

The Chesapeake Poetry Festival

by Jean Carideo and Phyllis Schirle

For the last sixteen years, Russell Memorial Library has been the home of the Chesapeake Poetry Festival. The first festival, held in 1993, was the result of a casual conversation between Norfolk attorney C. Edward "Eddie" Russell Jr. and Chesapeake Public Library Director Margaret "Peggy" Stillman. The idea began when Russell was taking a class in poetry at Virginia Commonwealth University taught by his longtime friend and Poet Laureate of Portsmouth Dave Smith. Russell asked Stillman if she thought holding a poetry workshop in a public library might be interesting and if Dave Smith could help. Not one to miss an opportunity (or a beat), Stillman enthusiastically agreed. With Russell and Smith helping, she began planning what would become an annual event. The Chesapeake Poetry Festival was introduced to the community as a celebration of the richness of Virginia's regionally, nationally, and internationally known poets, presented through poetry readings and workshops.

The Chesapeake Poetry Festival was a first: never before in a public library in Virginia had there been such a gathering of poets to celebrate each other's accomplishments as writers and to enjoy the sharing of ideas, feelings, and the power of poetry with the community at large. Due to Smith's network of friends and colleagues and his strength as a nationally known writer, twenty poets traveled to Russell Memorial Library for an intense weekend of public workshops, readings, and receptions.

George Garrett, Ellen Voight, Larry Levis, and Charles Wright were among those who came to hear, speak, and learn from each other. A diverse audience from all over Virginia responded well to this comfortable and open setting. Participants spent hours

**"Poetry isn't a profession;
it's a way of life.
It's an empty basket;
you put your life into it
and make something
out of that."**

MARY OLIVER

after the readings in small, informal group discussions and lively exchanges.

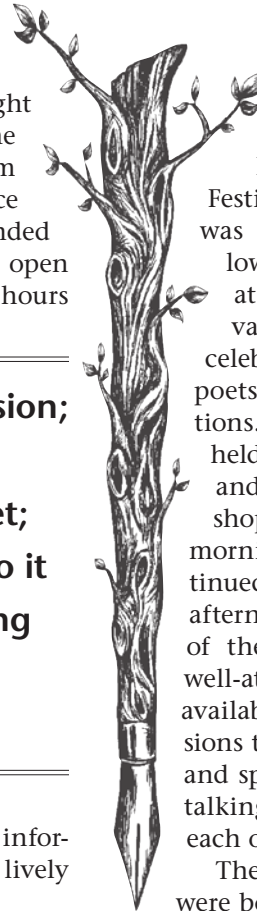
The second year of the festival brought together thirteen Virginia poets to participate in workshops and poetry readings (an ice storm prevented eight others from attending). The format was designed to confirm the value of poetry as it relates to humankind and to encourage a dialogue between the poets and the community. Workshop topics ranged from exploration of the black writer in the South, with the opportunity to debate the perception of progress made, to poets exploring their own work and critiquing the work of participants. Once again the event was a huge success, drawing in people from all over the region.

Twenty-three Virginia poets gathered for the Chesapeake Public Library Poetry Festival in 1995. The festival was attracting quite a following. Over 600 patrons attended this third festival, which continued the celebration of poetry and poets with Virginia connections. Poetry readings were held on Friday afternoon and evening; two workshops were offered Saturday morning; and readings continued throughout Saturday afternoon and evening. All of the poetry readings were well-attended. The poets were available for individual discussions throughout the two days and spent a great deal of time talking with the patrons and each other.

The two workshops offered were both standing room only. "Writing at Home: The Personal Writing Experience," chaired by Betty Adcock and Elizabeth Seidel Morgan, offered suggestions and exercises for participants to sustain year-round writing activities outside structured environments. "Publishing in Literary Magazines" was a panel discussion led by Dave Smith (*The Southern Review*); Margaret Gibson and Mary Flinn (*New Virginia Review*); Judy Longley (*Iris*);

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the bare minimum for travel and lodging. They participated out of a love for poetry and a strong friendship with Dave Smith. Most of the poets were also college professors; the varied class schedules for the schools were preventing many of them from making a commitment to continue. The festival took a hiatus in 1996, bypassing the gathering until 1997, in order to hold

