Words on paper have healing power

By Rhonda Van Pelt

Bulletin file photo

Molly Wingate, left, talks with fledgling poets during a July 2017 Poetry & Pottery session.

Molly Wingate doesn't just write poetry, she puts it into action. The 27-year Manitou Springs resident leads Poetry Heals and helped launch its signature program, Poetry & Pottery.

For the past two summers, Wingate, Manitou potter Mark Wong and their helpers have set up tables and a potter's wheel, put out pencils, paper, clay and soup, and waited for budding poets and potters to join the fun in Soda Springs Park. And it's all free.

The idea grew out of a community-building presentation, when Wingate and Wong both realized they could use the creative arts to help defuse tensions around homeless people hanging out in the park.

Wingate had some grant money; the city's planning director, Wade Burkholder, chipped in some surplus from his budget and they were in business.

"We had about $2,000 before the idea was 10 minutes old," Wingate said. "When that kind of energy comes together like that, it's like, 'OK, we'll follow that.'"

She started Poetry Heals with Ann Davenport, another Manitou resident. Their mutual passion for poetry really began gaining traction in the summer of 2015, when Poetry Heals became a sponsored project of Proprius, a "resource for students who are learning outside of and beyond traditional school," according to its website.

Wingate travels to a school for teens dealing with addictions and to other locations to work with veterans — anywhere she can help others learn the healing power of poetry.

But she doesn't shove it down their throats. Wingate, a Quaker, uses that faith's principles to welcome others and meet them where they are emotionally to create an "expectation-free zone."

> **It's about just feeling better.**
>
> *— Molly Wingate*

"It's about just feeling better. Luckily, others have done tons of research so I don't need to do it. But what we know, from the little data that we've collected, is that almost everybody feels better but nobody feels worse when they voluntarily engage in this.

"So the idea is bringing people together and saying, 'Hey, I want to listen to you, I want to put some tools in your hands, what's going on with you?' Or, 'You don't need to tell me anything; just write it down.' Because that's pretty cool, too. 'Here are the tools and here are the circumstances, so here's the opportunity.'"

Wingate sees poetry as an affordable, accessible and portable tool that she can put in others' hands. That doesn't mean it's always easy.

Several people who went through training to work for Poetry Heals didn't stay the course.

"They don't like working with addicts or they don't like working with mentally ill people or they found the street people more than they could handle. That's all great. If you can't handle it, I get it," she said.

Wingate's prime objective is to help people work through their barriers in a positive way, whether they're dealing with mental health issues, learning challenges, illiteracy, visual impairment or the inability to just sit still for a while.

"I really want to emphasize that it is an artistic motivation that is speaking to a variety of civic problems," she said.

For two hours on Wednesday afternoons, Poetry & Pottery brings together residents, visitors and transients to express their feelings, get to know each other and learn new skills.

"There are people who've been on the outskirts of Poetry & Pottery and never written a word, and some have. But some, their trust is so shredded. That they'll even come in and sit down next to me is huge," Wingate said.

At times, she has counted 100 participants at a session.

Wingate, Davenport and Poetry Heals' board of directors have already started seeking the funding needed to bring Poetry & Pottery back to Manitou in the summer of 2018. All mentors are paid for their time, and clay and glazes aren't free.

The nonprofit has gotten priceless support from a range of entities: the Smokebrush Foundation, the Manitou Art Center, the Manitou Springs Arts Council, the Manitou Springs Chamber of Commerce, Manitou Brewing Co., Murphy Constructors, the Bee Vradenburg Foundation, the Sheila Fortune Foundation, the Everett Trust, the city of Manitou and its City Council.

Wingate is also grateful for support from many individuals, especially her husband, Brian Murphy, a lawyer for nonprofits who serves on Poetry Heals' board of directors.

Wingate is compiling a chapbook of poems from Poetry & Pottery that will help raise funds. She hopes to have that ready to distribute in January, launched with a book signing at the Manitou Art Center.

"I have to say that Manitou has been a nice environment, especially for Poetry & Pottery. Because people, when I ask, they say, 'Oh yeah, I'll help.' I didn't get very many nos."

October is Arts Month, a Cultural Office of the Pikes Peak Region initiative to celebrate the performing and visual arts. Each week, the Bulletin will publish a story that focuses on a particular art form appearing on the Arts Month schedule. The third week highlights poetry, prose and comedy. Information: www.culturaloffice.org or www.peakradar.com.

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INFORMATION

To learn more, go to Poetryheals.org. Contact Wingate at mollywingate@poetryheals.org if you're interested in becoming a mentor.