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**Carla Perry sends Writers On The Edge into the future**  
**By Laura Eberly Of the News-Times**



**Writers On The Edge is entering a new phase in its development promoting the literary arts in Lincoln County - mirroring the growth of its founder, Carla Perry.**

*photo by Laura Eberly*

On Saturday, Carla Perry will hand over the reins of the Nye Beach Writers' Series, along with direction of Writers On The Edge, to Michelle Bonzcek and Tom Holmes. The couple has signed on to guide the program into 2005 and beyond.

"It's been a thrill," Perry said. "I knew I was on an incredible ride. I figured I'd just ride it until it wasn't there anymore. And then I said, wait a minute - I want to be writing ... what am I doing?"

For the past seven and a half years, Perry has been bringing authors from throughout the country to the Oregon coast as featured guests of the Nye Beach Writers' Series, a program of Writers On The Edge. Through her stewardship, the nonprofit organization has featured 254 writers at 98 events - largely made possible through volunteer efforts and community support.

"The first show was in June 1997 in Yachats in cooperation with the Friends of the Yachats Commons, who wanted a literary program and asked if I'd put something together," said Perry, who lived in Yachats for a year and a half before settling in Newport in 1998. Representatives of the Newport Performing Arts Center wasted no time in asking if she would provide the venue with a literary program as part of its mission and, at first, she said no, "because I was a volunteer, and it takes so much work," she said.

But - whether she knew it or not - she had already embarked on her journey as a promoter of literary arts in the area. She produced the first Writers On The Edge program at the performing arts center in 1999, and has orchestrated at least 12 shows a year through the program since. This year, she brought 25 arts and entertainment events to Lincoln County - along with 75 writers.

"I did not set out to create this - I was capable and there were things that needed to be done and I just learned how to do it," she said, noting she has grown along with the organization.

## **From one coast to the other**

Perry was raised in Manhattan and attended the High School of Music and Art in Harlem. The school has since merged with the High School of the Performing Arts - known to many American households through its depiction on the television show "Fame." In 1970, she received a degree in poetry from the University of Iowa Writers Workshop, the only place that offered bachelor's and master's degrees in writing at the time. She also received a degree in Mandarin Chinese.

From Iowa, she moved to Kansas where she lived for three years and worked as a house parent in a group home, helping educate children age 6 to 18. Her next stop was in Calhoun in central Western Missouri, where she taught in a one-room schoolhouse. She was voted Best Teacher by her students, but was "asked by the principal not to return. I was filling their heads with too much," she said.

Missouri was in the midst of a drought at the time, and Perry found herself wanting to go "where the water was falling from the sky, for free! You can survive where there's water. [In Missouri], we could not grow a garden. There was no running water, a coal stove - a whole different life from Manhattan." So she packed up her car and followed the water to Portland, Oregon. She worked as a freelance writer and poet and "was pretty successful" in Portland, then traveled to Virginia. It was several years before she returned to Oregon to settle on the Siuslaw, which "was beautiful, but isolated." She knew a friend in Yachats, however, and moved there - poising her at the beginning of an incredible journey.

## **Writers On The Edge blooms**

Over the years, Writers On The Edge has expanded to include a Summer Youth Writing Workshop for children age 6 to 18, along with afterschool programs and workshops, and collaborations with literary and arts organizations statewide.

The Nye Beach Writers' Series, however, is the flagship. At least two writers are featured each month (excluding December), who read from their recent works and field questions from the audience. Following intermission, the microphone is handed over to attendees who may read from their original works. At the close of the evening, a literary prize is awarded to the best "open mic" reader of the night. Perry has arranged it so high school students may attend the series free.

She has made audio tape recordings of every show and said often, the most interesting part of the event came when the author answered questions from the audience. "When it was really good, I'd send a copy to them," she said. Perry created memory packets for each guest artist, including copies of the press releases published in the paper, photographs from the show, and ticket stubs from the event. The writers "were well cared for, they got to stay in a beautiful hotel and felt recognized and appreciated. And I appreciated them," Perry said, adding that many said the series was "a highlight of their tour."

Perry cites support from the community as indispensable to the success of Writers On The Edge. Donations have come from area lodging facilities in the form of overnight accommodations for featured guests; from local businesses, which have supplied wine, tea, pizza and other concessions to attendees during the shows; and in donated venue space offered at various locations through the years. The continuous outpouring of support "is why I kept going, there was no reason not to," she said, marveling also at "the fact I have met writers who have fantastic minds. I got to choose who came, these people were the top of my list."

Among its many partnerships, Writers On The Edge has collaborated with the Mountain Writers Series, the University of Oregon, KBOO Radio based in Portland, and the Oregon Council for the Humanities to "piggyback" other readings and performances throughout the state with the series.

## **Making it official**

In March 2002, Perry applied for federal status as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization dedicated to the literary arts. Her application was approved almost immediately, and Writers On The Edge was granted nonprofit status within 40 days of the application.

"I had a really good crew of volunteers," Perry said, "who became the board of directors." The board started out with three members and at its largest included 12. Currently, 10 volunteers sit on board, "all original people" with the organization, Perry noted. By forming into a nonprofit, Writers On The Edge was able to create a nominally paid position to offer token compensation to its hitherto volunteer director - who had to learn how to process "lots and lots of paperwork. I had to learn all of that - and then grant writing, which was very successful," Perry said.

