



Young Poets Show a Love and Gift for Language At Poem In Your Pocket Day

by Amanda Gordon
Thu, 30 Apr 2009 at 4:15 PM



Chaz Bligen and Esosa Ruffin of the Rand School in Montclair, N.J. at Bryant Park for Poem In Your Pocket Day.

Schoolchildren reciting poems today at Bryant Park's Reading Room helped mark New York City's seventh annual Poem In Your Pocket Day.

Destinee Sims, a fifth-grader at P.S. 122 in Brooklyn, read her poem "The Ocean," which begins: "I can smell the ocean/ I can see it too./I can swim in the ocean." She likes writing poems and stories. "I just think it's a great way to express your feelings and you don't have a lot of rules," Destinee said.

Food was the inspiration for Zaileak Decastro's three-page poem "Ode to Chicken" — which the P.S. 3 student read from memory, to loud applause. (We recorded him reciting some of his poem and asked him a few questions about it, which you can listen to with the player below).

Eighth-grader Yashaswini Chittampalli, a student at the Center School, read her poem

"The First Ones" about what life was like for her parents when they first came to New York City from India in 1973. "I want to be a veterinarian, but poetry is a hobby," she said.

Frederick Douglass is one of her favorite poets "because he wrote about freedom."

Esosa Ruffin, a fifth-grader at the Rand School in Montclair, N.J., read "Whatif?" by Shel Silverstein, a poem she chose "because its sort of awkward and weird like my name." Her classmate Chaz Bligen also chose a Silverstein poem, "Strange Restaurant." He drew a cow on his hand-written copy of the poem, which he carefully folded and put back in his pocket when he was done reading.

Playwright, director, and composer Elizabeth Swados served as emcee. Professional poets also made appearances. Poet StaceyAnn Chinn offered some advice: “It’s important to read because it reminds you that the shizzle that is happening to you is not just happening to you. And it’s important to write because you need to get your own personal history out of you.”

Poet and writer Alan Katz, known for his light verse, improvised a line inspired by his allergies: “Being here today is really pleasing, though thanks to the park, I’m really sneezing.”

“Sooner or later everyone has an occasion that requires them to write a poem,” New York City’s Commissioner of Cultural Affairs, Kate Levin, said, explaining that writing poetry is a pursuit for amateurs and professionals alike. It was in that spirit that Mayor Bloomberg wrote a poem for the occasion, “NYC Service,” which was published yesterday in Metro New York (an excerpt: “Read to kids/Mentor one/Help some seniors have some fun”).

The Mayor’s Office, the Department of Cultural Affairs, and the Department of Education started Poem In Your Pocket Day seven years ago, collaborating with the City University of New York, “to highlight all the students and faculty who write poetry,” Ms. Levin said.

In addition to the reading in Bryant Park — which marked the start of the Bryant Park Reading Room event season, including more than 65 free readings, workshops, and book clubs — many classrooms and organizations planned to mark the day. The New York Botanical Garden scheduled an open-microphone reading of poems about plants; the New York Hall of Science passed out science-related poems; Poets House staff passed out poems to ferry passengers, and the Staten Island Museum offered free admission to anyone carrying a poem.

“It’s a great example of a program that started as a government initiative and moved out into the larger world and found its own stakeholders,” Ms. Levin said.

The occasion — which also corresponds with the last day of National Poetry Month — is even getting its own book to be celebrated at the Strand Bookstore tonight. The Academy of American Poets’ “Poem in Your Pocket” (Abrams) is an anthology of classic and contemporary poems. The event tonight will feature readings by poets Elizabeth Arnold, Matthea Harvey, Nick Laird, Ann Lauterbach, Idra Novey, Courtney Queeney, and Ms. Levin.

Books are nice, but sometimes it’s the little things that make a difference. We liked the encouragement offered by the small blue pins several city officials wore on their lapels yesterday, printed with the phrase, “Is that a poem in your pocket?”

Photos: <http://www.shutterfly.com/progal/slideshow.jsp?auto=0&aid=768a5498cf3dd73ea54f>