensified partnership with the Loudoun County Public Schools, had many of the presentations in



Left, students attending one of the library's many hip-hop poetry programs proudly wear their "Try Poetry" hats.

Below, a Book-in-a-Day poet celebrates the launching of the student-authored poetry collection (un)defined.

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the libraries and schools filmed by Loudoun County Public School Television, which aired the programming throughout Loudoun County on its Comcast Cable channel. These programs and poet interviews were simultaneously webcast on the Loudoun County Public School website and also posted "Between the Lines" on Safari Montage, which made the programs available to all classroom teachers. Prior to the Try Poetry initiative, this significant collaboration between the schools and library system did not exist.

The dedicated Try Poetry web-



page highlighted a variety of areas for customers' exploration. Each month the site featured a new genre of poetry, suggested a variety of poetry websites, and highlighted programs offered at the branches and in the community. Specific to this webpage was the monthly Faces of Poetry video offering in which one community member read a favorite poem aloud in a location of his or her choice. The video production was an educational collaboration with the television and digital media students of



Students work together to create a book in a day with author, poet, and teacher Kwame Alexander.

A Poem for Loudoun County's "Try Poetry 2010" Initiative

WHEN THE WORLD is not so beautiful
When the women can no longer find their song
When the children refuse to laugh
and their dreams are wild and untamed,
like mustangs in the dark.

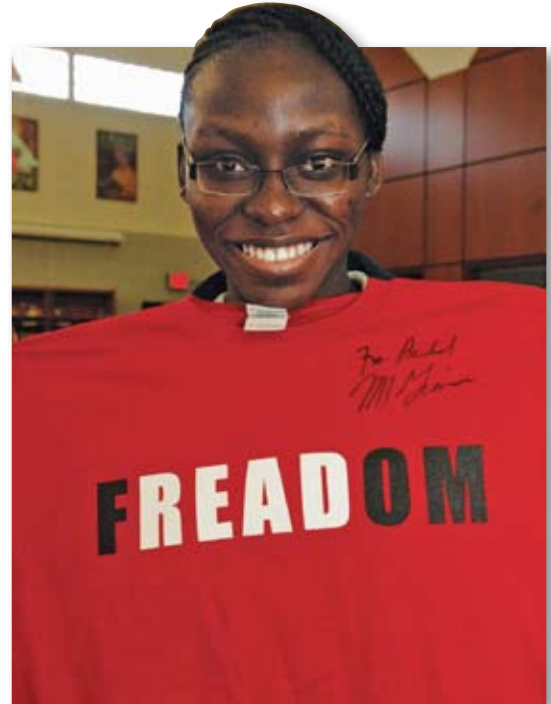
When the world is not so beautiful
When there are no boys to teach to love
When the water is inhospitable
and the promise of life collapses
How will we open the sky
for the women and men becoming?
How will we show summer
to the beautiful ones yet unborn?

This is not simple.
But, we can begin with a book.

A winter coat for the soul
A pair of shoes for the mind?
a world lit
with cool words
that know how to cook
and love to party.
A get-together of emotions
A buffet of ideas
A story that knows how to fly
Let the words be our glue
Let each page spread power
Try. Poetry.

These are the things that can change us
These are *words changing worlds*.

—Kwame Alexander, Loudoun County Poet-in-Residence



Students proclaim their rFREADom to read and receive a T-shirt for poet Nikki Giovanni to sign, with an excerpt from her poem "Good Books" on the back.

Left, young customers at the Concrete Poetry program featuring John Grandits enjoy the unique format this poetry offers.

Monroe Technical Center, an alternative high school. Community members who read on the Faces of Poetry webpage represented a vast demographic of cultures, occupations, and ages. Participants ranged from an advocate for mental health issues to a firefighter, teens at the weekly poetry slam, and the lead teacher for the Juvenile Detention Center. Poems were read in a variety of foreign languages, including Spanish and Croatian. These videos became a powerful marketing tool for the Try Poetry initiative and were another element in the library-school partnership.

In addition to the web presence, Facebook was used to promote the programs and events. *The Washing-*

**I knew that the answer
was "Try Poetry,"
so I began with the
question, "Why should I,"
and from there I took a look
at all the wonderful things
that poetry and reading
can bring to our lives,
to this world.**

**—Kwame Alexander
on writing the poem
for Try Poetry**

ton Post provided extensive coverage, which broadened the scope of the outreach. Posters and flyers branded with the Try Poetry logo were distributed and displayed at all branch libraries, in the schools, and at community groups and area organizations. The constant saturation of poetry was wide and diverse. The library wove Try Poetry into every aspect of its agenda: the director's farewell party featured an invitation in rhyming couplets, a poetry performance presentation was done in support of a traveling exhibit, and the annual 1Book-1Community selection was a book of poetry.

