

Protests and Poetry

SEEDS OF PROTEST were planted when the Long Island Symphony canceled its up-coming concert at Westbury High School due to pressure exerted by the American Legion which alleged that one of the musicians was a communist.

Stephen Bayne, a senior and piano accompanist to the school chorus, discussed the situation with the chorus director. The matter was urgent for Bayne since he had been told by the principal that he was to receive the citizenship award from the Legion. After discussions with his teacher, Bayne concluded that the McCarthy-like smear on the symphony and one of its members was shameful. He didn't tell his parents what he planned to do when proffered the prize on awards night.

Don Kursch, a classmate, was also drawn into the protest. Kursch's father, an 8th grade English and Social Studies teacher in the district, had "negotiated the best salary package for teachers in the United States," Kursch once wrote about his father, "When the superintendent tried to get rid of him, he ended getting rid of the superintendent." The senior Kursch, like many liberals, also had little use for the Legion.

The third student associated with the protest, Cheryl Humphry, was motivated less by political considerations than by two ethical concerns: people should be treated fairly, and a person shouldn't take what doesn't rightly belong to her.

Each was an outstanding student—Bayne president of the student council, Kursch class president, and Humphry class secretary. All three were honor students.

Life magazine featured the trio—A 17-Year-Old Boy Versus the Legion—in a June issue with a large photo of Bayne, another of Humphrey with her back against a tree holding a notebook looking a little overwhelmed, and Kursch with an extended hand as though waving away a reporter. The magazine described Bayne as “a brilliant student, president of the student council, talented pianist, promising scientist, good actor and an Eagle Scout.”

Here's what happened in the spring of 1960:

At the Senior Awards Night, the school announced the prizes. When Bayne heard his name called for the American Legion Citizenship Award, he put his hand on his girlfriend's shoulder as rose to his feet—for reassurance, for support. As planned, he declared, “Wait. I refuse to accept an award from an organization I can't respect.”

The audience twisted in their seats to see who had brazenly challenged the school authorities. Officials at the dais sat in disbelief until one broke the silence. He stood, pointing a finger in Bayne's direction.

“I demand the boy be ejected!” the school board member shouted.

Kursch's father cheered Bayne on, as did a few others, as the teenager turned and walked out of the room. Many that night thought Bayne was impertinent or worse, including the

chagrined principal who apologized to the Legion for the student's outrageous behavior.

An inside page the New York Times headlined—

Legion Foe To Miss
L. I. Graduation

Boy Says He Doesn't Want
to Mar Day—Veterans'
Aide Attacks Opponents

Eleanor Roosevelt featured the story in her nationally syndicated column, My Day.

I have been considerably interested in the controversy over the high-school graduate in Westbury, Long Island, N.Y., who had the courage to refuse an American Legion citizenship award because it came "from an organization whose policies I cannot respect."

The American Legion is a powerful organization and the student, Stephen Bayne, perhaps took on more than he alone could very well explain to the public, so I think it is only fair that some of us help him.

While I respect the Legion for many of the things it has done, and while I certainly have great respect for the men who fought for our country, I still cannot respect the attitude that the Legion has taken, for instance, on the United Nations. This position, clothed in patriotism and practically the same as that of the DAR, presents UNESCO, a specialized agency of the U.N., as being Communist.

When its own committee reported that UNESCO was not Communist, the Legion, without reading the report, announced at its convention that this U.N. agency was Communist. This is childish and the kind of behavior we certainly do not want to uphold as a pattern for our young people to follow.

It is very unfair for the public-school authorities to withhold any honors coming to Stephen because of his attitude. They should be pleased that education has given one young boy the strength to stand for things in which he believes. This is an achievement of which the whole Westbury school, particularly the faculty, should be proud.

Life's article elicited a few letters. While a couple supported Bayne, one reader from New Orleans wrote, "Where does Mr. Stephen Bayne get the idea that he doesn't respect the American Legion, a veterans' organization that fosters 100% Americanism? If I were his father, I would break every bone in his body!"



Stephen Bayne (Life)

The Louisiana letter-writer wasn't alone in his fury. Death threats began arriving in the Bayne mailbox. Fearing for her son's life, his mother contacted the FBI. For two weeks, a federal agent protected Bayne whenever he left his home.

Not wanting to endanger his classmates by being seen with them, his mother passed on a message to them from him: "Sunday afternoon will be the long-awaited culmination of four years of fun and hard work. It is a solemn and traditional ceremony. My voluntary absence will help keep it that way. I will not participate in the graduation exercises. My best wish to all my classmates."

