

POET-TO-POET: A CONVERSATION WITH RHONDA WARD



Poet Rhonda Ward fell in love with New London when she visited for OpSail in 2000. She lives here now.

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By Porsche Bostick

Rhonda Ward is an inspiration to the writing world. A native of Ohio, Ward was born in Cincinnati and raised in Dayton. The youngest of six children, Ward found a voice of her own through writing and grew to appreciate the art of poetry at a young age.

"I was about eight years old when I was introduced to poetry," she says, leaning forward as if to share a secret. "I used to play in Paul Laurence Dunbar's yard."

Dunbar, born in 1872, was one of the first African-American poets and writers to achieve a national reputation and be accepted by both white and black audiences. (The title of poet Maya Angelou's famed 1969 autobiography, "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings," was taken from his poem "Sympathy.")

"I would recite his pieces which were very difficult in dialect," Ward explains, "I fell in love with his poetry."

Ward didn't pursue writing her own poetry, though, until after moving to Connecticut.

In 2000, Ward visited OpSail in New London. She fell in love with the area and soon after purchased a house here.

She attended her first poetry reading at Bean and Leaf in New London after reading a notice in the local newspaper. Ward's first organized poetry reading was held at Golden street Gallery in New London. Her work has since appeared in several publications and journals, including the Long Island Quarterly, Temper Review and Siren and online at Poetry Bay, Burning Word, and Poetry Vlog.

In 2005, Ward recorded a collection of her poems. On the CD "As I Live and Breathe," she voices her versatile style of performing art.

In 2007, Ward traveled to England to attend an International Women's Art Festival where she read alongside Janine Pomy Vega. She entered the poetry slam contest, and to her surprise, won first place.

Ward, now an administrative assistant at UCONN, has been an active host of the annual Langston Hughes poetry reading held each February at the Mystic Arts Center. She also serves on the Board of Directors at The Writers' Block InK. She says she finds pleasure in encouraging young people by providing writing workshops which challenge them to explore their capabilities.

Ward is a strong believer in education. Her advice to aspiring poets?

"Crack a book. Learn as much as you can about poetry. Learn poetry's craft."

She also stresses the importance of networking and sharing your work.

"Never stop at "Hi" and don't ever be afraid of conversation," she says.

She draws her inspiration to write from "life", she answers simply, "exploring youth and both the complexity and simplicity of life. I find inspiration to write from love gone bad. I write love poems with a twist. Relationships, childhood. Anything that fills my passion."

Her writing touches on many milestones, including grief and loss:

To be a mustard seed, to lie prostrate with your face pressed to the ground,

*To sink into the Earth, and shake the soil, to water it with tears, to pray and sleep and start again,
to rise up as a chute.*

"I wrote that poem ["Even from the Depths"] after my father passed," she reflects. "It will always be my favorite."

Sometimes, a poem will resonate with readers in a way the poet doesn't anticipate. Such was the case with "Dance, Amari," a poem Ward wrote in 2003 for Amari Diaw of New Bedford, a 4-year-old African-American girl whose family was told she couldn't perform in her dance school recital because her braids didn't conform with the school's guidelines for appearance:

Dance, Amari (for Amari Diaw)

Do not untie your hair, Amari. Do not, for perfect plies and pirouettes, turn from native locks or wish for whiteness. Kick up your thick-boned legs in cultured protestation. Avoid unbraided simulation. Take first position, stand on pointed principles. Deconstruct the dance politic.

"That poem got me into trouble", she smiles. "I was a dancer years ago. There was an article about a little black girl — She was told that she couldn't dance in her recital because her hair wouldn't lay slicked back into a ponytail like the other children. I received a lot of positive and negative feedback for that poem ... I was doing what I only felt was right at the time."

Click [here](#) for more on the author of this piece, Porsche Bostick.

About the poets

Rhonda Ward of New London has read her work at many venues, including the University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth, the University of Connecticut at Avery Point, the Bowery Poetry Club in New York City, and Curbstone Press' Poetry in the Park series in Willimantic.

New London resident Porsche Bostick finds pleasure in poetry and the spoken word. After graduating from New London High School in 2003, she continued her education at Royal Oak Community College in Michigan and has since attended Mitchell College in New London. She recites her poems at various community events.