Throughout the year, the library scheduled programs for children,



The cover of Pages, the library's magazine, advertised the initiative.

Below, the library received a wonderful letter of support from the Poetry Foundation.

adults, and teens that celebrated, through live experiences with poets, the magic of words. Staff-presented programs included more than ninety weekly storytimes that offered an aspect of poetry, children's book groups with poetry themes, adult poetry book discussions, and writing groups led by staff that wrote personal memoirs in poetry. English for Speakers of Other Languages groups shared poetry in their native languages, and children and teens wrote sidewalk poems.

The community was invited to participate in Hip-Hop Poetry; Poems for Two Voices; I Can Haiku, Can You?; and weekly teen poetry slams. The poet John Grandits wrote Concrete Poetry. The Little Theatre of the Deaf performed, teaching the audience the sign for



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Try Poetry 2010 is a remarkable program that coaxes poetry out of the lonely garret to which it is sometimes exiled in America, and gives it new life in the community. Most of us learn to read through verse, but then, somehow, in school it often becomes a puzzle instead of a pleasure. Many of us turn away. The Loudoun County Public Library offers an inspiring array of readings, workshops, and discussion groups for all ages, reminding us that poetry can entertain even as it enriches. Poetry needs readers no less than it needs writers. As Whitman said, "To have great poets, there must be great audiences, too." Because of talented and resourceful librarians, poetry is flourishing in Loudoun County. Great audiences are not only discovering great poets, but they are also sharing them, making them part of their own lives and the life of the neighborhood. Whitman would be proud.

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Poet Glenis Redmond performs the classic poetry of African Americans in support of the National Endowment for the Humanities exhibit, Forever Free: Abraham Lincoln's Journey to Emancipation, hosted by the Rust Library.

Right, families celebrated the magic of words through live experiences with poets.



poetry emanating from the heart. Library branches built Poet-Trees, and the library asked the community to celebrate Put a Poem in Your Pocket Day on April 29. There were local poets who came up to the mic and shared their talents, and then there were the recognized poets: Kwame Alexander, Beny Blaq, Steve Scafidi, Carolyn Malachi, George Ella Lyon, James Scott, Bill Wellington, Cristopolis, E. Ethelbert Miller, Glenis Redmond, and 1Book1Community poet Nikki Giovanni, who celebrated poetry at the branch libraries, high schools, and Juvenile Detention Center. Program highlights included:

- Poet in Residence: Poet and

author Kwame Alexander was selected to be Loudoun County Public Library's Poet in Residence. He presented at the high schools, offered workshops at the libraries, and hosted a Brown Bag Lunch for Loudoun County government staff. He performed poetry at the After Hours Teen Center and wrote poetry with the kids at the library. He presented new emerging poets to the community and supported the work of youth finding their voices through words. Working with the Loudoun County High School, Kwame Alexander transformed the students into a publishing team and created a Book-in-a-Day. Weeks later when the

library and Alexander hosted the book launch of *un(defined)*, the poetry collection the students authored, these same young people returned with family and friends to shine in the recognition of what they had produced with Alexander. As the library's Poet in Residence, Kwame Alexander presented workshops to the detainees at the Juvenile Detention Center. These skillful presentations to incarcerated youth brought alive the realization that poetry knows no boundaries or limitations.

- 1Book1Community: According to the Library of Congress and Center for the Book, Loudoun

County Public Library is the first library system to select a book of poetry for their 1Book1Community title. Through the Irwin Uran Gift Fund, the library distributed 8,000 free copies of *Bicycles: Love Poems* by poet, activist, and professor Nikki Giovanni, who presented at Northern Virginia Community College, Loudoun County High School, and Douglass School, an alternative high school. Six hundred community members heard Giovanni's presentation. All the high school students received a red fREADom T-shirt. The following excerpt from Giovanni's poem "Good Books" appeared on the back: *There will be times people will not like me. I will be banned and forbidden. But I will be brave. I will stand*

for light and truth. Nikki Giovanni received standing ovations...and hugs.

The yearlong Try Poetry initiative was acknowledged by the

**... poetry is most
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community hears it,
sees it, hears about it,
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American Library Association's (ALA) Public Program Division. Loudoun County Public Library

was invited to participate as one of three speakers in the conference program, "Poetry as a Community Builder: Expanding Outreach through Poetry." This event was presented by the National Endowment for the Arts and ALA Program Division at the ALA Annual Conference in Washington DC. Thirty library systems from across the country who attended the conference program subsequently contacted the library system for information about creating their own Try Poetry year.

Loudoun County Public Library believes that poetry is most successful when the community hears it, sees it, hears about it, and bumps into it in as many ways as possible. The library just made it unavoidable—you had to Try Poetry. **VI**