"There were some people," the Nassau County American Legion's adjutant complained before 300 delegates at its county-wide meeting, "who because they do not care to learn the true character and purposes of the American Legion, occasionally break into print attacking the policies of our organization. It is most unfortunate that a few columnists who have a great affinity for defending people and organizations that we regard as leftist," evidently referring to Mrs. Roosevelt, "seize upon the action of an immature youth to make a Roman holiday of it."

Bayne's mother defended her son. The Legion had gotten it backward. Stephen, she said, was staying away from school because "he does *not* want to make a Roman holiday of it."

Kursch and Humphry thought that Bayne had gone too far with his protest, although they understood his reason and supported him against attacks from the community.



Cheryl Humphrey, Donald Kursch (Life)

At graduation, Humphrey secured the English prize and Kursch the history award. Each received the works of Euripides. When the two realized that Bayne was originally slated to receive the books, not them, they engaged in their own protest by returning the books to the school.

The Life article quotes the Legion's post commander saying that Bayne's actions were a "lifetime mistake" that would "plague him."

Harvard didn't agree. The college admitted him on a scholarship, as it did Kursch. Humphrey enrolled at tuition-free Queens College.

Bayne moved to the West Coast after earning a biology degree from Harvard and a MA in anthropology from Columbia. In Seattle he became the Education Director of the city's Symphony Orchestra and composed music for chamber and symphonic ensembles. In retirement, he volunteered as a docent at the Contemporary Jewish Museum, the de Young Museum and the Legion of Honor art museum.

With degrees from Harvard and the George Washington University, Kursch served in several posts in Europe as a

Foreign Service officer for the U.S. Department of State for thirty-seven years. After he retired, he became a Senior Advisor at the State Department's Coordinator for Counterterrorism.

Humphrey stayed local: she graduated from Queens College, received an MS in education, and taught in New York City public schools for many years.



1976-79

Three pizza parlors stood across from one another downtown, near the corner of Orchard Street. One was torched and then there were two. Another shut down abruptly and then there was one.

This was the pizza war that inspired a short poem of mine, which led to articles in the New York Times, Newsday and a discussion on a New York public radio show.

The story began with the Greater Westbury Arts Council. Initiated by Kayla Zalk, president of the American Dance Guild, the arts council ran classes in pottery, art, dance, and music. In the basement of the Westbury Library, Lyn and I jiggled to African beats taught by Bernard Johnson, a Manhattan choreographer and costume designer for theater, dance, and film; many children participated in eurhythmic music classes; Lyn won first prize for her blue-and-yellow hexagonal quilt at the Outdoor Art and Crafts Festival held on the grounds of the Westbury Friends school.

I volunteered to create and curate the Center for Contemporary L.I. Poetry. The first endeavor brought together books, journals, magazines, chapbooks and anthologies by

Long Island poets and publishers that were displayed on a shelf under a picture window in the library. Some publications were by nationally recognized poets, including a Pulitzer Prize winner, and local writers read by 10s of people, all the material in prominent view of library patrons.

Poetry shouldn't be only for those with enough talent and patience to be published, we thought. So, the council put out a call for poetry submissions—no limit on length, style, or subject matter, all submissions accepted. Poems quickly covered one of the reading room walls, replaced by a new batch every two weeks.

From the Westbury Times—

Poetry wall welcomes verse

Something there is that doesn't love a wall
. . . that wants it down. Robert Frost's craggy
faced farmer might not have taken too
kindly to it, but Westbury poets do love their
wall.

Something there is that loves a poetry
wall in Westbury. That's why would-be poets
who have all but given up placing their
poems before the public should take heart.
By presenting their "gift" of poetry, they can
placate their secret Muse and satisfy that
inner longing to express themselves.

Where's there's a poetry wall, there's a
way.

Newsday quoted from a high school student's poem—

This damn winter reeks of death
Places that hold memories beckon to me.

Another wrote—

A poem must spit fire
draw blood
be as hard as steel
soft as mud
A poem must be
whimsey
laughter
pain
tears you can walk thru
like Oregon rain

The poems of Kofi Awoonor, an international known Ghanaian poet, had spit enough fire that the Ghanaian government sentenced him to a year in jail. The former SUNY-Stony Brook professor had been seized in his home country within months after arriving there to teach in the English Department at the University of Cape Coast. Several of us from Westbury joined an effort to secure his release. As members of Amnesty International USA Group #74, we had worked on behalf of political prisoners and prisoners of conscience from around the world by writing letters, signing petitions, picketing, and meeting with government officials.

We “adopted” Awoonor and began writing letters to Ghanaian officials asking for his release.

This poem Awoonor smuggled out of prison, written to a girl on her birthday—

There are iron bars on the door
A man stands with a gun
He brings me food and water
Now and then

And I dream that soon
You and I and all of us
Will be free.

