AINE'S POET LAUREATE Betsy Sholl facilitated the new poetry series in the Council's free reading and discussion program, Let's Talk About It, in Bridgton last summer. In honor of National Poetry Month, she has contributed this account of her experiences. To learn more about Let's Talk About It, please turn to the article on page 6.

On five Saturday mornings in July and August, I drove along Route 302, through a still sleepy Windham, through Naples just beginning to wake up—a few strollers on the causeway, the lake deliciously riled or quietly glowing. But I wasn't planning a boat ride or a shopping expedition. I was on my way to talk about Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow in the lovely—and air-conditioned—basement room of the Bridgton Public Library. Who would have guessed that at our first meeting, at 10:30 on a summer Saturday, there'd be standing room only—and for the next four weeks, a dedicated group of at least thirty people?

Following the excellent curriculum prepared by Maine's former poet laureate, Baron Wormser, we read poems by all three poets on the first day. At each of the next three meetings, we looked at one poet more closely, and examined contemporary poets aligned with his or her style. As Baron writes in his introduction to the curriculum, we looked at Whitman's "free verse, expansive, vatic impulses," at Dickinson's "metaphysical, homemade, intense designs," and at the "socialized, fluid lyric musicians of Longfellow." For the last meeting, each participant shared a favorite poem with the group, some reading their own poems, some selecting recent discoveries, and others reading old favorites. In response to a suggestion from the group that we include in our last session poems responding to war, I made a handout that included poems from 8th-century China, as well as poems by Vietnam and Iraq veterans. Our weeks together reinforced our belief that poetry indeed carries vital responses to our human dilemma.

The group meetings were lively and enthusiastic, the discussions rich, the participants serious readers and engaged thinkers. We often spilled over our home finding point, and could have gone even longer. From retired ambassadors to journalists to teachers and fellow poets, the group was an inspiration and a delight.

Considering all the ways language is used to sell and exploit, we relished our time together looking at the work of poets whose primary relationship to language involves crafting sound and sense to explore, to discover, to probe, to make a music, that expresses our rich and varied humanity, or—as the poet W.S. Auden says—to make a "clear expression of mixed feelings."

We read Ginsberg's breathless and irreverent lament for his generation, Plath's metaphor-rich responses to motherhood, Merwin's evocative, subtle depiction of Vietnam, and Heather McHugh's deliciously tricky sexual puns. The group's quick wit and insight meant nothing was lost on us.

I left the last meeting with a car full of flowers, balloons, blueberries, an enormous cucumber, a book of poems, a New Yorker interview that one member graciously tracked down and Xeroxed for me, and a DVD by fellow poet Timothy Richardson—plus a sense of deeply shared humanity.

There are many people responsible for the success of this program: everyone who attended; the Humanities Council staff, partners, and funders who made it possible; Baron who prepared the excellent curriculum; and the librarians who request it and host the meetings. In my case, that was Bridgton's own irrepressible Diane am Rhein, whose enthusiasm and generosity were unbounded.

In an age when people decry the death of poetry, this program proves them wrong. Clearly, poetry still speaks and readers still listen.
T all began with chickens. Not the stylized chickens of children’s books, or the unseen chickens who lay the eggs we buy at the store, but chickens reduced to essentials: birds dangling upside down on a factory line, being processed. These were proof that chicken is more than the neat packets at the supermarket. And they were my introduction to the Maine Humanities Council, back in 1988.

I’d been hired to move and install a Council-funded exhibit of photographs by Cedric Chatterley documenting the final days of Belfast’s Penobscot Poultry, Maine’s last chicken processing plant. I couldn’t have imagined that hauling those fascinating, beautiful, and repellent pictures from Belfast to Machias would mark the start of a professional relationship that has lasted nearly 20 years, and counting. Since then, I’ve worked with the Council as a contractor, a grantee, a board member, a program provider, and a member of the staff. And on January 1st, I began as its fourth executive director.

In many ways, that first trip to Belfast was an example of what the MHC does best: uncovering and sharing unexpected stories with the widest range of Maine communities. And while we’ve never since funded a project dealing with the poultry industry, we still hope to surprise, challenge, and delight, in every one of our programs.

