

FEATURES

Playing with Living Poetry



Photo by Lily Keyes

By Kalin Burkhardt
Naked Opinion Editor

St. Michael's College is the first in the country to acquire a Word Garden. As the newest member of the Teaching Gardens, it invites students, faculty and community members alike to come and create living poetry.

The Word Garden, a life-size set of movable stones with words carved into them, is the creative work of "On the Rocks" stone-artist Chris Cleary. "We noticed his own little version at his studio and just thought, this needs to be at our college," said Valerie Bang-Jensen, education professor.

The concept was originally pitched last fall as an idea for the senior class gift but didn't work out. Less than a year later, Bang-Jensen and biology professor Mark Lubkowitz brought the garden to campus themselves. Alan Dickinson,

director of grounds, really helped make it happen, Lubkowitz said.

"He is our third partner, the reality check and the problem solver," he said.

Now that the garden is secured on campus, it is open to be enjoyed by all.

"The concept is like magnetic poetry," Bang-Jensen said. "Each of the stones has a word and the words are represented by different fonts, and the stones themselves are different shapes and colors."

But the fruit of the Word Garden blooms beyond just an aesthetically pleasing eye-catcher. Its true magic lies within the endless possibilities it provides for members of the St. Michael's community.

"What is college really about? It is about ideas and words so this is a space where you can physically go and actively play with these ideas and words,"

Lubkowitz said.

English professor Lorrie Smith took her poetry class to the Word Garden on the first day of school.

"It was a gorgeous sunny day, so as our getting-to-know-each-other exercise we wrote a group poem together," she said. "We gathered words, and students had to interact with one another to come up with the poem."

Bang-Jensen and Lubkowitz have melded literary gardening with academic curriculum in their new first-year seminar, "Digging Down to the Roots: The Meaning of Gardens."

"I am often awed at the brilliance of whoever puts two words together in a way that I would never have thought of," Bang-Jensen said. "It's sort of like intellectual footprints."

The Word Garden currently boasts 330 words in addition to two chess-

boards that were sandblasted into larger rocks.

"One of the things we would really like to see happen is for faculty members and students to start throwing words in," Lubkowitz said. "We are anxious for it to grow in a way that even better reflects St. Michael's."

Those who wish to add their own seeds to the garden can pick a word and have it carved into stone by Cleary for \$5 a letter.

With the stones strewn about there is concern that they may be stolen.

Bang-Jensen said that she does worry about it but checks on them every day and none have been stolen thus far.

"It belongs to the community and when you're taking a stone, you aren't just taking one stone, you are taking an idea away, and it's then going to have a ripple effect on the poetry you can write," Bang-Jensen said.

Both Bang-Jensen and Lubkowitz are confident in the community's ability to keep the stones safe and are excited to see how the community can help the garden grow, they said.

"You go through life as an artist never knowing if your art has changed the world or not," Cleary said. "Being able to see people go and interact with it, that is the true magic of this art."

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