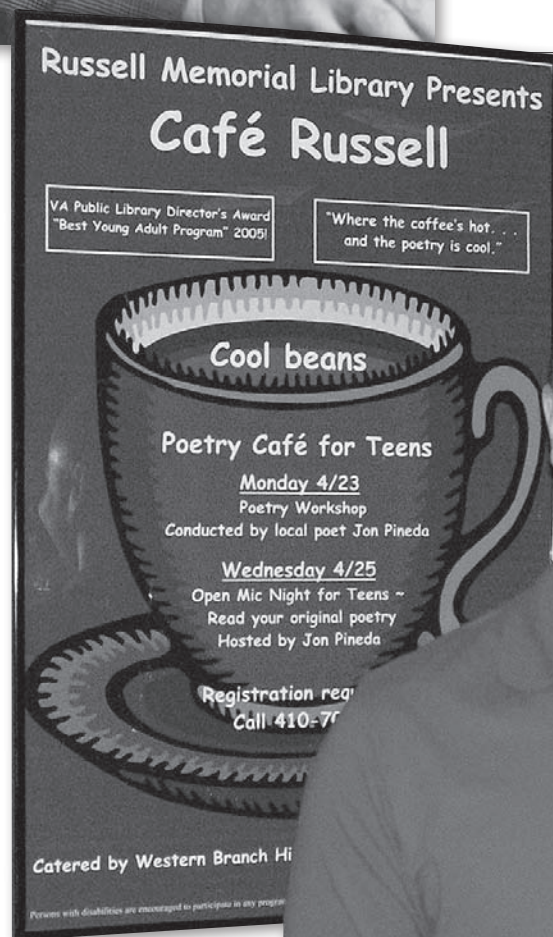
"Whenever I read a modern poem, it's like my brother has his foot on the back of my neck in the swimming pool."

HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT

and Henry Hart (*Verse*). While encouraging aspiring writers not to give up, they offered a candid look at what editors like and don't like.

An interesting side note about the 1995 festival: The staff received a call in 2002 from an up-and-coming young poet named Jon Pineda. He had recently won his first national poetry prize, the Crab Orchard Award, and he wanted to see how he could contribute to the Chesapeake Poetry Festival. He had attended the festival in 1995, right at the time he was applying for the MFA program at VCU. He told the staff he couldn't believe his good fortune in getting to meet the very poets he had been studying the past year at—where else—the library. He has since become an integral part of the event, conducting teen workshops and editing the teen poetry journal.

Unfortunately, the Chesapeake Poetry Festival, with so many stellar poets gathered for two days, was becoming more and more difficult to arrange. Funding was limited and the poets received only



Top, Gregory Orr; above, Jon Pineda

a planning session and make a change in the format.

In *Poetry 180: A Poem a Day for American High Schools*, Billy Collins, America's Poetry Laureate in 2003, suggests to young people the notion that poetry can be a part of everyday life as well as a subject to be studied in the classroom, "because all too often high school is the place where poetry goes to

die." With this in mind, the planning committee made the decision in 1997 to host two featured poets each year in order to include appearances at two Chesapeake high schools along with public readings. The event included poetry workshops at the library with local poets and an open mike night for the public as the finale. This format not only allowed us to gain a stronger focus for our publicity and highlight the creative talents of two poets, but also enabled

"My favorite poem is the one that starts 'Thirty days hath September,' because it actually tells you something."

GROUCHO MARX

Top right, Natasha Trethewey

Right, Sarah Kennedy

Below, Dave Smith



in Virginia program, to offer honorariums and travel expenses and to host a reception before the public readings. This financial support also made possible the purchase of fifty copies of each visiting poet's books for students and teachers to study before the school visits and keep as mementos of the event.