I’m honored to be leading the Council, and mindful of the challenges we face in extending what has been a remarkable record of accomplishment. I’m grateful for Deedee’s leadership over the past 20 years. She leaves an organization with solid assets: a talented board, a marvelous staff, and the extraordinary humanities scholars who give life to our programs.

The other critical factor of course, is our audience. And I hope you’ll all stick with us (and tell your friends) as we jump off into the Council’s fourth decade.

Erik Jorgensen
Executive Director

FAREWELL TO DEEDEE

On November 30, 2006, hundreds of friends of the Maine Humanities Council—including Bruce Cole, the Chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities—gathered at the Institute for Contemporary Art in Portland to honor Deedee Schwartz upon her retirement as Executive Director. A film produced by Carol Taylor featured interviews with a few of Deedee’s colleagues and friends, whose comments epitomized the outpouring of affection and admiration that surrounded the evening’s guest of honor.
The Council’s 30th Anniversary Humanities Fest took place on October 21, 2006, at Bates College and the Franco-American Heritage Center in Lewiston. Three hundred Mainers of all ages enjoyed toe-tapping, cake-eating, storytelling, poetry reading, and talks on a wide range of humanities topics offered by 25 of the Council’s many friends from Maine’s scholar community. Recordings of many of the presentations will be available soon for download at www.mainehumanities.org.
"I held the hand of a dying patient, a person I had known for 18 years. I told her that I loved her and held her hand as she died. I have usually been more detached, but gentle, and let others sit with the patient, so I could continue with my busy work. But I hesitated, sat at the bedside, and decided NOT to leave. To BE with her."

"In two instances, my relationships with other health care professionals improved because we shared the experience of communicating about our reading. In one case, we did not agree and, in fact, for a few moments were in rather vehement opposition, but having that experience in a safe arena improved our working relationship."

To explore new methods of evaluation, the Council secured funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities and turned to Dr. Bruce Clary at the University of Southern Maine’s Muskie School of Public Service. Clary engaged Council staff in intensive reflection and conversation on the program’s goals and methods. They identified five basic goals for participants: increased empathy for patients, greater cultural awareness, improved interpersonal skills, better communication skills, and greater job satisfaction. Then they worked backwards to identify particular components of the program, linking the outcomes to the stated goals. This structure comes from the Kellogg Foundation logic model: “a systematic and visual way to present an understanding of the relationships among the resources you have to operate your program, the activities you plan, and the changes or results you hope to achieve.” Working with the logic model, Clary designed an online questionnaire and sent it to all Literature & Medicine participants for the year 2006. Responses came from 278 participants in eight states. Clary also collected qualitative data from focus groups he conducted at four program sites.

Clary’s survey measured change in individual participant attitudes in five areas, or “domains,” linked to the five goals, using a standardized four-point Likert scale—the lower the number, the greater the change. Results for every domain revealed an impact from the program (see table). The impact was most significant in the domains of empathy and cultural awareness. As Clary wrote, “These domains are complex and not easily taught within organizational settings. The ability of the Literature & Medicine program to have an impact [on them] is a distinct contribution to the health care workplace.” Literature & Medicine not only prompted change in these domains, but also gave participants language to describe it: in Clary’s focus groups, participants talked about different perspectives, more compassion, holistic behavior, deeper relationships, greater honesty, understanding sub-cultures, and transcending everyday issues with patients.

LITERATURE & MEDICINE: HUMANITIES at the Heart of Health Care is a reading and discussion program for medical professionals that, as one participant writes, “renews the heart and soul of health care.” Program participants work in all aspects of patient care, and include nurses, physicians, support and allied staff, administrators, clergy, social workers, and therapists in hospital, home health, hospice, and public health settings. The opportunity for these professionals to talk about their work with colleagues is rare, and the effects of bringing them together to reflect on lived experience through the lens of literature are often profound.

Since 1997, when it was created by the Maine Humanities Council, Literature & Medicine has been a success by a variety of measures. It started with a single pilot group at Eastern Maine Medical Center, but by this year, Literature & Medicine groups will have met in over 90 different hospitals and other health care settings in 19 states, from Florida to Montana and Maine to Hawai’i. The program was named a Patient Quality Initiative by the Maine Hospital Association in 2002. In 2003, it was awarded the Helen & Martin Schwartz Prize for Excellence in Public Programming by the Federation of State Humanities Councils. Press coverage has ranged from local newspapers like the Ellsworth American to national publications like Academic Medicine: Journal of the Association of American Medical Colleges and the Christian Science Monitor.

