

Changing lives, one poem and pot at a time

By Rhonda Van Pelt

Manitou Springs residents Molly Wingate and Mark Wong are planting seeds and watching them grow, Wingate through words and Wong through ceramics.

Their collaboration, Poetry & Pottery, just completed its third year of offering solace, fun and learning in Soda Springs Park. This year's two-hour sessions started June 6 and ran on Wednesdays through Aug. 22, drawing approximately 50 people per week.

"We work with toddlers through senior citizens," Wingate said. "We have lifelong learning opportunities here and artistic expression. But also, if you want it or need it, we can do the traumatic stuff, the therapeutic stuff, which we do a lot with the poems, especially with the homeless folks."

She estimates that about one-quarter of the people attending the free sessions are street people, with the remaining split 50-50 between tourists and residents.

Wingate and her paid helpers will sit with the fledgling poets, giving them writing prompts or leading them through a community poem, stringing together random words written on tags to create something that can be silly and heart-breaking.

Sometimes, the helpers have to write the words on paper. One street person, who Wingate calls "our elder statesman," is extremely dyslexic, so he needs help to express himself.

Wong and his paid helpers show the wannabe potters how to throw on a wheel, then will help them glaze and fire their pieces at a later session — if they return.

Having the sessions at midday is a deliberate choice to keep street people occupied during the lunch hour and away from Manitou restaurants. Plus, everyone can sit down together over soup.

Wingate and her team make everyone, including the transients, feel welcome.

"We're happy to see them. We're going to put them to work, writing poems or making pots. If they're around, they always help set up or tear down. There's just a little more of a connection between them and the city. A little more pride in the city."

The result is a feeling of community between young and old, locals and visitors, securely housed and transients. It has changed the environment in Soda Springs Park, especially in the Bud Ford Pavilion, from what has often been a scary place into a more positive one.

"I'm serious and all that jazz, but



Courtesy image

Erica Ornelas helps a young guest learn to throw a pot during a June 2018 Poetry & Pottery session.

I'm kind of a goofball. This allows me to use that goofiness to invite people to come find their voice," Wingate said.

"Everybody's heart gets cracked open a little bit, and you get to crack your heart open and that's how the light gets in, as Leonard Cohen says. And so, I think that it lightens my heart and I think it lightens everybody else's heart."

Manitou Police officers occasionally stop by to check out the writing and ceramics projects, and they've gotten to know some of the regulars who live on the streets. That's paid off, for instance, when officers

responded to a call about street people

cat-calling women.

They spoke to that elder statesman and asked for his help, and he agreed to ask the offenders to tone it down.

"So the cops are working with the street people to keep the street a more pleasant place for everyone," Wingate said. "I can't prove anything but I can say that we create an environment in which that's possible, that that conversation can happen."

Wingate likes to share the stories that keep her and her team returning to the park.

The first is about an older male transient who attended this year's final

session and wanted to contribute to the donation jar they keep on hand.

One of the helpers told him he didn't have to do that.

"And he said, 'I was told you show your appreciation for something.' He'd gotten a big bowl of soup and he'd sat down and written and felt very grateful. He gave us, literally, his last nickel," Wingate said.

Another story is about a sad young man named Seth, who couldn't afford to go home to see his family. Manitou resident Isaiah Funkhouser was volunteering with Poetry & Pottery, and he befriended Seth and

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eventually invited him to stay with the Funkhouser family.

Seth's grandmother sent money so he could take a bus home, and he stayed there about a month before deciding he had to return to Manitou. He's now living in the Funkhousers' downstairs apartment, has a job, pays for his food and utilities, and is working through a high school equivalency course.

"If we have a success story, it's Seth," Wingate said.

When Poetry & Pottery hosted its birthday party on Sept. 25, Seth was asked if he'd read his poem.

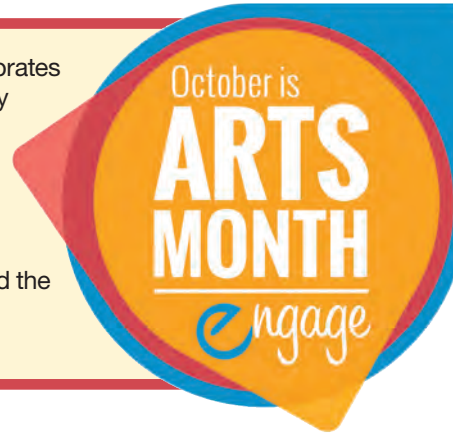
"He stood up and talked about how, knowing that one of our mentors, Beth Arrowsmith, was always going to be there, and other people were always going to be there, and it would be a friendly, easy place to relax, to think about things, meant everything to him."

Those memories are priceless, but the Poetry & Pottery sessions come with a price tag.

Wingate estimates an entire summer costs \$8,000 to \$8,900, due largely to the expense of clay.

She's adamant about paying the mentors, since they have to go through mental health first aid training and

Each October, the Pikes Peak region celebrates Arts Month as a way to elevate the visibility and importance of arts and culture in our community. The official call to action during Arts Month is to "have at least one new cultural experience with family or friends during the month." The third week focuses on poetry, prose and comedy, and the fourth on music and dance. Information: PeakRadar.com/ArtsMonth.



