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Orinda neurologist's new book of poetry gives voice to vets

By Kara Navolio



Dawn McGuire

Photo by Sonia Menenberg

Orinda poet Dr. Dawn McGuire has just launched her fourth book of poetry, inspired by her work as a neurologist with veterans returning from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

McGuire's unique perspective stems from the work she does at her free clinic with veterans to treat their neurological symptoms like phantom limb pain, head injuries and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. But in order to treat these men and women returning from war, she is compelled to understand the psychology of the patients and how that is also impacting their brain. She spends a lot of time with her patients to develop trust and find a new language that can build a connection.

"If I can be part of restoring their sense of agency, then that is a cherished success," says McGuire.

The book, "American Dream with Exit Wound," gives voice to the post 9/11 vets. "I don't pretend that I can feel what they feel or experience their inner life, but I can create an empathic connection through the poems," explains McGuire. "I see real pain. Not all of it stems from the body, but it acts out through the body. Some of the poems are written from the perspective of family members and their pain as well."

She says that the U.S. does a lot of training to get soldiers ready for war. "They go to war and make sacrifices – morally, physically, psychologically — then we expect them to automatically reassemble when they return. We have no boot camp to retrain them to be who they were before the left." The result can be depression and social isolation.

A neurologist since 1991, McGuire conducts research on brain trauma at the Neuroscience Institute at the Morehouse School of Medicine. She began her free clinic in 1990 helping AIDS patients with neuro-

logical problems.

She has been writing poetry since the age of 15. "One of the things I fell in love with medicine is the beautiful language. The Greek and Latin roots in medicine feel like you are touching history," says McGuire.

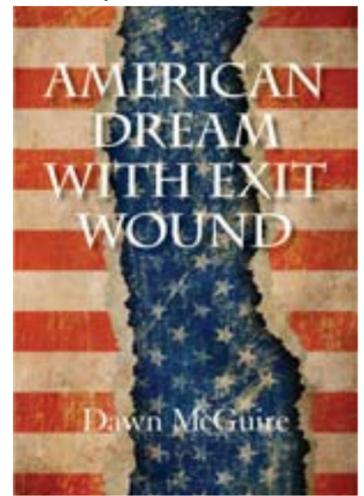
McGuire's previous book of poetry "The Aphasia Café," published in 2012, deals with her response to patients who have experienced damage to the part of the brain that controls language, often due to strokes. It won the 2013 Indie Book Award.

Aspects of the new book also deal with loss of language, but in the case with vets, it's often due to severe physical and emotional pain.

McGuire, who herself has lost family and friends in war, bases her practice on slowly building a safe place for patients to connect so she can really help them, not just with their neurological symptoms but with their inner wounds, too.

In writing this book of poetry, she expressed, "I hope people will arise more curiosity and concern for what our vets go through." She poses questions like, What if we were able to change the experience for returning vets? What if they didn't have to wait three months to see a VA doctor? What if we did proper re-assimilation? What if we gave proper medically-assisted detox from pain killers? Aren't these things also worth fighting for?

McGuire will be reading from her book at the Poetry Flash Series at 7:30 p.m. on May 18 at Moe's Books in Berkeley.



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Short Docs festival touches hearts and minds

By Sophie Braccini



Middle school filmmakers Zachary Lara and Keith Johnson stand with Matt Chaney, their Short Doc subject, along with their moms. Photo Christy Mack

The second edition of the Lamorinda Short Docs festival and competition was a vibrant testimony of the budding local visual talents the region holds.

In a time when images and videos are favorite media, this celebration is welcomed. With participants from kindergarten to adults, and documentaries from the most simple to the most polished, the festival showcased amusing, beautiful, meaningful, surprising and informative short films made and produced by students and amateur adults. It could have attracted a wider audience.

Lamorinda Arts Council started the video competition last year with LAC Meredith Frieman as the main driver. This year 16 short docs were in competition in four categories: elementary school, middle school, high school and adults. It was judged by cable network producer Greg Flucher, T.V. producer Joel Patterson, writer, filmmaker and actor Julie Rubio and editor, animator and colorist David Santamaria.

In attendance at the Lafayette library on May 7 were mostly the parents and friends of the filmmakers, but the presentation would have deserved a wider audience, as the spectators were charmed by these unique creations.

The elementary school group

backgrounds, getting together to thrive and test their limits. The movie included some drone footage of the Moraga Skate Park, slow motion, and skating visuals nicely weaved with interviews.

The audience favorite was also part of that category. Movies are judged by a group of professionals in each category, and LAC also allows the audience to choose one school-age favorite after all the films have been viewed. Zachary Lara and Keith Johnson won this prize for their movie "Matt: A Story of Hope and Inspiration," about Matt Chaney, who is suffering from the highly debilitating condition ALS. The film is a touching portrait, never too dramatic and even humorous at times.

"Behind The Scenes of Campolindo's 'Beauty and The Beast'" by Frenel Franciso won the high school category, an excellent film that was able to convey the atmosphere of camaraderie and all the hard work that needs to happen to put together a sophisticated high school musical.

The adult category entries were all bordering on professional level videography. "Sunjams" was an all-music film presenting the local nonprofit that raises money to fund musical education in less fortunate schools; "Pack 464" told the unique story of the Pinewood Derby, a cub scout activity and competition where boys build small wood cars and race them; "Getting It Right" presented, in a very aesthetic and interesting portrayal of Steve Benjamins, who restores and tunes pianos in Lafayette; and the winner was Réka Pigniczky's "Wild Thing," the sculpture that was created by elementary school children in Orinda and is now on display at the library plaza.

Local filmmaker and judge Rubio expressed her enthusiasm at the quality of the videos that were presented and rejoiced that LAC created this competition to nurture and recognize these abilities in young filmmakers. LAC plans to hold the competition again next year.