

P O E T R Y



FOUNDATION

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The first of these letters, two years ago, necessarily spoke in terms of concepts and intentions. There were no Poetry Foundation programs then, the only assets of the organization being *Poetry* magazine and a large bank account. That letter set out a plan for the new initiatives by which the Foundation would commit itself to “a vigorous presence for poetry in our culture.” The task, as set by our board, was “to discover and celebrate the best poetry, and to place it before the largest possible audience.” With the last of those initial programs launched early this year, and with new ones underway, it is now possible to talk about more than theory. We can begin to talk about the results of a plan put into action.

The Poetry Foundation has operated this year out of new offices in Chicago, just a few blocks from the first home of *Poetry*, with fifteen employees and a budget of \$7 million. The collective effect of its programs in 2006 was to place poems in front of ten million Americans who would not otherwise have seen or heard those poems. This was done through the pages of *Poetry*, through the Foundation’s family of Web sites and associated podcasts, through Poetry Out Loud, the national poetry recitation program for high school students, and through sponsored poetry programs in each of the major media venues. The Foundation’s programs put money—\$600,000 in 2006—directly into the pockets of poets and their publishers: authors’ payments, copyrights and permissions payments, and a wide range of prizes and awards. The Foundation, as an active member of its cultural community, presented twenty poetry events in Chicago this year. The Foundation also seeks to be a good member of the greater poetry community, and is collaborating on projects with the Library of Congress, National Endowment for the Arts, and leading publishers of poetry. It has also been an active financial supporter of the programs of other poetry and cultural organizations.

The Foundation has organized its programs under several areas of activity. In reporting on these areas, we also want to recognize the individuals responsible for our progress. These managers have the skills necessary to their areas of responsibility; each also has a background in poetry. Their collective knowledge of the art form is an important asset of the Foundation.

POETRY

Under the editorship of Christian Wiman, *Poetry* has grown in circulation from 11,000 three years ago to over 27,000. With its spirited criticism, imaginative features, and eclectic mix of poets, the magazine has, by common consensus, “reclaimed its place at the center of American poetry” (*New York Sun*). Now in its ninety-fifth year, the monthly has never missed an issue.

ON-LINE INITIATIVES

The Internet, with its enormous potential to disseminate poetry, has been of particular interest to the Foundation and its mission. Under the leadership of Editor Emily Warn, a family of related Web sites has been designed and launched. PoetryFoundation.org features an archive of 4,500 poems by more than four hundred classic and contemporary poets, which visitors can navigate with a powerful

“Poetry Tool,” as well as continually changing journalism and editorial content about poetry and poems in the archive.

Other sites include PoetryOutLoud.org, which supports the national poetry recitation contest sponsored by the Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts; AmericanLifeinPoetry.org, the Internet home of a nationally-syndicated newspaper column by former US Poet Laureate Ted Kooser; the Children’s Page, which offers a window into the world of children’s poetry for parents, librarians, and educators; and PoetryMagazine.org, which supports the magazine. Collectively the Foundation’s family of Web sites has logged 2.5 million unique visits in its first year of operation.

POETRY & YOUTH

One important finding of *Poetry in America*, a first-of-its-kind research project published by the Foundation earlier this year, is that a positive experience with poetry early in life often creates a lifelong reader of poetry. This has prompted the Foundation to develop programs aimed at both young adults and children.

In 2006 Poetry Out Loud moved from a two-city pilot to a nationwide recitation program for high school students. The Foundation, represented by Program Director Stephen Young, collaborated with the National Endowment for the Arts to create a classroom kit, a supporting Web site, and the infrastructure necessary for a national competition. Over fifty thousand students from the fifty states and the District of Columbia competed for \$100,000 in scholarship prizes and stipends for their schools. The national finals, which took place in Washington DC last May, were the subject of a feature on the *NewsHour with Jim Lehrer*.

As a way to raise public awareness of the importance of poetry for children, the Foundation established the Children’s Poet Laureate — Consultant in Children’s Poetry. Jack Prelutsky, the first recipient, will advise the Foundation on its programs in this field as well as lead his own initiatives.

POETRY IN THE MEDIA

Fundamental to the Foundation’s mission to raise poetry to a more visible and influential position in our culture is a strategy for disseminating poetry broadly in the media. A portfolio of initiatives, established by Media Coordinator Anne Halsey, is placing poetry in each of the major media channels.

NEWSPAPERS. The Foundation publishes the newspaper column “American Life in Poetry” for more than two million readers each week. Every column includes a poem by a contemporary American poet and a brief introduction by former US Poet Laureate Ted Kooser. The column, available free to editors, has been syndicated in over one hundred newspapers.

MAGAZINES. The Foundation actively cultivates relationships with a variety of magazine editors whose readerships might be receptive to poetry and poetry-related content. Where there is interest, the Foundation then connects editors and journalists with poets and poetry resources.

RADIO. The Foundation is the major sponsor of Garrison Keillor’s national radio program, *The Writer’s Almanac*. More than two million listeners on some 325 stations hear poems read on this program each week.

TELEVISION. The Foundation acts as an editorial advisor to a series of poetry newscasts for public television's the *NewsHour with Jim Lehrer*. In 2006 twelve profiles of American poets were produced and aired for the program's three million nightly viewers.

PODCASTS. This new venue, popular with commuters and students, is proving to be highly poetry-friendly. The Foundation's podcasts — high-quality recordings of poems, interviews with poets, and documentaries — are now downloaded four thousand times each week.

AWARDS & RECOGNITIONS

Building on the magazine's long history of giving awards, and on the Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize and Fellowships, which have a twenty-year history, the Foundation has created a new family of prizes, the Pegasus Awards, intended to celebrate under-recognized poets and to encourage new types of poetry.

NEGLECTED MASTERS AWARD brings a reading public and renewed critical attention to the work of under-recognized, significant English-language poets.

EMILY DICKINSON PRIZE includes publication of a first book for a poet over the age of fifty.

MARK TWAIN POETRY AWARD, recognizing a poet's contribution to humor in American poetry, is given in the belief that humorous poetry can also be seriously good poetry, and in the hope that American poetry will in time produce its own Mark Twain.

RANDALL JARRELL AWARD IN CRITICISM is for critical writing that is intelligent and learned, as well as lively and enjoyable to read.

VERSE DRAMA AWARD, established to revive interest in a neglected verse form, includes production and performance of the winning manuscript.

CHILDREN'S POET LAUREATE is awarded to a living American writer in recognition of a career devoted to writing exceptional poetry for children.

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The first of these annual letters closed by saying, "One way to test the adequacy of our vision for the Poetry Foundation is to imagine what might be called 'the legacy interview.'" A future journalist asks, "You have now sat with a large amount of money for a long time. How is poetry in America better off because of that?" I hope that this letter might provide a first answer to that, and a down payment on our promise.

