

Poet laureate writes Sussex poem

Balingit finds inspiration at Fort Miles

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JoAnn Balingit is a poet laureate who draws inspiration from Cape Henlopen State Park /Chuck Snyder photo

LEWES — Since JoAnn Balingit was appointed the state’s poet laureate in May 2008, she has taken her role very seriously.

“I wanted to make sure that a lot was being done to encourage writing in the schools, and I felt strongly about that,” she said.

In her position, Balingit, 56, helps promote poetry and creative writing throughout the state.

She said writing can give people the opportunity for expression and make a difference in people’s lives.

“To be able to write about what you experience connects you to other people in a really fundamental way that only happens when you’re communicating through art,” she said. “Poetry is one of those ways of communicating at a level that helps you figure out what’s going on.”

Inspiration for her poetry comes from a variety of sources, she said. It can come from memory, in response to other works, quotes or conversations, or serve as a definition for something.

“I like to mess around with language when I’m writing a poem,” she said. “I don’t always know what’s going to happen.”

She’s now working on a poem about a series of letters she wrote to her sister 20 years ago, which had descriptions of everyday events that occurred when she taught at a school in Wilmington.

“I’m just taking those experiences — they’re just descriptions of the kids and the sometimes crazy experiences — and I’m playing around with those and seeing what happens.”

She has a poem titled, “Comfort, Cape Henlopen,” which was inspired by the park and she hopes to write a praise poem or a thanks poem about the park down the road.

“It’s a place that just really speaks to me and I haven’t quite figured out why,” she said.

Cape Henlopen State Park is also the home of Fort Miles, which is the subject of a poem she is currently working on.

“It has a very mysterious quality and I think that has to do with the fact that Fort Miles was there before it became a state park,” she said. “I think when you’re walking around and you see these big fortress doors in the dune, it’s just fascinating.”

Some poems can be completed in one sitting and others can take as long as 10 years. She started her Fort Miles poem in September and hopes to wrap it up by the end of the month.

“It’s nowhere yet. It’s notes. It’s a bunch of photographs on my cell phone. It’s a list of photos I want to see at the Dover archives right now,” she said. “I like to take something that really happened and play with it.”

When she’s not writing poetry, the former school librarian continues to promote creative writing and poetry in schools. She’s been involved in the Scholastic Art & Writing Awards, a statewide competition for creative writing.

“I think it’s so important for kids to have an opportunity to do creative writing in school,” she said. “That’s fallen by the wayside

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