



The Hamilton Poets during their regular Tuesday afternoon meeting. Photo by Kyle Pope

THE BARDS OF THE HAMILTON SENIOR CENTER

An eclectic group of amateur poets and their weekly roundtable

BY KYLE POPE

The poem for the day is "Dream Boogie" by Langston Hughes, and Barbara Brenner, a theater major from back in the day, kicks things off with a reading that sounds almost like a rap.

*Good morning, daddy!
Ain't you heard
The boogie-woogie rumble
Of a dream deferred?*

Next up, Irving Goldman, the only man in the group and a retired psychologist.

*Listen closely:
You'll hear their feet
Beating out and beating out a -
You think
It's a happy beat?*

Finally, Gun Garel, from Sweden, who has been writing poetry since she was 14.

*Listen to it closely:
Ain't you heard
Something underneath like a -
What did I say?
Sure,
I'm happy!
Take it away!*

The group joins together on the last word of the poem, "Y-e-a-a-h," holding it for an extra note.

Not what you'd expect on a weekday afternoon at the Hamilton Senior Center on West 73rd Street. Yet here is it, every week, around a table under fluorescent lights, where an eclectic group of a dozen or so neighbors has gathered for the last four and half years to write poetry. Some, like Garel, have been at it

their entire lives. Others, like Marie Vassallo, are trying poetry for the first time. Several members of the group have passed away, including one member who died at the age of 105. Brenner signed up one day because it was too cold outside to do anything else, and now can't imagine her life without the Hamilton Poets. "For me, it's like a safe house," she said. "We can fall and not get hurt because we support each other. We can try things and not be afraid."

The format each week is the same: the group reads a poem, going around the room with each person reciting a verse. Usually, they'll read the work a couple of times to let the words sink in.

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Then, they'll discuss the work, dissecting everything from the language used to the images evoked to the biography of the poet. (Langston Hughes, who writes about race and justice, warranted a particularly spirited discussion, fed by news out of Ferguson, Mo.)

Finally, the group is asked to write a poem inspired by the reading they discussed, the results of which are read aloud after 20 minutes. A one-dollar donation per class is requested, but optional. (Also, being a senior citizen isn't a requirement of the class, though the average age appears to hover in the 70s.)

The poets will tell you that poetry-on-demand isn't for the meek, as Vassallo captured in her poem, entitled "Divine Intelligence":

*Divine Intelligence, I'm waiting for
Your words,
Mine are refusing to surface
I'm ready to fall on my knees
I'll let them crack if I have to
I need a poem*

Earlier this year, 30 poems from the group were compiled into a collection, "Hidden in the Light," published by Dunton. The book came into being after Goldman ran into an old friend, Lese Dunton, and raved about the poetry group. Dunton, which helps authors self-publish their books, hand-held the Hamilton Poets in putting the thing together, with each

member pitching in to cover costs.

That was in September. By January, "Hidden in the Light" was out, available on Amazon.com.

"These people have amazed me with their boldness," said Michelle de Savigny, an Upper West Sider who has served as the group's teacher and moderator since the beginning. (The compilation is dedicated to her, after an epilogue from Otto Mond, a member of the group who died last year.) "When they asked me, 'Why don't we put a book together?' I said, 'Go for it.' And they did."

A lover of poetry for as long as she can remember, de Savigny was a reading specialist at the private Town School on the Upper East Side for more than two decades. Then, she decided to switch careers and now is training as a psychotherapist specializing in aging and mental health.

The poets use the class, she said, for everything from a weekly social outlet to a venue to vent their frustrations about growing old in a city obsessed with youth. "They all are very much in touch with the cycle of life," de Savigny said. "This gives them the chance to talk about their lives."

More than anything, poetry gives them a chance to be heard.

"It's invigorating, freeing," said Garel, whose contributions to the book include a revenge poem aimed at her stepmother.



Moderator Michelle de Savigny, a long-time poetry lover now studying to be a psychotherapist specializing in the elderly. Photo by Kyle Pope

*My father's second wife
A witch from hell
If there ever were such a creature.*

The poem, "To Forgive Is Nobler," proceeds from there.

Other contributions are gentler, like a poem from group member Patricia Dasko, who once did PR for Lowell Thomas and traveled Europe with a renegade ballet company.

Now, she writes lovingly about the simple sharing of an ice cream cone between moth-

er and child.

*I know this is delightful
These two are worth watching.
I no longer can enjoy ice cream
So they do it for me and
I am happy to be here, to watch them
and to know this ritual is still here.*

"I never thought I had any inclination to do anything like this," Dasko said of the Hamilton Poets' ritual. "But I am so glad it's here."

