

# THE READER

BY VICKY DICKSON

## POETRY IN ACTION

To those of us who grew up thinking of poetry as a formal, somewhat stilted art form, the whole notion of a poetry slam can seem anomalous. Not to mention intimidating: The idea of choosing to stand in front of a group of strangers and deliver a deeply personal poem of one's own creation – a poem that is publicly judged in terms of both content and delivery – well, that's nearly incomprehensible.

Until, that is, you start to get a sense of what the spoken word movement is all about. Until you talk to poets like Will McInerney, whose performance of his poem "Life upon Life" at last fall's Flyleaf launch of *27 Views of Chapel Hill* brought the house down.

"If we don't tell our own stories, someone else will, and they will surely mess it up," the Chapel Hill native and UNC graduate says. "We are the only experts on ourselves, so we must embrace our roles as the bearers and transmitters of our own stories. Through telling our own stories, we not only can help ourselves grow, but we can help others who have experienced similar things cope with their own stories and experiences."

McInerney himself grew up not knowing or caring much about poetry. But then his high school English teacher, Michael Irwin, and his longtime friend Kane Smego became an inspiration: "Their work with poetry and education were the sparks that pushed me toward poetry." So McInerney joined the Chapel Hill Slam Team, shortly before it changed its name to "Sacrificial Poets" in homage to fellow poet Ira Yarmolenko (who was murdered in May 2008).

He's now co-director of Sacrificial Po-



Will McInerney in Beit Jala in the Palestinian West Bank, where he taught poetry classes  
PHOTO BY DANA ABU-DAYYEH

ets/YouTH ink, which has evolved into a poetry organization devoted to fostering social transformation. As McInerney sees it, "Spoken word holds a unique and powerful place as an artistic medi-

um suited for protest and popular movements. By appealing to people's emotions, focusing on people's stories and utilizing the power of the human voice, spoken word works as a strategic and

influential political vehicle."

He's taken that belief to protests against racism at UNC and gentrification in Northside, as well as to public school classrooms in Chapel Hill and Durham. In 2010, McInerney was invited to teach high school students in the Palestinian West Bank how to use poetry as a means of nonviolent resistance.

Those experiences just whetted McInerney's appetite for pushing his own boundaries, so he and Smego (Sacrificial Poets' artistic director) conceived the Poetic Portraits of a Revolution project as a way of using "the power and perspective of art to examine the complex and intertwining human stories that make up these popular movements in North Africa."

The two, along with photographer Sameer Abdel-khalek and translator and spoken-word artist Mohammad Mousa, spent two months in Egypt and Tunisia this past summer, and returned with a collection of riveting poems and pictures that help to put a human face to the political upheaval. They presented some of their work at the recent TedxUNC conference, and are developing a theatrical performance out of their material that will debut in the beginning of March at The ArtsCenter in Carrboro.

McInerney says that his "experience with Sacrificial Poets has had a huge impact on my desire to continue working to change the structures of inequality that make up our world." Eventually, he'd like to become a human rights lawyer – a career for which all that experience getting up in front of people and telling deeply personal stories will undoubtedly stand him in good stead.

To learn more about the Sacrificial Poets, come to Flyleaf Books the first Wednesday of every month at 6:30 p.m. for the Sacrificial Poets Touchstone Open Mic. The event is open to people of all ages, and you're sure to witness some amazing talent.



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