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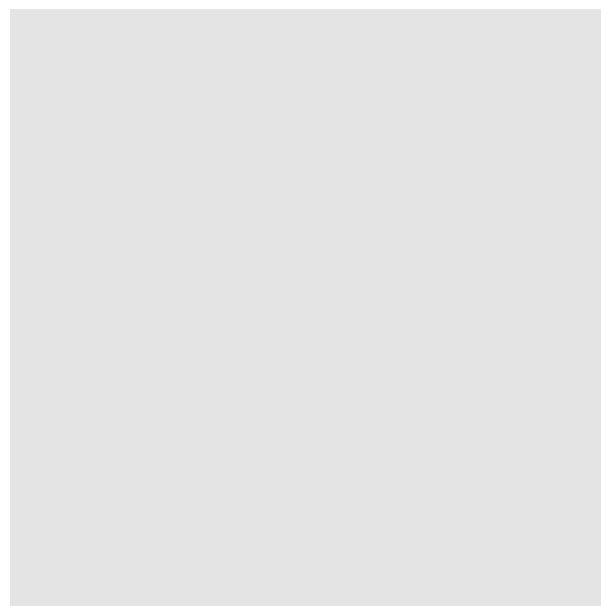
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TOP STORY

Writing celebration honors late professor, WKU poet laureate

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Mary Ellen Miller was named Western Kentucky University's poet laureate in May 2017.

submitted



Western Kentucky University English department head Rob Hale (left) speaks Sunday, October 28, 2018, during the Mary Ellen and Jim Wayne Miller Celebration of Writing at the Kentucky Museum. (Bac Tntrons/photo@hordailynews.com)

Western Kentucky University student Casey Child remembers his late poetry professor Mary Ellen Miller as the teacher who'd endlessly mark up his work and didn't shy away from tough love.

"She one time wrote, 'This is the worst poem you've ever written' on one of my poems," said Child, a senior from Taylor Mill.

"I think that summarizes her, because it shows that she loves her students enough to push them to progress. She would only write that on someone's poem that she felt could be a writer, and I think she believed in all of her students that way," he said.

Child joined Miller's former students, colleagues, friends and family members Sunday in honoring her contributions as WKU's poet laureate and longest-serving faculty member. Miller died in June at 83 years old after health complications from a fall.

This year's Celebration of Writing at WKU, an event Miller organized for 21 years in memory of her late husband, was renamed the Mary Ellen and Jim Wayne Miller Celebration of Writing.

Prior to his death in 1996, Jim Wayne Miller taught German at WKU and became an accomplished writer. He was named state poet laureate in 1986, according to the Kentucky Arts Council.

In WKU's Kentucky Museum, former students read their work, colleagues read Mary Ellen Miller's poetry and Kentucky writers such as Wendell Berry and Silas House paid tribute to her legacy.

She was a teacher who went deeper than just the structure or formality of poetry, Child said.

"She taught writing in a way that made it accessible to students ... bringing human experiences and complexity into the words," he said.

Mary Ellen Miller brought that approach outside of her classroom by creating the annual Celebration of Writing, which brings guest writers to share their work, expertise and host a writing workshop for students. Past guest writers include House and Kentucky poet laureate Frederick Smock, among others.

Each year, students compete for 10 slots in the workshop, and ultimately, money prizes for the top three students. Child took home a \$100 prize for winning first place, and Elizabeth Crowe and Emily Houston won second and third place, respectively.

This year's event brought back former students who won previous years' prizes to share the work they won with or a new piece they've written since.

Among them was Derek Ellis, who won first place in 2014 with his poem “John Lennon: A Day in the Rye.” The poem explores Lennon’s assassination and his killer’s obsession with J.D. Salinger’s “The Catcher in the Rye.”

“It’s the first poem Mary Ellen said, 'That’s your first good poem,' ” Ellis joked, prompting laughter in the room.

Michaela Miller, who took third place prize last year, read her poem “Portrait of a Bowl of Beans.”

“She encouraged me to not only write poetry but to have courage to read it in front of people, which is a big deal for me,” she said.

Mary Ellen Miller’s former colleagues also paid tribute to her 53-year career on the hill. WKU President Timothy Caboni, who was unable to attend, sent written remarks read by English Department head Robert Hale.

“Mary Ellen embodies WKU’s spirit,” Caboni wrote. “When you think of how we invest our lives in our students she is the epitome of that to which we should aspire. She was a gifted writer, poet, editor and teacher dear to our students, dear to our faculty and staff and dear to WKU. ... She was also dear to me. I am grateful to have known her.”

House sent his own tribute through an audio recording that was played at the event. He described her as witty, determined and someone who believed in him as a writer.

“She was usually the smartest person in the room. I love the way she never suffered fools,” he said, drawing laughs from the room. “She either loved you or she didn’t. You always knew which camp you were with Mary Ellen. I learned so much about being a better teacher by seeing her with students. She cared about them and wanted so badly for them to soak up every bit of knowledge they could.”



Aaron Mudd

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