How We Do It

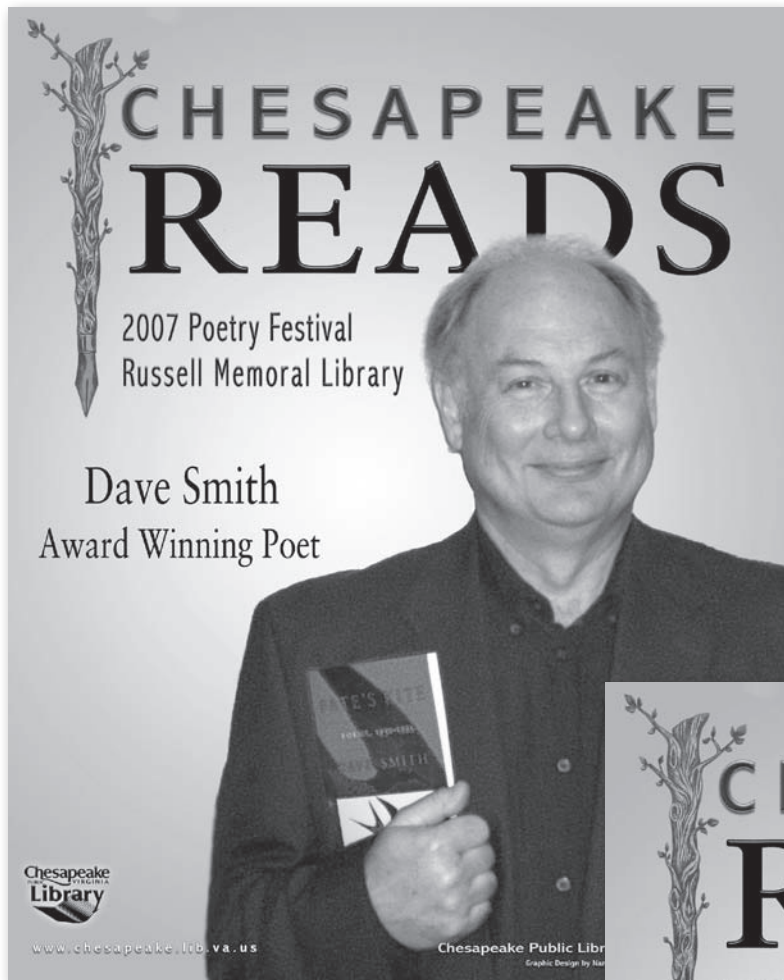
In the interest of full disclosure, putting on a poetry festival of this scale, with limited staff and space, is not easy. The planning and execution of each year's festival is done by four staff members who are also juggling their daily responsibilities in the library. Planning starts soon after the end of each festival: poets are considered, selected, and invited; schools are chosen; grants are written; and the publicity and logistics of the receptions and events are discussed. The continued success of this event is directly attributed to the fact that these employees are the same seasoned folks who have worked together for years. They approach each and every year the same way—with the attitude that this will be the best poetry festival the



us to take nationally known poets and poetry into Chesapeake's public high schools. The high school appearances (each year for the last thirteen years) continue to be among the most rewarding and illuminating experiences of the entire festival.

By focusing on two featured poets, it became possible for us, with the support of the Chesapeake Public Library Foundation, the Friends of the Chesapeake Public Library, the Chesapeake Fine Arts Commission, and the Writers





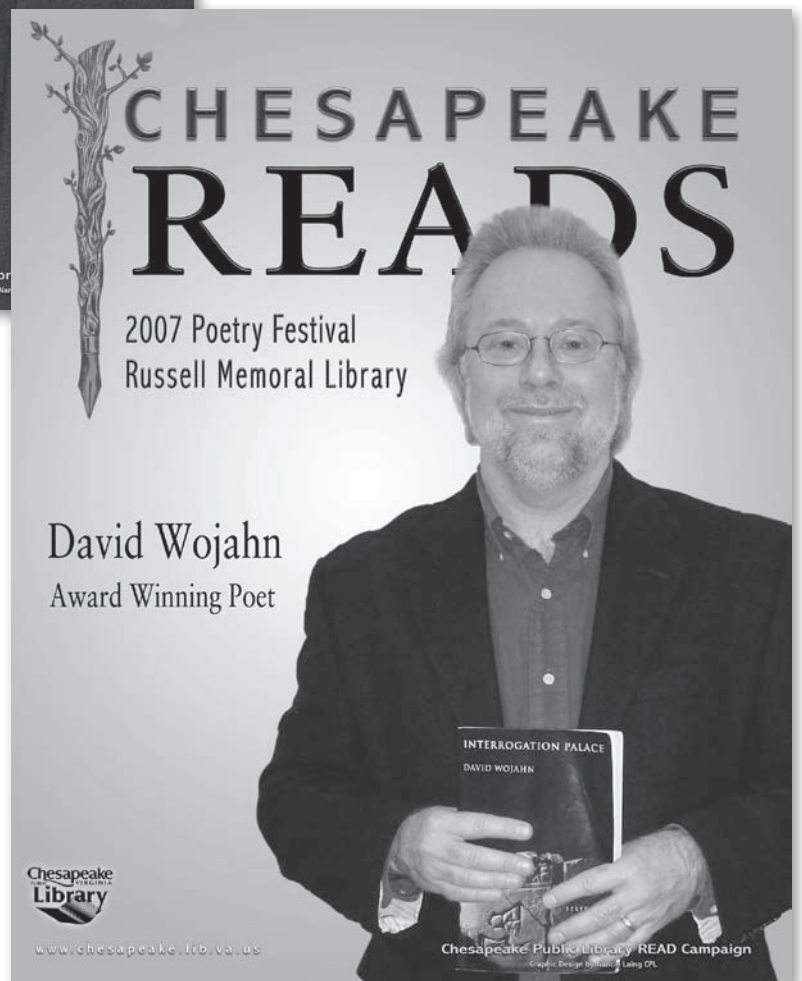
Chesapeake Public Library has ever presented.