In return, I wrote this poem for him—

As I sit and dream a little
You too sit in a mosquito cell
and others in frozen rooms
confined for their thoughts
Your captors sharpen their teeth
on silence
So I forge my gentle spear
As you send yours past
drowsing prison guards
a joyful song together
across continents of
narrow hearts.

AI Group #74, the Greater Westbury Arts Council, and the Westbury Memorial Library collected Awoonor's published poems, fragments of unpublished poems, and books by and about him to call attention. By the time the exhibit was installed, he had been released. Still, Newsday ran a half-page story on the library's program to bring attention to the poet unjustly imprisoned.

Our next poetry project was inspired by Long Island-born Walt Whitman, bard of the common person. The council decided to bring poetry to the masses, and what greater mass of Long Islanders was there than the Dashing Dan commuters? Our proposal to the LIRR was two-pronged: put up poetry posters in railcars and have winners of the contest read their poems on board during the month of May to celebrate the

Whitman's birthday. Whitman never read his poems to his fellow commuters on the Brooklyn Ferry, but I was certain he would have applauded this effort.

Railroad officials thought the readings on the trains were impractical, but they did agree to place 100 illustrated Long Island-themed posters for each of the 10 winners in railcars and to distribute copies of featured poems to some lucky riders. We applied for a \$1,700 grant from the New York State Council on the Arts to pay for printing costs.

The state council asked for a mockup of a poster. We hadn't yet announced the final selections, so we didn't want to use any of the submissions. Instead, we decided to use one of mine, without a graphic, as the slug. I chose a poem that focused on Long Island, in particular, Westbury.

The New York Times April 9, 1979—

Musings of Local Poets to Greet

Hardened Riders on the L.I.R.R.

Ten Long Island poets, some of whom have never had their work published, will soon have their work read by hundreds of thousands of people.

The poetry, which concerns such matters as manhole covers on Montauk Highway and the continuing urbanization of the suburbs, rendered in iambic pentameter, among other meters, is to be printed on posters and placed in Long Island Rail Road cars, just like posters that urge riders, sometimes in rhyme, to smoke cigarettes, drink whisky or entrust their money to a bank.

Newsday also thought bringing poetry to commuters was a splendid idea. An editorial read:

Poetry That Those Who Ride May Read

Two of the greatest problems facing contemporary poets are (a) getting published and (b) getting read. Regrettably, (a) is not always followed by (b), but the Greater Westbury Arts Council has come up with a solution to the problem, and we think it's delightful.

It's possible to avoid books of poetry. Many readers do it for years at a time. But commuters aboard Long Island Rail Road trains can hardly avoid eye contact with advertising posters. So to reward the seven winners of its poetry contest, the arts council proposes to publish each of the poems in an edition of 100 train posters.

A poster may not be as durable as the traditional slender volume, but it certainly generates greater readership. We think the arts council is to be commended for finding a way to bring poetry to readers—whether they like it or not.

Commuters would never find out whether they liked it or not. The executive director, Robert Mayer, told the New York Times that the funding request had been turned down after a literature panel, which included poets, had reviewed poems submitted “and found that the quality was not of a level that it thought should be supported by state funds.”

A Newsday story had a slightly different quote from Mayer. Now he said the rejection was based on a single poem submitted with the application. I told Newsday that my poem “was not really meant to show the quality of what we were looking for. It was just part of a graphic mockup showing the sort of posters we planned to have printed. We could have just scribbled in place of the poem.”

In fact, I, along with an Adelphi University English professor and a publisher of a poetry press, had selected a distinguished group of Long Island poets from more than 300 entries. We were now in the process of choosing illustrators for the posters.

The council accused Mayer of dismissing the poetry without having read the final 10 selections. “Our board of directors was incensed at the impolitic, denigrating remarks made by you without having seen any of the submitted poetry,” GWAC’s director said.

No one outside the council had seen the winning poems, but readers of a New York Times could judge for themselves as my poem was reprinted in a follow-up article about the fracas. Or radio listeners to WNYC could have heard the poem, as I did one morning while driving.

Worn down by the controversy, the council gave up the poster project. Not long after, several key members of GWAC moved and one died, ending not only the poetry endeavor but the arts council itself.

Today young men wear designer sneakers, only aging widows don black stockings and frumpy dresses, tomato gardens are green carpets and most grape presses went into storage. The poetry collection moved to Hofstra University.

Revived at the beginning of the new millennium with the shortened name Westbury Arts, the village gifted the program a building downtown.

As for Kofi Awoonor: Ghana appointed him ambassador to Brazil, then Cuba, and finally to the United Nations. In 2013, on the day he was to read his poems at an international poetry festival, a terrorist attack in a Kenyan shopping mall killed him and seventy others.