Offering a face to match the living words

By Susan Thornton Hobby
HoCoPoLitSo Recording Secretary

Thirty years ago, founder Ellen Conroy Kennedy decided to put living authors on the curriculum by starting HoCoPoLitSo’s writer-in-residence program for the county high schools.

Beloved poet Lucille Clifton was the first guest of honor, reading her work and talking with students in seven high schools in 1981. Since then, writers including Li-Young Lee, Truth Thomas, Marion Winik, Michael Dirda, and Gayle Danley have put human faces on the words of contemporary literature.

HoCoPoLitSo is anticipating terrific sessions in the classrooms with this year’s poet-in-residence, Naomi Ayala. A bilingual poet born in Puerto Rico, Ayala has taught creative writing since she was 19, and specializes in working with students whose first language is not English. The author of three books of poetry, Ayala is also a translator of poetry.

Last year’s poet-in-residence, Steven Leyva, said of his experience in county classrooms, “I loved getting to share my enthusiastic and quite nerdy love of language and anime with a group of talented, intelligent, and inquisitive students.”

At Oakland Mills High School, after the students had finished writing poems with Leyva, teacher Laurin Grubb spoke up. Wiping her eyes, she said of her pandemic year, “What I feel that we have missed as teachers this year, is seeing the joy and spark in our students with our own eyes,” Grubb said. “Being in the session with Steven Leyva allowed me to witness with my own eyes that magic, and that juju is what I’ve sorely missed!”

Leyva explains that literature, in schools, in prisons, in a quiet living room, or in a crowded bar, is vital: “Whether you are a high school student in Howard County or an incarcerated person like Etheridge Knight, a poem invites us into the same awe.”

HoCoPoLitSo is grateful to all the writers who have brought living awe into the classroom for thirty years, and to Lillian Bauder, a donor who is now funding the program.

We invite you to share the same awe, to help HoCoPoLitSo keep our events, videos, and programming coming, despite a pandemic.
2021 Highlights

HoCoPoLitSo ushered in its 46th literary season by hosting a performance by slam poet Gayle Danley at the Howard County Arts Gala in July 2020 with a dynamic reading for the gala’s virtual audience.

On October 2, 2020, the Lucille Clifton Reading Series debuted Joseph Ross’s newest poetry collection Raising King, based on the writings of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Introduced by poet E. Ethelbert Miller, the virtual presentation recorded by Alan W. King at Kittamaqundi Community Church had an audience Q & A moderated by Susan Thornton Hobby. A recording is available here. www.youtube.com/watch?v=IvGbf4vYOb8

The 43rd Annual Evening of Irish Music & Poetry held virtually on February 19, 2021, with novelist Joseph O’Neill. Introduced by Daniel Mullhall, Ireland’s Ambassador to the U.S., the reading emceed by author Belinda McKeon, and included an Irish dance lesson by Teelin Irish Dance’s founder Maureen Berry and musical performances by Jared Denhard, Laura Byrne, Jim Eagan, Sean McComiskey, and a sing-a-long with Martin O’Malley, former governor of Maryland. A signature cocktail, An Irishman in Istanbul, was created by and available through The Wine Bin of Ellicott City specifically for the event. A recording is available here. www.youtube.com/watch?v=jGgfj4vY0k8

Irishman in Istanbul
a signature cocktail created for HoCoPoLitSo’s 43rd Irish Evening by The Wine Bin

Pour into an ice filled cocktail shaker
• 1 ½ oz of Jameson ipa finish
• 1 oz apricot puree
• ¾ oz cardamom syrup
• 1 oz lemon juice
(reduce to ¾ oz for sweeter cocktail)

Shake for 20-30 seconds
Strain into a coupe or martini glass
Garnish with 2 dried apricots

ENJOY!

HoCoPoLitSo, in partnership with Howard Community College (HCC), produced the 13th annual Blackbird Poetry Festival on April 28, 2021. The virtual festival featured Ukrainian-born poet Ilya Kaminsky, the author of Deaf Republic, a 2019 Naional Book Award finalist, and included a morning workshop for HCC students. The afternoon Sunbird reading began with a tribute set to music written by Ryna May, honoring the many “blackbirds” who had shared their poetry at the festival over the past thirteen years. The ticketed Nightbird event, hosted by Teri Ellen Cross Davis, poetry coordinator for the Folger Library, featured Kaminsky and Wilde Lake High School student and Poetry Out Loud winner Paula Yeboah. The question-and-answer session brimmed with hope, and brought Cross Davis, and others in the audience, to tears.

Wilde Readings

Organized by Laura Shovan, Ann Bracken, Linda Joy Burke, and Faye McCray, Wilde Readings continued live on Facebook second Tuesdays, September thru June, with an open mic and this year’s featured writers, Ned Balbo, Michael McKewon Bondus, Shirley Brewer, Regie Cabico, Jona Colson, Chad Frame, Edward Doyle-Gillespie, Jalyn Harris, Matthew Holnner, Steven Leyva, Lenett Nef’tahtiti Partlow-Myrick, Fernando Quijano III, Patti Ross, Jane Satterfield, Terri Simon, Israfel Sivad, Rose Solari, Mathangi Subramanian, Gwen Van Velsor, and Vonetta Young.