In the end, the payoff for Perry came in bringing the literary arts to Lincoln County and the opportunity the program provided to meet a range of people with "incredible minds, and I've made friends with so many of them. That has been an incredible benefit." Perry's enthusiasm and belief in cultivating a strong literary arts scene on the coast has not gone unnoticed.

She was awarded the 2002 Stewart H. Holbrook Award for Outstanding Contributions to Oregon's Literary Life (Holbrook Award) by Literary Arts, a statewide arts organization dedicated to promoting the importance of language as a means to express, explore, and experience the world. She was nominated for the award by a featured author in the Nye Beach Writers' Series. The award commended Perry's involvement with Writers On The Edge along with her other literary endeavors, including co-ownership of Dancing Moon Press and her service as editor and publisher of "Talus & Scree International Literary Journal" from 1997 to 1999. She was also recognized as a founding member of the Central Oregon Coast Writers' Co-op and editor of its literary journal, "The Space Between."

"I had never, ever gotten up in front of an audience before this started, and now I can do it," Perry said.

She was also selected as a recipient of a 2003 Oregon Literary Fellowship in the category of poetry, another program of Literary Arts. The fellowship helps writers in need of funds to initiate, develop or complete a project in the genres of poetry, fiction, literary nonfiction, drama, and young readers literature.

Last year, Perry was recognized along with other Oregon artists and citizen leaders by Governor Ted Kulongoski at the 2003 Governor's Arts Awards held in Salem. The awards, presented in partnership with the Oregon Arts Commission, recognize Oregonians whose work on behalf of the arts has significantly contributed to the growth and development of Oregon's cultural life.

"I felt like I was queen for a day," she said. "I was heady. I even wore a red dress that I borrowed."

She said she was heartened to see the state recognize a rural program. "Most of the concentration of the arts awards go to Portland; to recognize a rural arts program was phenomenal, for the state to acknowledge that it does make a difference in the schools and locally."

Perry's grant-writing efforts with Writers On The Edge have included funding for writing programs for students in the Lincoln County School District. The first grants helped to bring writing workshops to Waldport High School. Successive funding was used in collaboration with the Portland-based group, Community of Writers - a teacher support program whose goal is to improve student writing achievement by improving the quality of writing instruction - to provide creative writing instruction for third and fifth grade teachers in Lincoln County.

"We don't have the major sponsors and businesses here that the urban areas have, and the school district can't afford to fund arts programs. It was really marvelous," she said, for the state to acknowledge that facilitating arts programs in Lincoln County did matter.

### **Looking to the future**

Recently, with Writers On The Edge taking on a life of its own, Perry looked around her to evaluate the direction her own life was taking. She is "about a third of the way through" the edit of her novel, has two residencies waiting in the wings, a small press publishing company, and a host of other projects awaiting her attention. She said she asked herself, "Do I let it (Writers On The Edge) die, or find someone to take it over?"

This spring, she wrote a paragraph briefly describing her position as director of Writers On The Edge and sent the information across the Internet to literary and arts programs. She received 35 inquiries, and of those conducted 11 interviews.

Michelle Bonczek and Tom Holmes fit the bill. "And so that worked out very well," Perry said. "I'm very happy with them, they're perfect for taking it over." She said the couple has plans to expand the program and produce events throughout Lincoln County. "I wanted the next person to be able to create Writers On The Edge in their own image. I support that."

Perry will take time to finish her book during two upcoming writing residencies. The first offers "two weeks in the snow" at Caldera (near Sisters) in December; and the second will give her four weeks at Soapstone, a writing retreat for women on the northern Oregon coast, set for the spring of 2005. Her novel, currently under the working title of "Riva" (the name of the protagonist), is set in New York City in the 1960s.

Perry hasn't been back to New York City since the 60s, she said, and "in my head, I still see the subways at 15 cents." Among her mementos, she found a photograph taken of the menu at Chock Full O'Nuts in New York City, with the prices frozen in time. She could use that small detail in the story.

"There is a lot of truth in the book, the times - civil rights, the World's Fair, Vietnam, the entire East Coast lost power - they were very dynamic times," Perry said. The book is about relationships and "a lot of magical realism - when things are difficult, how amazing things happen," she said. Other projects include the compilation of her third collection of poetry; and the creation of a sampling of Oregon writers who have read during the Nye Beach Writers Series, complete with CD recordings, printed transcription and photographs, and interspersed with her own written commentary.

On the side, she enjoys painting and gives away her works as birthday presents to friends and loved ones. Painting portraits of friends and writers and giving them as presents "gives me an outlet," she said. To round out her experiences, she "wants to write some songs. (Local musician) June Rushing said if I write them, she'll sing them." In the meantime, Perry plans to continue freelance writing and offer small press publication services through Dancing Moon Press. And on yet another horizon, Perry's son and daughter-in-law, Zachariah and Nicole Perry who live in Portland, are expecting their first child.

Perry's final production of the Nye Beach Writers' Series is set for 7 p.m. Saturday at the Dogwood Building in Newport, when she will introduce Bonczek and Holmes to the local literary community.

More information about Writers On The Edge, including upcoming programs, is available online at [www.writersontheedge.org](http://www.writersontheedge.org).

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