

Wake Robin's Poet Laureate

Text and photo by David Conrad

In Japan great artists and craftspeople of extraordinary talent are considered “human treasures” in their elder years. At Wake Robin we have our own human treasure, Jean Connor. What better way to celebrate National Poetry Month in April than to acknowledge the marvelous life and work of our own resident poet?

This month marks the twentieth anniversary of National Poetry Month, the largest literary celebration in the world, with schools, libraries, publishers, and poets celebrating the central place of poetry in our culture. Millions across the country are celebrating National Poetry Month in dozens of suggested ways. One way for us at Wake Robin is to put a spotlight on Jean Connor.

Recent Vermont Poet Laureate Sydney Lea calls Jean “one of Vermont’s literary treasures,”



and the publisher of Jean’s two books, Passager Books, declares: “Here at Passager we love Jean Connor. She is kind of our patron saint, our leading lady. She definitely epitomizes Passager’s goal of cultivating creativity throughout the lifetime.” This small press in residence at the University of Baltimore devotes itself to publishing older poets. *A Cartography of Peace* was published in 2005, when Jean was 86, the first book published by Passager. Publishing staff started printing books, not just periodicals, “because we wanted to publish Jean Connor’s poems and find a larger audience for her work.” *A Hinge of Joy* followed in 2009, when Jean was 90.

Jean and her twin brother, who lived with his wife at Wake Robin, were born in Iowa, but very soon moved to Buffalo, and later to White Plains, N.Y., where Jean completed high school before heading off to Middlebury College. She and her parents thought Vermont was a beautiful place, and her parents liked the idea of Jean and her brother graduating from Middlebury together. After majoring in English literature with a minor in political science, Jean completed graduate work at the Columbia University School of Library Science.

Jean’s first job was in the Rochester Public Library, but soon she joined the State of New York library system, where she worked to foster cooperation as head of public-library planning and development for the whole state of New York. The state became a national leader in library development and cooperative library programs. When it came time to retire, Jean felt that “poetry was another opening, a change in retirement.”

When Jean arrived at Wake Robin, construction was still underway. Architectural plans for the Community Center included a library, but with Jean’s extensive library-planning experience in New York State she decided to visit several CCRC libraries and convey information about these libraries to the Wake Robin Corporate Board. She noticed that work space was not included in the plans, and a large door on the east side of the fireplace gobbled up space needed for shelving. At first, new books were processed in a distant space downstairs, but later the current library workroom was created, shelves were built in the Game Room for additional storage, and mysteries and audio-visual materials were sent to Butternut.

Once settled into Wake Robin, Jean devoted much of her time to poetry. She knew education is vital, so she studied writing at the Vermont College of Fine Arts in Montpelier and the University of Vermont. Inspiration came as she heard lectures by a variety of writers, engaged in critical dialogue, and attended poetry readings. As she puts it, "I studied in informal and formal ways," not working toward a degree but "developing lasting friendships out of a group experience of people writing."

One of the most gratifying experiences Jean has had in recent years is collaborating with the Vermont composer Erik Nielsen. Erik had heard Neal Charnoff's interview with Jean on Vermont Public Radio after her first book was published. Several years later, Nielsen called and wanted to talk further with her. Jean says that "one of the great joys" in her life is that Erik Nielsen set her poems to music. The "thrill of having poetry put to music is wonderful," she notes, citing composers of the Vermont Contemporary Music Ensemble who have written pieces that rose "out of the spirit" of her poetry. In the Ensemble's 2011-2012 season, Jean began a Burlington program by reading "A Poem of December," followed by music written expressly for her poem.

Jean is amazed and delighted by the current level of interest in poetry everywhere. In this area, the annual Burlington Book Festival draws audiences to enjoy poetry presentations open to all. Especially remarkable to Jean is the creation of the Sundog Poetry Center, which is currently featuring a series of interviews with poets on Thursday evenings on Vermont Public Television. The "Conversations With Vermont Poets" series is exciting personally because Jean was invited in March to speak with the two founders of Sundog. Tamra J. Higgins and Mary Jane Dickerson interviewed Jean in a Hornbeam lounge, and that interview will soon appear on the Sundog Poetry Center website. An interview with the new Poet Laureate of Vermont, Chard deNiord, is currently available on the website, but soon Jean Connor will join him there.

Since coming to Wake Robin, Jean has shared her interests and talents with fellow residents. This has included poetry presentations open to all as well as smaller groups of residents focusing on the poetry of Emily Dickinson and U.S. Poets Laureate. Haiku with tea was featured one time, and a few years ago an evening program presented by Jean and several others centered on former Poet Laureate William Stafford. Last summer Jean initiated "Poetry on the Deck" and enlisted several residents to help organize the first event, focusing on the poetry of Billy Collins. The reading on the back deck of the Community Center turned out to be so popular that a second reading by a half-dozen residents was scheduled.

Clearly, it is time to honor the gifts of Jean Connor. Her inspiration and creativity continue to enrich Wake Robin. We can be proud to call Jean a "human treasure" in our midst.*