

A POETIC JOURNEY

Ocean State Poets gather to share poems of survival

By Joe Baker

Staff writer Baker@NewportRI.com

NEWPORT — Poetry is a slow cooking stew that tastes better the longer it steeps. Done well, it acts as a catalyst not only for the writer, but for those exposed to it.

A few writers from Ocean State Poets shared their thoughts and bared their souls Sunday at the Redwood Library program entitled “Writing Down Cancer, Surviving Through Poetry.” Highlighting the program was Carol Anderheggen of Newport, who read several works from her book of poems — “Writing Down Cancer” — outlining her life-altering journey through breast cancer.

In a blurb in the book, Heather Sullivan of Middletown, who read some of her own poems Sunday, described Anderheggen’s poetic journal as “heart-wrenching honesty.”



“From the initial diagnosis to ‘a new life one-breasted,’ ultimately hope prevails,” Sullivan wrote. “Courageously and with artistic precision, Anderheggen exposes her own vulnerability, and in doing so, allows us to experience her fear, her loss and, most of all, her ‘heart made real above the bone.’”

Anderheggen, a retired librarian, wrote her first poem when she was 8, shortly after being adopted. Over the years the art of poetry has allowed her to delve into her innermost thoughts and feelings and to cope with them.

"It's a process of resolution. I'm resolving something I'm feeling," Anderheggen said after the Redwood program. "I write because I have something to say."

It was in 1990 that the then-50-year-old Anderheggen was diagnosed with Stage 1 breast cancer. Fearful of chemotherapy and radiation treatment, she opted for a mastectomy. It was poetry that shepherded her through the stages of grief, she told the small gathering at the Redwood Library.

"(The book) is a journey through shock, fear, anger, resignation, reconciliation and hope," Anderheggen said.

Accompanied by fellow poet David Dragone on violin, Anderheggen opened her reading with a poem written five years before her cancer diagnosis. In it, she confronts growing older, ironically, by focusing on her breasts.

"I'm neither young nor old. Control becomes an illusion and my breasts remain where gravity insists they be."

Anderheggen wove her way through the surgery, her confrontation with her new body ("life was now a one-breasted affair") and her eventual acceptance, achieved with the help of a support group ("We are tethered together ... by visible loss, invisible fear").

Sometimes it'd take her a month or more to get a poem just right, a process she called "a fine madness," which required what some might see as an inordinate dwelling on the disease's darkness. But it gave Anderheggen a voice to emerge from the darkness, she said, a way to cope with her fragility.

"You have to confront (issues)," Anderheggen said. "It helped me to write and it helped me to hear other people (react to them). I think it'd be much worse not to confront these feelings."

Poetry is therapeutic for Sullivan as well. She read several of her poems dealing with the loss of her younger brother when she was 13 and he was only 8. Using the season of autumn, she told of her eventual acceptance of her brother's death.

"You watch as the leaf makes its graceful descent before landing on the terrain of a new season, and you know, just as the leaf does, that this time the answer is in the letting go."

Sullivan was instrumental in the founding of Ocean State Poets and is currently its treasurer. The group conducts workshops throughout the state, including at the Adult Correctional Institutions in Cranston and a weekly program at Salve Regina University for adults with developmental disabilities.

