



The 4th Annual High School Poet Laureate Project

By Meghan E. W. Corbett

It seems as though the topic of education has been in the news constantly in recent years. New policies are in place, teachers are being laid off and spending cuts are as prevalent as pencils in the everyday world of learning. It can seem daunting at times to figure out ways in which to give back and help to ensure our children's futures are not diminished because of funding cuts, but the Forsyth Education Partnership is determined to bring the focus back to where it belongs.

"Forsyth Education Partnership (FEP) is 'a nonprofit organization that facilitates community collaboration, commitment and action for educational excellence in our public schools,'" said Dianne Iseman, student project co-chair. "Winston-Salem Forsyth County Schools (WSFCS) supports and assists FEP in sponsoring the student part of our endeavors, known as The High School Poet Laureate Project. The idea for a high school poet laureate was born in an ad hoc committee meeting of FEP involving school personnel and FEP board members whose work focused on keeping students in school. Having just been to Guilford County's Poet Laureate reading sponsored by the public library, I mentioned that perhaps this was a way our young people's voices could be heard; giving them an avenue in addition to academics, sports, drama, etc."

After speaking with the FEP board and WSFCS, Iseman's suggestion was approved, and four years later, the program has seen wonderful growth and participation from young people. "All high schools are participating," said Iseman. "With the help of Alexandra Hoskins from WSFCS'

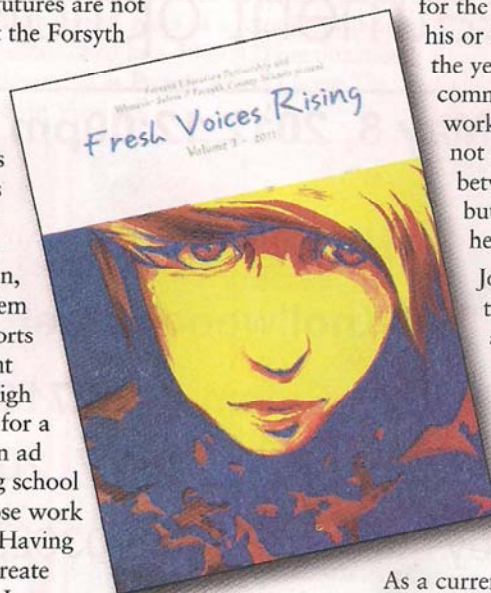
administration and high school English teachers, all students at every high school are given the opportunity to enter their poetry in the contest."

According to the FEP's website, "the Poet Laureate project was established to promote creative arts and to provide an avenue for students to express their artistic originality." In a time when the arts and a student's creativity seem to be taking a backseat, it is phenomenal to have a group of people determined to uphold this avenue for expression during National Poetry Month in April. Each high school submits a first and second place winner to send to the official competition, where judges made up of university faculty and published poets review them to come up with county-wide 1st, 2nd and 3rd place winners.

Students involved are supported by their parents, principals and teachers who motivated them. "Each winner receives a monetary award, medal and certificate," said Iseman. "The first place winner becomes WSFCS High School Poet Laureate for the year, and that student is invited to read his or her work at various functions throughout the year while also being available to community groups who would like to hear the work. This contest is so important because it not only serves as a collaborative effort between the community and our schools, but it gives our young people a chance to be heard."

Joseph Mills of North Carolina School of the Arts judged the contest in its first year, and said the poetry submitted by the students dealt with "race, grief, gangs, religion, military service, romantic love, friendship, language...in short, all the elements of what it means to be human. They document the sensitivity, yearnings, anger, sadness and joy of high school students."

As a current sponsor of the Poet Laureate Project, Joyce Kohfeldt of Innovative Educational Support Systems in Kernersville understands how important it is to give high school students these experiences. "I have chosen to support the Forsyth Education Partnership Poet Laureate Project because I believe that children are our future and our best investment," said Kohfeldt. "Anything we can do to help them share their thoughts, aspirations and talents is advantageous, not only to them, but to the rest of us." Kohfeldt also supports this medium for students by providing



journals for middle and high school teachers to use as motivators for creativity.

Rhett Trull is also a sponsor of this endeavor. "As a young writer who grew up attending WSFC schools, I know the importance of encouraging and praising young poets," said Trull. "I was fortunate to have good teachers who noticed and named my gifts. That early encouragement gave me the confidence to pursue the writing that has become my career and a source of strength, hope and healing in my life. I support FEP and the Poet Laureate Project as a means to continue recognizing the talent of students' writing that can not only build confidence, but better communities and cross borders. These young poets are among those who will lead us into the future and inspire change. They, their teachers and their families should be proud of their courageous, passionate, sensitive voices. And...we must keep listening."

In addition to the wonderful poetry, FEP President Karel Chandler solicits artwork from high school students who wish to see how their artwork stands up against their peers. "This just adds another wonderful element for student participation," said Iseman. "The artists also receive monetary awards and artwork is included in annual chapbooks. Being chosen as a cover artist is considered an honor and kept a secret until the night of the contest when chapbooks are revealed. Anyone wishing to purchase a chapbook can contact Karel after the event. They are sold for \$5.00 and help defray expenses. The 4th Annual High School Poet Laureate program will take place on April 19th at 6pm at the WSFCS Education Building. This year's judges include Terry Kennedy from UNC-G's MFA Program, Donald Ilko, retired theatre instructor from DePaul University, and Rhett Iseman Trull, author of *The Real Warnings* and editor of *The Cave Wall Press* in Greensboro. For more information, visit www.ForsythEdPartnership.org, or contact Karel Chandler at kchandler3@msn.com.