In spite of all this acclaim, there remained—until recently—a lack of systematic evidence that Literature & Medicine accomplished what it said it did. Most hospital administrators are compelled to be number-crunchers, even if they are humanists at heart. They judge professional development programs on the standards they meet and results they deliver. Unfortunately, reading and discussion programs are notoriously resistant to these types of measures. Their transformative effect occurs incrementally, and participants often struggle to describe it. There are no control groups, no placebos, and very few objective indicators of success. How could participant feedback on Literature & Medicine—which was copious and consistently positive—be captured in a format that would appeal to quantitative minds?

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The survey also invited open-ended comments on outcomes in the workplace environment. As with the scales measuring individual outcomes, empathy was the most frequently cited benefit of the program. “I have learned to be more honest with patients and to take the time to see where they are coming from emotionally, spiritually, and mentally,” wrote one participant. Other comments focused on improved relationships with colleagues. Participants found that the program opened doors to networking and collaborative problem-solving: “Participating with colleagues on a non-clinical level in a discussion of patient, family, and professional issues inspired a new appreciation of our work, our goals, and each other.” Finally, the survey asked participants to describe a specific event to illustrate the impact of Literature & Medicine. The goal of this question was to ground responses in terms of daily professional life. The 128 resulting statements offered a close-up, personal view of the program’s impact (see sidebars for examples).

This kind of anecdotal evidence, combined with figures from the survey, can help hospital administrators determine how to direct their limited professional development resources. It also helps busy medical professionals decide how to spend their scarce free time. But the results of the evaluation won’t be used merely as selling points. Even while affirming that the goals of Literature & Medicine are being met, the data that Clary gathered—in both numeric and narrative form—will help Council staff refine and improve the program. Other Maine Humanities Council programs are also exploring ways to use logic models to lend structure and credibility to the feedback they already receive from participants. To learn more about the Council’s evaluation efforts, please contact Associate Director Victoria Bonebakker.

"After reading Kafka’s The Metamorphosis, I worked with a patient who had cancer and was also depressed. I mentioned I had read it and the patient [had] read it, too. Through the book, I found a new way to understand his treatment and diagnoses.”

"I have used our reading or class interaction on several occasions to help employees, managers, and medical staff to look at a work situation or a specific patient/family issue. Literature & Medicine is a wonderful program that helps build the empathy and understanding of all patients and staff."

"Some of the materials we read looked at cross-cultural experiences. When an African American resident on my team asked a question about our ‘standard way of doing things,’ I was able to go beyond ‘this is just the way it is’ to think about what that ‘way’ looked like to someone from a background different from my own—something I might not have even thought about previously.”

"Oddly enough, calling some doctors by their first names has been a big behavioral change for me!”

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* The lower the value, the more positive the impact of the program.
Ten years ago, Oprah’s Book Club emerged as a major force in book publishing, pushing sales of its selected titles into the millions. The club raised thorny questions about celebrity culture, engaged many new readers, and enraged some seasoned ones, but its one irrefutable effect was to make book club culture more visible. Bookstores now commonly devote prime shelf space to popular book club selections, whose back pages are filled with “discussion questions.” How to guide approach the trend from many angles: there are tips for mother-daughter clubs, annotated lists of titles on every imaginable topic, and tips for dealing with “problem” group members. There’s even The Book Club Cookbook, which features a recipe from the popular literary epic prepared annually by Bowdoin College Dining Services for the Maine Humanities Council’s Winter Weekend.

This proliferation of book club varieties and resources may not correspond to any real increase in the number of readers, yet the trend does suggest a desire among readers to leave the confines of their living rooms and talk with others about what they’ve read. The Council’s Let’s Talk About It program satisfies that desire by bringing Mainers together to engage in conversation about books. But several unique features distinguish Let’s Talk About It from most traditional book clubs.

The most significant difference is that Let’s Talk About It groups are free and open to the public. In communities throughout Maine, the program connects neighbors from all walks of life who might not otherwise meet. One participant has said, “I have been in book groups with friends, but it was so wonderful to be in one that was public. It is so important to have this type of exchange, and to have experiences like this open, free of charge, to all who wish to attend.”

