



Intellect and intuition

BOOKS – MAY 6, 2015 Portsmouthnh.com

Portsmouth's newest poet laureate Kate Leigh explores the poetry of place

by Larry Clow

Ever since she was a child, poet Kate Leigh has found inspiration at the Isles of Shoals. Her family traveled to Star Island every summer for conferences, and while the adults went about their business, Leigh went about hers, exploring every crook and crag. The ocean and the elements ruled over everything; when she looked to the east, there was nothing but the ocean and the empty horizon.

Decades later, she's still exploring, still in love with what she calls the "enormities" of the islands. And now, she's bringing the rest of the Seacoast along with her. Leigh was named Portsmouth's newest poet laureate on May 4.

"I live in one of the most creative communities I can imagine ... that makes me feel even more honored to receive this appointment," she said.

Leigh comes from a family of writers. Her mother was a writer, and her grandfather was in charge of the English literature department at Phillips Exeter Academy for many years, she said.

"We were all expected ... to become involved with reading the classics and trying our hands at (writing), but also reciting and preparing poems. It was kind of an old-fashioned upbringing," she said.

“There’s a voice in my head that speaks in rhyme a lot. The inside of my mind is always creating poetry. If I don’t write, I feel worse.” — Kate Leigh

Poetry has been a constant in her life, though its presence has ebbed and flowed. She raised four daughters and “had a tumultuous life” for many years. But for the last 15 years, she’s been a dedicated poet. In the last six years alone, she’s released nine collections of poetry, beginning with 2008’s “Dances With Light: Isles of Shoals Poems.” Her 2009 collection, “West Heaven: Images from Jamaica,” was a collaborative effort with artist Lucy Bloomfield. She’s also worked with photographer Sarah Flause on two collections: “Lens & Pen from the Isles of Shoals” in 2009 and “A Chaste Faith: Shaker Communities of New England and New York” in 2012.

“There’s a voice in my head that speaks in rhyme a lot. The inside of my mind is always creating poetry. If I don’t write, I feel worse,” she said.

Leigh works full time as a massage therapist — her office is located in downtown Portsmouth, above Breaking New Grounds. Though she sees massage therapy and poetry as separate pursuits, Leigh said her approaches to both have some commonalities. Massage is just as much about knowing anatomy and physiology as it is about knowing how to communicate with clients and following your intuition, she said. Poetry works in a similar way for her — her intellect may help guide the beginning of the poem, but it’s her intuition that helps shape it.

“I like (both intellect and intuition) to work together in me,” Leigh said.

She also draws inspiration from other poets in the area. She’s been a featured reader at Beat Night at The Press Room and at the Portsmouth Poet Laureate Program’s monthly poetry hoot nights at Café Espresso in Portsmouth. She’s had to overcome “a lot of social inhibitions,” she said. “I may be someone who would be isolated” if it weren’t for the larger writing community.

“The circle spreads out, and the community gets more exposed to poetry in a good way.” — Kate Leigh

But that community pushes her to keep going. “The standards of other writers inspire me to be a better writer myself,” she said.

Leigh still visits the islands every year, though she’s mainly there to work, sometimes as a caretaker, most often as a massage therapist. In “This Gloriousness,” from “Dances With Light,” she writes about how she draws inspiration from the islands:

“My toes curl, my eyes squint, / My heart sucks juice from these islands / Through the spine in my back, surrounded, / accepted, as part of all this / Gloriousness.”

Portsmouth’s poets laureate are appointed for a two-year term, and during that time, they spearhead an annual project or event and bring poetry out into the wider Seacoast community.

Each poet laureate collaborates with the Portsmouth Poet Laureate Program's board of trustees on designing a project. Leigh said she already has a number of ideas on how to bring poetry into the community — those ideas include visiting local classrooms to work with students. She also wants to bring young poets and senior citizens together.

When people are exposed to poetry, "it's amazing what starts to flow out," Leigh said. "The circle spreads out, and the community gets more exposed to poetry in a good way."