HOW TO HELP

"Poetry Heals," a compilation of poems from the summers of 2017 and 2018, is available for \$20. Contact Wingate at mollywingate@poetryheals.org or 685-4114. Wong made Poetry & Pottery mugs for Manitou Brewing Co., 725 Manitou Ave., and the nonprofit receives a portion of the proceeds. Or go to the website, poetryheals.org, to donate.

give up two hours in the middle of their week. Wingate and Wong also get paid for their time spent at the park, but they also spend time organizing and doing outreach.

Wingate pursues grants for Poetry & Pottery, which is under the umbrella of Poetry Heals, the nonprofit she founded in 2015. The Bee Vradenburg Foundation helped the program get off the ground; since then, other foundations have also

helped.

Right now, Wingate and her team are looking for people to donate to Poetry Heals. Peak View Roofing of Colorado Springs has set up a matching grant of \$1,500; Wingate said Oct. 12 they were 35 percent of the way to their goal.

The city of Manitou Springs has also helped with funding.

"We've been asked to be part of the actual budget request. It was

Long Road

*The roads I've traveled,
The things I've seen.
All I've known.
Still I miss home.*

*The eagle has flown,
And the wolf howled.
The moon shown the way,
Still I miss home.*

*The green of the grass,
Roll of the hill,
Blue of the ocean,
Sound of the streams,
Oh gods, I miss home.*

~ Seth M.

interesting last summer, because we sort of got our funding by the skin of our teeth, but we got it," Wingate said.

"I can pitch Poetry & Pottery as economic development, as arts and culture, as education. I can pitch it lots of ways. But it definitely is a community builder."

Arts news

Special Events

Third Friday Art Walk: Tour galleries and enjoy art from hundreds of artists, plus food, drink and live entertainment. 5-8 p.m. Oct. 19. Various locations. Information: facebook.com/3rdFridayArtWalkManitou.

"Fiber=Art": A juried show of non-functional fiber art with artists' reception. Commonwheel Artists Co-op, 102 Cañon Ave. Information: 685-1008 or commonwheel.com.

"Little Hands Big Masterpieces" Show and Black Tie Gala: A collaborative show featuring the artwork of students from throughout the region. Proceeds benefit the Pikes Peak Children's Museum. Show runs Oct. 22-28. Black tie gala with silent auction, 5 p.m. Friday, Oct. 26. Manitou Art Center, 513 Manitou Ave. Information on gala tickets or the art show: littlehandsbigmasterpieces@gmail.com or 357-7726.

Creative Corridor Photo Scavenger Hunt: Take an exciting photo scavenger hunt through Manitou Springs, Old Colorado City and downtown Colorado Springs with your favorite team. Prizes for the winning and losing groups. Saturday, Oct. 20. 2-8 p.m. Manitou Art Center, 513 Manitou Ave. Registration and information: www.meetup.com/cplg_cos/events/254695924/.

Art Classes

Inkle Weaving: Come explore the world of

warp-faced band weaving, a skill used in belts, guitar straps and wall hangings. You will learn how to read an inkle weaving draft, warp an inkle loom and weave a piece of warp faced fabric. Material fee: \$20. Class fee is \$45 for members and \$55 for non-members. 5:30-8:30 p.m. Friday, Oct. 19. Manitou Art Center, 513 Manitou Ave. Information and registration: textileswest.org or 203-5581.

Curious About Tapestry: Learn the tapestry weaving methods of Greek, Egyptian and Roman times. You will leave the class knowing how to warp and create slits, lines, curves, joins and hatching. Class fee is \$75 for members and \$85 for non-members. Material fee, \$15. 10 a.m.-3 p.m. Wednesday, Oct. 24. Manitou Art Center, 513 Manitou Ave. Information: textileswest.org or 203-5581.

Cork & Craft Sessions: Create and take home beautiful, handmade craft projects in a two-hour class using easy-to-follow instructions. \$30. 6:30-8:30 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays. Craft, 1107 Manitou Ave. Information: craftmanitou.com or 425-9108.

Calls for Entries

First Amendment Gallery: Experienced and emerging artists display their work in various media. Through Dec. 5. 513 Manitou Ave. Information: manitouartcenter.org or 685-1861.

Best of the Members Gallery: MAC



Courtesy image

Rhonda Denney's work is part of the "Fiber=Art" exhibit at Commonwheel through Nov. 11.

members selected the favorite pieces they displayed in the Manitou Art Center during the past year. Through Nov. 11. 513 Manitou Ave. Information: manitouartcenter.org or 685-1861.

Rocky Mountain Field Institute

"NATURE!" Photo Contest: RMFI is looking for powerful images that capture Colorado's dynamic, awe-inspiring and invigorating natural beauty. All photos must be taken in Colorado and fit into one of the contest categories. \$10-\$25 donation to enter. Submissions accepted Nov. 1-8.

Information: Information: rmfi.org, 471-7736, ext. *#, or rmfi@rmfi.org.

Call for wall artist, jeweler and wearable fabric artist: Commonwheel Artists Co-op has openings for various artists. Download the Commonwheel Membership Application Packet at Commonwheel.com or pick one up at the gallery. The application submission will remain open until a new artist is added. Information: www.commonwheel.com/membership-opportunities.html.