This sense of community is enhanced by the fact that Let’s Talk About It groups meet in a vital and time-honored civic space: the local public library. The Council provides publicity materials and advice, while the Maine State Library stores and distributes books throughout the state. Financial support from the Maine State Library, the Belvedere Fund of the Maine Community Foundation, and this year, the We the People initiative of the National Endowment for the Humanities, enables about 40 libraries—from Rangeley to Lubec, Caribou to Kittery, and many towns in between—to host programs each year. Since most libraries run on tight budgets, Let’s Talk About It is often their most significant if not their only public offering.

Another distinctive feature of the program is that discussions are led by skilled facilitators, whose provocative questions elicit a range of perspectives. “One of the most difficult things about running a book group,” said one veteran participant, “is getting people to talk. From the first discussion, our Let’s Talk About It facilitator had the group pondering, discussing, debating—and often laughing.”

Facilitators are equally adept at focusing discussions that stray too far from the topic at hand.

Finally, rather than choosing books on a whim, Let’s Talk About It groups explore themes through carefully constructed series of books. The readings in each series are selected by a scholar with expertise pertaining to the theme. Program hosts can choose from over 35 different series, including perennial favorites like “Going to Sea” and “The Mirror of Maine.” (For a full list of series, please visit www.mainehumanities.org/programs/talk.html.)

...OUT OF OUR LIVING ROOMS

Above: Mahmud Faksh brings the history of the Middle East to life for participants attending the new Let’s Talk About It series “Behind the Headlines: An Introduction to the Middle East” at the Merrill Library in Yarmouth, Maine. (Photo: Dave Jackson)

Girls Talk & Teen Voices Mentor Partnership
$3,834: “Girls Talk” and “Teen Voices” are mentorship programs that link the University of Maine at Farmington students and community members with girls in grades 5-8 in MSAD #58 (Strong, Kingfield, Phillips, and Stratton). Each month, girls and mentors read a book relevant to the lives of developing adolescents, then come together at the schools for dinner, book discussions, and related guest speakers or activities. Since the mentorship programs began, participation has steadily increased, and other school districts have developed their own programs. New initiatives include purchasing enough copies of a single title to do a common reading across schools; expanding genres to include literary fairy tales, poetry, and science fiction; and bringing a published author to the program. For more information, please contact the UMFG Center for Student Involvement, (207) 778-7347.

Students in the Girls Talk program in Kingfield participate in a “literature in the round” activity in conjunction with the book So B. It by Sarah Weeks. (Photo: student essays)

The Late Indian War
$3,000: The Late Indian War is a documentary film project that explores, from a Native American perspective, the continuing social and spiritual impact of English colonization on Eastern Native American nations. The events surrounding King Philip’s War (1675-76) will be examined for connections to the reduction in Natives population and influence—in particular, the status of women. Research will be conducted in Maine on Ferdinando Gorges’ failed Sagadahoc Colony and the thwarted diplomatic efforts of Father DuRielles of the Kennabeke Mission on behalf of this Abenaki. The resulting documentary will present the Native perspective on a period that elicited significant recent attention in films and literature. To learn more about this project, please contact Director Ann Tweedy, tweedspot@aol.com.

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SELECTED NEW ENGLAND PROJECT

GRANTS

Vermont Humanities Council: $2,000: The Vermont Humanities Council’s “Building Community: Stronger Together” grant program supports community programs that link the University of Maine at Farmington, the Belvedere Fund of the Maine Community Foundation, and the publication of new literature. Some of the projects funded include: “Let’s Talk About It” in the midst of winter’s worst cold; building a “literature in the round” activity in conjunction with the book So B. It by Sarah Weeks. (Photo: student essays)
Thanks to support from the Belvedere Fund and other Maine Humanities Council donors, staff and scholars have introduced six new or revised Let’s Talk About It series within the past year, with five more in progress. One goal of this expansion has been to satisfy frequent requests for series that explore a variety of cultures.