As the saying goes, "There is no constant but change," so the festival expanded again in 2005. We added a poetry writing workshop for teens; a teen-only open mike night; and Café Russell, an evening of poetry for middle school students and their families (winner of the 2006 Virginia Public Library Director's Award for Best Children's Program). *FONT*, a literary journal dedicated to featuring poetry by high school students currently residing in Chesapeake, debuted in 2007. The brainchild of award-winning local poet Jon Pineda, *FONT* was recognized by the *Virginian-Pilot* as contributing to the richness of our cultural community in 2007. For 2009, we

are considering the phenomenon of Poetry Slams and the possibility of holding events throughout the system, rather than hosting everything at one location.

A Charged Atmosphere

From the beginning, our goal was to bring poetry into the realm of public recognition and to encourage anyone who was interested in writing poetry. As most literary festivals are held at universities or schools, people who may be reluctant to go to a poetry event at a college have an entirely different feeling about an event at a public library. Comments from partici-



pants over the years have proven this to be true. The informal setting allows both the poets and the audience to simply experience the joy of reading, of hearing their works as pure expressions of the art of poetry. The public has the opportunity to interact with those who have made poetry their life's work; the poets are able to share their poems without the competitiveness of the academic environment.

One comment heard year after year concerns the caliber of the festival's featured poets. Since the initial festival in 1993, Chesapeake Public Library has hosted four Pulitzer Prize winners—Henry S. Taylor, Charles Wright, Claudia Emerson, and Natasha Trethewey—and forty-two nationally known and published profession-

"It is largely from other poets that one begins to be a poet—you're not going to become one through learning prosody, but through the energizing force of the word. I think every poet begins by simply being enchanted by the sound of words."

STANLEY KUNITZ,
a founder of Poets House
(<http://poetshouse.org/about.htm>)

als, many of whom are chairs of major university English departments. This coming together of poets creates a charged atmosphere, which adds to the wonder of the event. By focusing only on poetry, both the audience and the authors can immerse themselves in something too often ignored or simplified in the everyday world. By holding this event in the public library, the opportunity is available to all who love poetry and language. Again a quote from Billy Collins: "I am convinced that for every nonreader of poetry, there is a poem waiting to reconnect them to poetry." Another comment, usually from folks who've been talked into coming to the Chesapeake Poetry Festival by their friends or spouses, concerns the sense of being "shook up" when they hear



a poem that resonates in some personal way. People in the audience sit up or tear up or speak up when a poem moves them, and it happens at every reading.

The Chesapeake Poetry Festival has connected hundreds of people, from poets to students to patrons to staff, and sparked an interest in poetry and creative writing for people of all ages. Not an undertaking for the fainthearted, the festival is worth every bit of the effort put into it by the staff. We truly believe that: poetry and literature are about daily life; writ-

“Political and economic developments may seem to dominate the news, but culture and education are the forces that actually shape an age, since they transform the human heart.”

DAISAKU IKEDA

ing about living life should be a normal, everyday experience; and recognizing that the meaning of language belongs to the listener promotes a better understanding of oneself and others. Our goal is to continue to increase public awareness of the value of poetry, and encourage our community to make it a part of daily life. We look forward to many more successful years of presenting the Chesapeake Poetry Festival. (Check out www.chesapeake.lib.va.us for information on upcoming events.) **VI**

Chesapeake Poetry Festival Poet List, 1993–2008

Adcock, Betty	Hummer, T. R.	Simpson, Grace
Baldwin, Beth	Johnson, Mark	Smith, Dave
Burris, Sidney	Kennedy, Sarah	Smith, R. T.
Cairns, Scott	Kutchins, Laurie	Smith, Ron
Chitwood, Michael	Larson, Jeanne	Soniat, Katherine
Dillard, Richard	Levis, Larry	Stuart, Dabney
Donovan, Greg	Longley, Judy	Sylvester, Janet
Drake, Jeannette	Moeckle, Thorpe	Taylor, Henry
Emerson, Claudia	Morgan, Elizabeth S.	Tham, Hillary
Fenza, David	Nystrom, Debra	Trethewey, Eric
Garrett, George	Orr, Gregory	Trethewey, Natasha
Gibson, Margaret	Paul, Jay	Voight, Ellen B.
Glasser, Jane Ellen	Raisor, Phillip	Warn, Emily
Hart, Henry	Rankin, Paula	Wojahn, David
Huddle, David	Seibles, Tim	Wright, Charles