School Programming

Funded by a generous endowment to HoCoPoLitSo’s school programming by Dr. Lillian Bauder, Steven Leyva served as this past year’s Bauder’s Writer-in-Residence. He provided 14 virtual workshops for county schools and a county-wide workshop attended by almost 200 students. For thirty years the Howard County Poetry and Literature Society (HoCoPoLitSo) has awarded book prizes to the winners of its All-County Writing Competition, and honored students nominated by their teachers for Promise and Achievement in Language Arts. HoCoPoLitSo continued the tradition by working with Howard County public school teachers to make virtual presentations to graduating seniors. Fine books with personalized name plates and letters were hand-carried to the students at the schools.

The nine creative writing winners were Caroline Greaser (Atholton) in the personal essay category; Hannah Shen (Mt. Hebron), Stephanie Okoma (Oakland Mills), and Ava Perry (Long Reach) in the poetry category; Alicia Ribeiro (Oakland Mills), Jianuo Li (Centennial), and Jenna Khatib (Long Reach) in the short story category, and Inogen Archuleta (Centennial) and Jasmine Sonpar (Mt. Hebron) in the playwright category. This year’s reviewers were Michael Clark (retired journalist and former publisher of Little Patuxent Review), Sylvia Lee (associate professor of English Howard Community College), and Patricia Van Amburg (poet and professor of English Howard Community College).

In addition, twenty-five students were chosen by their English Departments to receive HoCoPoLitSo’s Promise and Achievement Award in Language Arts. The honorees were: Daniel Etcheberrigaray, Catherine Heltig (Atholton); Maria Daly, Philip Wang (Centennial); Ainsley Welykordoko, Michael White (Glengel); Olufemi Adebasisi, Megan Zimmerman (Hammond); Cameron Drummond, Ken’Nay Sye (Homewood); Magesh Amrit, Stephanie Samuel (Howard); Leslie Deiss, Jackson French (Long Reach); Grace Kim (Marriotts Ridge); Victory Carey, Kaleb Tucker (Oakland Mills); Jordan Foster, Timothy McShea (Mt. Hebron); Tydre’a Eaddy, Dayrin Jimenez (Roservoir); Sydney Alexander, Aidan James Hoffmeister (River Hill); Rebecca Jihae Jang, and Sarah Rubin (Wilde Lake). Suhani Khosla (Atholton) was recognized as HoCoPoLitSo’s first Bauder Youth on Board. HoCoPoLitSo is grateful to Dr. Lillian Bauder for funding HoCoPoLitSo’s student programming.

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HoCoPoLitSo On-Line

Production of HoCoPoLitSo’s *The Writing Life*, suspended in March 2020 due to the closure of HCC’s TV studio. Recordings from the Lucille Clifton Reading Series with Joseph Ross, *Why We Can’t Wait*, poems from *Raising King*; the 43rd Irish Evening with Joseph O’Neill; and the Blackbird Poetry Festival with Ilya Kaminsky are available on HoCoPoLitSo’s YouTube page.

HoCoPoLitSo launched its *Poetry Moment* series on Juneteenth, 2020, marking the importance of the Black Lives Matter movement. The first eleven Poetry Moments showcased poems written and read aloud by Black authors who have visited HoCoPoLitSo. With video pulled from longer programs recorded over the past thirty years, thirty Poetry Moments have been released and are available on HoCoPoLitSo’s YouTube channel. The Columbia Festival of the Arts channel is hosting the expanded productions, produced in partnership with HCC’s Arts Collective, with actor introductions offering context to the poems.

The value of *The Writing Life* archive to scholars was again evident this year. The Poetry Foundation asked permission to use clips from the “really amazing interview with Marilyn Chin.” Vermont’s Brattleboro Trail requested permission to use portions of the Saul Bellow reading for its heritage audio application. Righteous Babe Records linked to our YouTube interview with Sekou Sundiata during the online radio station’s tribute month to the late poet. The Howard County Public School System included a link to *The Writing Life* and *Poetry Moment* series as a teacher resource in their learning management system.

HoCoPoLitSo Partnerships

Throughout the year Susan Thornton Hobby and Laura Yoo successfully facilitated book discussion groups on-line in partnership with Howard County Public Library System and One Maryland One Book. Yoo interviewed best-selling author Lisa See and Hobby facilitates a climate fiction book club.

In partnership with Howard Community College Arts Collective, HoCoPoLitSo co-hosted Meeting the Moment: Conversations about the Arts in the Age of Black Lives Matter in September 2020 on Facebook Live.

On March 4, 2021 HoCoPoLitSo collaborated with the Bauder Lecture Series and Howard Community College to host a virtual conversation with Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah, author of *Friday Black*, and Tope Folarin, author of *A Particular Kind of Black Man*.

SAVE THE DATE
Friday, February 11, 2022

**Virtual Irish Evening**