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Poetry in the Air

By Alex Hanson
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ix years ago, Larry Polansky, a Dartmouth College music professor, got interested in American Sign Language. He started to learn it, and as he made more contacts in the deaf community, he began to look at deaf arts and culture, where he found a particularly rich poetic tradition.

Since the late 1970s, American Sign Language poetry has been growing, but it remains a subculture within a subculture.

“As near as I can tell, it's completely unknown to anyone in the hearing world,” Polansky said.

Polansky is doing his part to change that. He and Mary Essex, a Strafford native who now lives in Norwich, and who is deaf, are



Visiting scholar Mary Essex and Dartmouth professor Larry Polansky worked to bring the Flying Words Project to Hanover next Saturday. (**Valley News — Geoff Hansen**)

building a bridge between the hearing and deaf communities, and poetry is their vehicle.

Next Saturday, Dartmouth will host a performance of The Flying Words Project, a partnership between deaf poet Peter Cook and hearing co-author Kenny Lerner. The performance is at 7:30 p.m. in Moore Hall's Filene Auditorium and is free and open to the public.



Polansky and Essex are responsible for bringing the poets to Dartmouth, and in the spring, they will teach a course on ASL poetry that will bring five leading practitioners of the art form to Hanover.

The notion of poetry by and for the deaf can seem counterintuitive to a hearing person. But ASL, which was created in the 1820s, has a long storytelling tradition, and poetry is part of that, Essex said.

ASL poetry is performed, but, as with verse in English, or any other language, it has conventions all its own, Essex said. For example, a progression of signs might follow a numeric pattern. Polansky demonstrated one he'd learned from deaf children in which each sign is both a word or idea and a number: I (one, in the form of the extended index finger), see (two, index and middle finger pointing out from the eyes), a bug (three, thumb, index and middle finger), crawling (four, fingers crawling up arm), splat (five, a flat hand brought down on the arm).

A deaf poet might use space to convey rhythm, or use pauses, or the way certain signs are made to emphasize ideas or phrases. A single sign might be moved to represent other signs or versions of signs.

Written poetry requires analysis, said Essex, and “the same is true of ASL poetry.” Cook's work is so complex and singular that repeated viewings bring out new meanings, she said.

“I suspect there will be people in the audience who will be deeply engaged by it,” Essex said. “I also think there will be people who will be bewildered by the whole concept.”

ASL poetry owes its existence in its current form to Clayton Valli, who was the first person ever to earn a doctorate in ASL literature, and who identified the

characteristics of ASL poetry.

Valli, who died in 2003, was, like Essex, a graduate of Brattleboro, Vt.'s Austine School for the Deaf. He taught in the linguistics department at Gallaudet University, the country's preeminent university for the deaf, and documented his own work.

As much as Valli and other poets have done to make their work accessible, ASL poetry hasn't had wide exposure in the hearing world.

“Deaf poetry is as isolated in the deaf world as English poetry is in the English-speaking world,” Polansky said. Since the deaf community is so much smaller, then ASL poetry is small indeed.

The difficulty in translating ASL poetry is a significant factor in its marginalization. Schopenhauer wrote that “poems cannot be translated; they can only be transposed, and that is always awkward.” The difficulty of translating from a signed language to a spoken one makes the difficulties of translation between two spoken languages seem negligible, Polansky said.

“As English speakers, we can read translations of Rimbaud and feel like we've had the experience of reading his poetry,” he said. Not so with ASL poetry. Even performers who work as closely as Cook and Lerner offer “kind of a bilingual experience,” Polansky said, rather than an ASL performance with English translation. Lerner's speech is more of a gloss on what Cook is saying, Polansky said.

Technology is changing the way deaf poetry can be experienced. The ease with which performances can be recorded and put on the Internet is making it more readily available and is turning poems from pieces seen only in performance into works that can be accessed as a sort of visual text. Recorded performances were once available only on DVD, making them expensive and hard to find. Now YouTube and other video sites are well stocked with ASL poetry.

Recognition for ASL has taken time. Polansky noted that it wasn't until the middle of the last century that ASL was widely acknowledged to be a language possessing the richness and complexity of any spoken language.

“Before, it was poorly understood by people in the hearing world,” he said. That recognition created an impetus toward a more conscious literary tradition, he added.

Cook and Lerner are at the forefront of ASL poetry. Their visit, which is sponsored by Dartmouth's Leslie Center for the Humanities and the Mellon Foundation, both of which support Polansky's work, is likely to draw an audience from throughout the Northeast. Polansky said he's fielded calls from New York and New Jersey.

Cook is from Chicago, and Lerner is from Rochester, N.Y. They met in Rochester at the National Technical Institute for the Deaf in 1984 and began performing soon after. Essex said she would ordinarily have to go to Boston for such a performance.

"I think it's great to expand what Dartmouth does," said Essex, who also teaches ASL in Dartmouth's Rassias program and has worked with deaf communities in Latin America, Turkey and Tibet.

Perhaps, she said, it will lead Dartmouth to get in touch with deaf alumni to ask them about their experiences on campus.

If nothing else, it will expose Dartmouth students and area residents alike to a language, and a manner of speaking, they've probably never come across before.

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