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# Making Life a Matter of Meter

By David Bornstein

The sixth-graders raised their arms, eager to be called upon to read their poems.

Irvin Lopez clutched a stack of index cards like they were baseball cards. On each was a three-line Japanese haiku poem he had composed. He read "Tree":

*The tree  
grows  
to be killed*

Glennie Llano read her poem, "I Hear":

*I hear crashing  
I hear screams  
I hear things  
that you've never dreamed  
I see running  
I hear crying  
all because  
people are dying  
then  
I see pictures  
in my head  
about the people  
who are dead*

John Arce read "Angry Teacher":

*Angry teacher  
angry teacher yelling away  
one minute mellow the other gray  
angry teacher cool down  
we live learn and carry on*

Ever since he came to PS 16 in Wilmsburg 16 years ago, sixth-grade teacher Jeffrey Pflaum has been doing everything in his power to get his students to tap their creativity by writing poetry. In his classroom posters offer suggestions about experiences to write out: a graph keeps score of the class "contemplation All Stars," and another art is headlined "Keys to Writing." Rule No. 1 reads: "Know that you've talent and have something important to say."

Pflaum knows his students have nothing to say. And so do the nearly ten publications, including *Sevens* magazine and *New York Newsday*, it have published, and also pursued, some of the poems in past years. This year, Pflaum has taken things a step further. He sent an anthology of the



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Teacher Jeffrey Pflaum and the sixth-grade poets of his PS 16 class.

poems called "Inner Cities," which he's compiled since 1975, to a book company in the hope of getting it published.

Since most of his students are Hispanic, Pflaum sent his manuscript to Arte Publico Press in Houston, a company that specializes in American Hispanic writers.

"I grew up hating poetry and I don't claim to be a poet," Pflaum said. "Can you teach somebody to write? I don't know on a higher level if it can be taught. But at this level, I try to get to the creativity in them."

"I don't believe anyone is not creative," he added. "Show a person what he has inside — and give him a route to find it."

"Alone" by Jason Dueno  
*alone  
on my bed  
looking at a bug*

Pflaum explained that the hardest part of his job is getting by the initial "uptightness" with poetry and creating an environment in which the young-

sters feel free to reflect on and express their experiences on paper and out loud.

"These kids are not in love with school and working," he said. "In the beginning they will give me something unoriginal — from the 'Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles,' from movies or TV. They have to learn to reflect on their experiences, to progress and to learn how to make choices. People have experiences. But you can't assume that they can put together what's happening inside themselves to understand it."

"School Day" by Angie Cosme

*I remember those days.  
Twenty-five percent I hated.  
And the rest were okay.  
But now I'm in the sixth grade.  
That is, work all day.  
And have no play.*

*I remember those days.*

"Tears" by Gregory Ketrles

*When they pick  
on you and make fun of  
you that's a lot of sadness*

in there

At least one period every week is devoted to poetry writing. But Pflaum sees the pre-writing setting as equally important. So two-to-three times each week, the class has "contemplation" sessions. During these sessions, Pflaum turns off the lights and plays music as the students lay their heads on the desks. When the lights come on 10 minutes later, a class discussion — Pflaum likes the term "cross fertilization" — is held, after which the students record their thoughts in poetry or prose.

Pflaum uses an array of teaching aids — slides, posters, photographs — as idea-generating starting points.

The best music for writing poetry? It's unanimous. "Classical," the 11-and-12 year olds rang out.

"Beethoven and Mozart," added Francisco Rosada.

Many of the poems dealt with similar themes: war, friendship, desire for understanding, frustration in school and fear for the future of the world.

But the images were as diverse as can be imagined. In "Fantasyland," Francisco Rosada envisions a place:

*where no one's in need,  
No starving people, no mouths to feed,  
Where no age and no prime,  
Where people could live without worry  
or crime,  
Where the crippled could walk and the  
blind could see*

"People pay more attention to it when it rhymes," he explains.

Darren Scantlebury's "Homework Can Kill" included

*my homework took a knife  
and tried to stab me.*

Juan Serrano's "Short Life" notes that life

*is just like ink in  
a pen it just runs  
out*

Perhaps Gregory Ketrles best sums up the youngsters' work in "All About Fun."

*Jumping  
Springing and  
dazzling that's what it is.*