

Skagit Valley Herald

MONDAY
MAY 14, 2012

A locally owned newspaper serving Northwest Washington since 1884

75 CENTS
Copyright 2012, Skagit Publishing LLC

EDUCATION FOCUS

Making poetry fun



Scott Terrell / Skagit Valley Herald

Irish poet Tony Curtis sings Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" to an English class Thursday at Skagit Valley College in Mount Vernon.

Skagit River Poetry Festival will be held this weekend in La Conner

By ERINN UNGER
Staff Writer

They tell kids they're going to read poetry, and you'll often get the same reaction: rolling eyes, disinterest and none-too-subtle overall crankiness, teachers say.

But bring a live poet to the classroom, and the atmosphere changes: The students' eyes light up, they're willing to listen to the words spoken by the author, and even pick up a pen and try their hand at a little poetry themselves.

That's been the experience at many schools in Skagit County, thanks to the Skagit River Poetry Project.

Established by the Poets in Schools program in 1998, the poetry project has provided about 10,000 students years of instruction and inspiration from the masters, including such greats as former Poet Laureate of the United States Billy Collins, Irish poet Tony Curtis and Kurtis Lamkin, who often brings along his West African 21-stringed kora.

This year is no different, giving kids a

Information

Want to check out the Skagit River Poetry Festival schedule or learn more about the Poets in Schools program? Go to: www.skagitriverpoetry.org

packed schedule of poets and culminating in the organization's Skagit River Poetry Festival this weekend in La Conner.

The biennial festival, this year from May 17-20, includes a lineup of internationally and locally known poets and authors giving workshops, discussions, readings and even some music at various locations around town.

While the idea of inviting high-profile poets and authors to La Conner was a big part of the poetry project, its roots are in the organization's long-term mission to encourage literacy among students, organizers say.

"That project really started, because we really felt that poetry was a vehicle for literacy for kids in our schools," Project Director Molly McNulty said. The project now serves seven school districts, from

Concrete and Bellingham to Oak Harbor, sending poets into the schools to work with students for about 90 days a year, beginning in September.

"What poetry does isn't just that pretentious 'I'm a poet' kind of stuff," McNulty said. "It really is all about clear thinking and clear communication and that's what poetry does for our kids."

For Terri Bakke-Schultz, who teaches the fifth- and sixth-grade Challenge class for gifted students at Island View Elementary in Anacortes, inviting poets to teach gives her lessons more credibility. The program also exposes students to published poets and opens their minds to the idea "...that not all great poets are dead," she said. "There are many great living poets, and certainly having a poet in your classroom brings that to life, also."

The poet then may read theirs or others' poetry, talk about their own writing process and teach a lesson, helping students express themselves by writing their prose.

See **POETRY**, Page A4

Secure Communities opponents seek help at local level

By MANUEL VALDES
Associated Press

SEATTLE — First, it was thought the full activation of the federal immigrant jail check program was up to the states. Then in Washington state, maybe it was a county decision.

But despite objections by some state governors, local police agencies and immigrant rights groups, the federal government has been fully activating the program — Secure Communities — throughout the nation, including Washington state.

The decision by the Department of Homeland Security to bypass local and state agencies to collect the fingerprints necessary has left immigrant rights groups with few options.

So now, to challenge the federal program, some are turning to their local officials.

In Seattle, immigrant rights and domestic violence groups have begun lobbying King County executive Dow Constantine to halt honoring a key component of the program. They want King County to stop holding suspected illegal immigrants in the county jail for U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, a practice called "detainers."

At least two other counties — Cook County in Illinois and Santa Clara County in California — in the country have begun ignoring detainers. San Francisco is also declining to hold illegal immigrants for the federal government.

Cook County's decision, followed by a publicized case of an illegal immigrant who committed a crime after being released, prompted a sharp rebuttal from the ICE's director, who said the county was compromising public safety.

Secure Communities uses fingerprint analysis to identify illegal immigrants in county jails. Local jurisdictions send the fingerprints of people booked in jail to the FBI. Now, ICE uses the FBI database to cross check with its own databases.

See **SECURE**, Page A4

► Poetry

Continued from Page A1

Teachers also can download curriculum from the program's website and use those resources to supplement their own teaching.

Bakke-Schultz said the result is "absolutely stunning poetry."

There's a wide variety of poets coming into the classrooms, and though all are from the Pacific Northwest, they each have their own niche.

There are naturalist poets and lyrical poets and those specializing in slam poetry, said Sherry Chavers, a former teacher who now volunteers in Anacortes School District collaborating with teachers on language arts lessons.

"They each bring their own voice

and their own way of looking at the world," she said.

These poets show students that everyone can have a voice and express it in a different way, she said.

Chavers said she once taught a student once who was struggling at home and at school. He refused at first to write poetry, but slowly warmed up to the resident poet visiting the classroom. The experience left a lasting impression on the student.

"Eventually by the end of the week, he had really developed the way to getting the anger outside of himself, in a way that is more appropriate," Chavers said.

She ran into that student four years later, as he was riding his bike.

"You remember that poet lady?" the student asked Chavers. "... Well, she kind of saved my life."

The program is not just beneficial

for students, but also is a gift for teachers, who often are inspired by the poets who visit, Chavers said.

Teachers interested in being part of the program attend a workshop put on by the program in the fall and are then connected to poets.

Currently, however, there's a higher demand for poets in the classroom than there is money available.

"I certainly have become much more confident in my ability to teach poetry, and poetry is just a bigger part of my language arts curriculum than it ever was before," said Bakke-Schultz. She added that she feels "more validated" when she sees what her students produce.

"Their voice really comes through when they write poetry," she said.

■ Erinn Unger can be reached at 360-416-2141 or at eunger@skagitpublishing.com. Follow her on Twitter at www.twitter.com/schools_svh.