

Poetry In All of Us

City College of New York's Poetry Outreach Program

KAREN CLARK AND GREGORY CROSBY

EVERY SPRING THE APARTMENT of poet Barry Wallenstein on New York's Upper West Side becomes a blizzard of poetry. A recent evening found him once again hosting the judging of submissions for the City College of New York's (CCNY) annual citywide poetry contest. Dozens of people filled the apartment, all of them busily reading poems from public school students of all ages, marking them with anywhere from one to five stars, and passing them on to other readers.

Director of CCNY's Poetry Outreach Center Pamela Laskin buzzed from room to room—her cry of, “Who needs another batch of poems to read?” ring-

Karen Clark received her MFA in creative writing at City College. A published poet, she has also co-authored a screenplay, *All I Want for Christmas*, with Margarette Gulinello. She expects to publish her collection of fractured fairy tales, *Andersen Alterations*, this year, as well as her novel, *The F.U. Diet*. Her blog, *The Quill and I*, can be found at karenclark00.blogspot.com.

Gregory Crosby is the author of the poetry chapbook *Spooky Action at a Distance* (2014, *The Operating System*). He is co-editor of the online poetry journal *Lyre Lyre* and currently teaches creative writing at Lehman College, City University of New York.

ing out above the hubbub. Wallenstein, an emeritus professor at CCNY and founder of the Poetry Outreach Center, presided over this highly organized chaos with the benevo-

lent aspect of one who is in

his best-loved element—now giving a critical opinion on a poem, or perhaps finding a seat for a newly-arriving judge, or glancing at a poem that had gotten the thumbs-up from four or five readers to exclaim, “Oh, this one’s from one of our new schools—won-



All photos in this article by Hubert Williams, taken at the Poetry Outreach Center's Spring Poetry Festival.

“There is poetry in all of us, and anyone, even a young child, can stand up and recite something that makes the hair on the back of your neck stand up.”

derful, wonderful!”

The contest is part of the Poetry Outreach Center’s year-long program, now in its 42nd season, and grew out of an annual poetry festival started by Wallenstein in 1972. The Center now sends poets from City College’s faculty and students from its graduate writing program into New York City public schools to give readings and conduct hands-on writing workshops which culminate in students’ participation at the annual Spring Poetry Festival and an annual anthology called *Poetry in Performance*. Students from all five boroughs can also enter the high-school poetry contest, in which winners receive cash prizes and attend special events.

The day-long festival features the contest’s win-

ning elementary, middle school, and high school students and invited guests reading their poems, along with a

featured guest poet.

The goal of both the festival and the Center’s outreach, says Laskin, is to encourage the creation and appreciation of poetry at all levels of public education. Indeed, the Poetry Outreach Center and the School of Education recently received a SEED Grant from the U.S. Department of Education to help support a new group of mentors drawn from the School of Education’s graduate students, in the hope that they will one day join the ranks of public school teachers who welcome poets into their classrooms.

The poetry that comes out of these classroom collaborations, says Wallenstein, never fails to amaze him. “There’s a sort of irony, a paradox, I’ve lived with



all these years, because I believe it is very, very difficult to write a good poem, and there are very few true poets who come out of any generation,” says Wallenstein. “And yet the Outreach Center and the festival itself suggest the opposite—that there is poetry in all of us, and anyone, even a young child, can stand up and recite something that makes the hair on the back of your neck stand up. I argue for both positions.” 🐾

