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CATA poets speak their minds tonight

By **Laura Corona, Berkshire Eagle Staff**
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GREAT BARRINGTON - "I have a whole collection of poems. They tell my thoughts about what I'm doing - dancing, that I'm happy and well, when I'm happy with myself and everybody else. When I can write it, I can explain things," Mary Huberman said.

Huberman, of Great Barrington, is one of the poets to have work showcased at the upcoming annual Community Access to the Arts (CATA) "I Am a Part of Art" art show and poetry reading, tonight from 5 to 7.

Tonight, CATA will celebrate visual artists and poets with approximately 80 pieces of artwork and 15 poems based on the theme "Sticks and Stones." "It's the culmination of an entire year of art workshops," said Liana Toscanini, CATA's development and marketing director. "It gives people a chance to shine in public. It's part of the mission of CATA to notice people's talents and abilities as opposed to their disabilities."

CATA is in its 18th year of using art to integrate people with disabilities into the community. Through more than 1,000 workshops in Berkshire County, CATA serves some 500 people with developmental, physical and emotional disabilities, offering classes in a wide range of visual and performing arts, from painting to juggling to yoga.

"Of the faculty who do visual arts workshops, each goes through artwork and picks works that represent as many participants and as many classes as possible. It's very colorful; that's what people notice when they walk in," Toscanini said. Against the

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colorful backdrop, CATA participants and guest readers will kick off the art show with a selection of poems from weekly classes Carol Stroll has taught from September to June.

"Carol is such a gift to them in taking their artistry and ideas seriously, bringing out symbolism and abstraction," said Lee Conlon, Huberman's house mother. "They get affirmation from one another. They read to each other; they clap. It's the same kind of support any group of writers gives to one another."

Moving from the classroom to a public space is a special experience for participants and guests alike, as CATA brings in celebrity guest readers to be part of the reading. This year, Donald Platt, an English professor at Purdue and brother of one of CATA's participants, will attend as guest reader and will read one of his own poems as well.

"The room is usually packed, and you can hear a pin drop," Toscanini said. "It's a great mix of things. The poetry is extremely moving, and the visual art is so colorful and cheerful. It's both happy and moving. For participants to hear their poetry read or to read it themselves - it's a phenomenal experience for them."

"What's interesting for the faculty members - and can be difficult - is that everyone in a workshop is at a different level," Toscanini added. "It's made apparent in the poetry where you can see all the levels of what's going on. Some people are very articulate, some less so. Some have a sense of humor. Some are simple, some more complex."

Toscanini and Conlon both spoke about CATA's long-distance poet, Amy Sequenzia. A former resident of Great Barrington, Sequenzia moved to Florida in 2005 but still participates in CATA's poetry classes with the help of her caregiver, a special keyboard and e-mail.

"Amy is totally nonverbal," Toscanini said. "She's an outstanding poet, but she can't talk."

Conlon agreed, saying, "To meet her, you wouldn't think anything was going on inside, but then you read her poems, and they're amazing. It's very humbling to realize the complexity of thought that we don't always get to witness."

For Conlon and Huberman, the reading is a special event that draws attention specifically to talents that otherwise sometimes get lost in the shuffle.

"The spirit that comes through in the participants' work isn't always evident in the course of regular conversation," Conlon said. "There are things we don't get a chance to experience in the 'Let's put the laundry in; We have to get out of the house to be in class on time' day-to-day happenings. Poetry helps Mary to get out her feelings and thoughts that are otherwise hard to express."

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