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"I want to demystify poetry. And, by doing so, I want to raise the bar with the writing. I want them to realize that poetry doesn't have to be pretty."

TINA CANE, poet and mother of two *three*

Their poetry means more than just words

A writing program at Providence elementary schools has taught students a new way of expressing themselves.

BY LINDA BORG
JOURNAL STAFF WRITER

PROVIDENCE — Tina Cane believes that poetry is a window to the soul, a way for students to discover that words are a way to express deep and, sometimes, dark feelings.

"When you become personally invested in how you use words, you feel more," said the Providence poet and mother of two. "If you only know the words good and bad, then you only experience good and bad. I want them

to see that poetry is a vehicle for expressing strong feelings."

By showing that writing can be fun, Cane is trying to balance the understandable emphasis on improving basic skills, which can neglect creative expression in the drive to boost test scores.

What began this fall began as a volunteer effort at Vartan Gregorian Elementary School has since blossomed into a paid job that also includes fourth graders at Martin Luther King Elementary School. None of this would have been possible without the financial support of the parent-teacher organizations of both schools.

On Sunday, two dozen Gregorian students read their poems, the culmination of

eight months of work, at AS220, an art-and-music space in downtown Providence.

Cane's approach is simple but effective: she gives her students a fragment of poetry and then asks them to write their own poems using the same structure. It is modeled after the Teachers & Writers Collaborative in New York City, where Cane taught poetry to youngsters before moving to Rhode Island four years ago.

Cane began teaching poetry to fourth graders at King Elementary School three weeks ago. In a recent class there, Cane reads a snippet from Praxilla, a 5th-century B.C. poet:

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Poetry

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Loveliest of what I leave behind is the sunlight and loveliest after that, the stars and the moon's face, but also, cucumbers that are ripe and pears and apples."

The poem is called "Hymn to Adonis," and those lines are all that remain from the original work. Adonis, Cane explains, was a Greek god who was killed by a wild boar. After his death, he was sent to the Underworld, where he reflected on all of the wonderful things he left behind.

Cane reads the poem out loud twice.

What does he miss? she asks the class.

"The sun," one student says.

"Cucumbers that are ripe," says another.

"People thought Praxilla was ridiculous for putting sunlight in the same line as apples and pears," Cane says. "But she was showing how extraordinary the little things are in life."

Cane reads a poem by a Gregorian student that was written in response to the same poem:

*Last loveliest of what I
Leave behind is the sand
Wet and smooth like
a mango's skin in the fall*

Look at how descriptive the language is, Cane says. A mango's skin is wet and smooth. Can't you just feel the fruit's texture? Think about the things you love. And when you do, she says, include examples that move from the big things you would miss to the little ones.

The Praxilla fragment gives students a point of departure from which to launch their own

poems. Although Cane encourages her students to experiment, she is a stickler for grammar.

Cane also says that she pushes her students to move away from clichés. Be specific, she tells them. What color is the sky? Is the blanket fuzzy or rough? Is your little sister's laugh gentle or loud?

"I want to demystify poetry," Cane says. "And, by doing so, I want to raise the bar with the writing. I want them to realize that poetry doesn't have to be pretty. It doesn't have to rhyme."

Seasoned poets write with passion, enthusiasm and joy, Cane says. They tweak established forms and challenge boundaries.

Back in the fourth-grade class at King, 9-year-old Zeke Cohen asks if he can read his poem and then he does.

Loveliest of what I leave behind is the winning of the war

Loveliest after that are the troops coming home

But also, my great-grandfather's dog tags.

Cane nods and points out how Zeke's poem moves effortlessly from the big picture — the war — to the personal — his great-grandfather's dog tags.

Another child raises her hand to read, then another.

Loveliest of what I leave behind is the moon darkening the sky

With the stars streaming the sky and the world beginning to darken with roads staying still for life.

And most important after that is wishing on a star for a wish to come true

But also seeing astronauts with their rockets flying in the cool air of space.