

The Room Where Things Happen: The Dona Benicia Room

By Lois Requist

Benicia Literary Arts promotes literary endeavors in our community. Recently we've been holding "Shut Up and Write" events in the Dona Benicia Room at the city library. People get together and write. No prompts, music, or directions on what or how to write. Nothing to be turned in at the end. Here's my first experience there.

Shut up and write. That's a bossy statement and not that easy to do as I learned the first time I came. I've been in this room many times before, but not usually to write. My history here includes reading, participating in readings, and talking about writing, but not writing, the thing that leads to all the others.

Now let's see what I can do in this unstructured time.

Looking out the window, I see oleanders blooming pink and white. They grow like crazy all over California, along the freeways, breathing in the fumes and noise, bearing witness to drivers and cars in all forms. If they can withstand all that is thrown at them, like the mattress or the couch that no longer provides comfort they must be amazing.

I've been in this room so many times. Benicia has a poet laureate program, and I was poet laureate from 2012 to 2014. I brought in coffee pots, cream, sugar, tea bags, and lemon. I remember that more than the poetry. All the weird little things that happened. Once I only brought decaf. One of the poets, John, yelled at me. He wouldn't let it go. I also brought cookies and snacks. I thought that's what some people came for and, if they did, that's okay. Forrest, the homeless man in town, came to the poetry meetings. After the meeting, he helped me carry stuff to my car.

"Can I give you a lift?" I'd ask sometimes. He always said no.

Back in 2012, I went to the city council meeting on a Tuesday night in July and was officially made poet laureate. The next morning before I was up, I got a phone call from Idaho. My brother, Larry had died. I left for Idaho within a couple of hours, driving that road I've taken so many times, Larry's sad life hanging over me. He had mental limitations that were never diagnosed. He

lived with our mother until she died and then next to my sister who watched out for him, tried to keep track of his money. Mother had left what she had to him. It needed to be parsed out, or it would all be gone quickly.

He'd fallen asleep in his chair. Some time in the night, he woke and started walking to his bed, but apparently fell, due to a heart attack, the medics said. "Never knew what hit him," one of them said. Do they know that or is that what they always say to stunned relatives who didn't see this coming? Larry's life wasn't an easy one, though when he laughed it was from the belly and he jiggled all over.

I returned from Idaho to begin my poetry plans. Three weeks later, Lee, the man I'd been seeing for about six years had a stroke. It happened on a Friday. We were supposed to go to his sister's home in Alaska that Sunday, but that would not happen. He couldn't swallow but his body still made saliva, so he had to spit it into a cup constantly. His nourishment came through a tube in his stomach. He lived like that for ten years.

In October of 2012, I had a reading of my work in this room. My kids came. My granddaughter Melissa played the flute. I read poetry and prose. Friends came. Laurie, Steve and Robert, and Barry came out from San Francisco. After, I had a party at my house.

Every first Tuesday those who want to read or listen to poetry come to this room. They still do. The world has changed so much since 2012! I wanted people to learn more about poetry, so I introduced a few ideas each meeting, explaining that poetry started before there were written words, hence the use of rhythm, rhyme, and repetition. Easier to remember.

I've seen the room full—like the first meeting we had about a virtual village that would provide services, information, and connection for older people. That was the beginning of what is now Carquinez Village.

A history with this room. So many meetings. One just Tuesday of this week. They've taken the curtains down and that makes for a better atmosphere in the room. Updates it.

I don't attend the first Tuesday poetry readings anymore and don't write much poetry. I've leaned into prose and that's mostly what I write. Maybe I'll take poetry up again.

I'm going to have a glass of wine when I leave here. I'm looking forward to it. The walls here are gray, the sky outside, blue, without a hint of darkness. Though I write on the computer at home, I brought a notebook here, thinking I'd try writing longhand for a change. I write uphill. Why is that? I tried to stop but can't.

So many times, when we've had a meeting here, we've struggled with microphones. The right kind, the right place.

It's cold in here. I'll bring a sweater next time.

We made plans here for the poetry anthology that every poet laureate produces during their term. We listened to poems. I remember Joel Fallon who started the poet laureate program and sold the idea to the city council. He's gone now. Robert Shelby. Gone. Ronna Leon. Still in town but I don't see her much. I followed those folks. Ronna was terrific. Other people followed me as poet laureate: Johanna Ely. Don Peery. Tom Stanton. Mary Susan Gast and now Kathy Monroe.

What is it with poetry? How hard is it to catch a butterfly, capture a moment, a fleeting thought, or glimpse an idea? Even famous poets didn't do it all the time. At least I don't get it in all of Emily Dickinson's works, or Walt Whitman, or W.H. Auden, or Wallace Stevens. I could go on. There are so many. When I do "get it" with these poets and so many others, well it's like nothing else. This moment when thinking and feeling come together and we experience something hard to define, but worth trying, worth everything.

Until tonight, I never thought how this room contains so many memories. All the people I've talked to or listened to. Did my poetry touch anyone? Bring on a wry smile, a giggle, or a tear? Transcendence? Has anyone who has ever been in this room left something? An energy/ An iota of difference, the size of an ant. Are the words imprinted in the walls? Will there some day be a way to retrieve them?

Are these the same chairs and tables since about 2006 when I started coming here? Does anyone ever play the piano?

Some of the people who I've been with here are gone. Judie Donaldson. Carolyn Plath. Gone where? That's what everyone wants to know. The same group of people won't meet here again. All our lives have shifted. At my age, everything connects to something else.

Shut Up and Write meets every other Monday night at the Benicia City Library from 6:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m. Everyone is welcome. The next two dates are September 16th and 30th.