The Council worked with Mahmud Faksh, a professor of political science at the University of Southern Maine, to develop “Behind the Headlines: An Introduction to the Middle East.” This series differs from the rest in that groups meet three times, not five, and each session begins with a 45-minute presentation by a facilitator who specializes in the Middle East, followed by an hour and a quarter of facilitated discussion and questions. The single text is The Contemporary Middle East, edited by Karl Yambert, a new, accessible anthology of writings by leading scholars incorporating historical, cultural, and political perspectives of the region. Its timely theme has been met with an incredible response. Groups at each of four pilot sites—York, Bridgton, Bangor and Yarmouth—immediately filled to capacity, and long waiting lists formed. A recent caller to the Council who read about the program in the newspaper guiltily confessed that she has felt hatred for all Muslims since 9/11. She wanted to join a Let’s Talk About It group to become better informed and more open-minded.

While “Behind the Headlines” may encourage understanding through its balanced approach to a fraught region, “Making a Difference: How Love and Duty Change Lives” tackles the subject of compassion head-on. This series asks what happens when we are called to act upon what we perceive as our duty—especially when such action entails considerable sacrifice. It was developed with support from Thoughtful Giving: Philanthropy as Civic Engagement, a project funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Other series that have been well-received by groups seeking books from beyond Maine’s borders include “From the Outside Looking In: Views of the South Asian Experience” and “So Near & So Far: An Exploration of Cuban Literature.” “Family and Self,” designed to trace shifting values under increasing Western influence as depicted in 20th century Japanese novels, will be offered for the first time this spring. Scholars are still refining two other series: “Paradise Revealed,” which samples Caribbean literature in many genres, and “Growing Up Between Cultures: Circulations and Collisions.” A new series on “The Gilded Age” debuted this spring at Portland’s Victoria Mansion, and a revision of the popular “Defining Wilderness, Defining Maine” series is also in progress. These Let’s Talk About It offerings will introduce Maine readers to a wide array of new perspectives—not only the ideas in the books themselves, but also the opinions of fellow readers who come together to discuss them.
SAVE THE DATE!

OCTOBER 5-8, 2007!

Maine Humanities Council is excited to announce a Tour of the Kennebec Chaudière Heritage Corridor, the historic route along the Kennebec River from the tidewater of Bath to the Beauce Region of Québec, used for centuries by Native Americans, revolutionaries (Benedict Arnold), traders, and immigrants. This tour will bring to life the history and contemporary culture of the Corridor, which marks its 400th anniversary in 2007. Check www.mainehumanities.org for updates and/or call to make sure you are notified of further details and registration opportunities. The tour is made possible in part by support from the We the People initiative of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

THE DOROTHY SCHWARTZ OPPORTUNITY FUND

In her 25 years with the Council, Deedee found countless opportunities to serve people who rarely have access to the things that define the humanities: books, reading, and conversations. The fund named in her honor will help us seize opportunities as they arise, just as Deedee always did. As of December 31, 2006, 361 generous donors had contributed a total of $113,559 to this fund, and a pledge from the River Rock Foundation for $250,000 brought the total to $363,559.

SAVE THE DATE!

Announcing a National Conference sponsored by the Maine Humanities Council as part of Literature & Medicine: Humanities at the Heart of Health Care®

November 9 – 10, 2007 | Radisson Hotel Manchester, NH

Keynote Speakers

Rafael Campo, MD, physician and award-winning poet; Rita Charon, MD, PhD, innovative leader in the field of narrative medicine; Anne Fadiman, author of The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down

Target Audience

All health care professionals are invited, including:

• chaplains and clergy
• educators (health, humanities, medical)
• hospital and other health care facility administrators
• medical and nursing students
• nurses and physicians
• physician assistants
• service providers
• social workers
• staff and volunteer coordinators
• therapists of all kinds

Keynote presentations and over 20 smaller sessions—including workshops, discussions, and informal presentations—will both inform and inspire. Participants will learn how literature and writing can support the personal and professional development of all health care professionals, and will have the skills to implement programs.

Appropriate continuing education credits will be available. Detailed information, including registration fees and forms, is available on our website: www.mainehumanities.org.

Caring for the Caregiver

PERSPECTIVES ON LITERATURE AND MEDICINE

Annette Elowitch (left) and Brita Zitin (right) help celebrate Deedee’s twenty-five years at the MHC! Photo: Diane Hudson