

## *Reaching Homeless Children With Poetry*

Ken Slesarik

**“A typical student may have struggled in one or more academic areas but I made sure without a doubt that every student felt valued and capable.” - Ken Slesarik**

After many years facilitating an after-school poetry club for reluctant learners and performing assemblies and workshops for homeless students I was prompted to ask the question: is teaching poetry to homeless and reluctant learners different than teaching the average child?

My involvement in working directly with homeless children was a result of my wife Julie and a dear friend of ours named Nicole who is very involved with the homeless cause. I get immense joy from helping children and the opportunity to volunteer presented itself. It was very fulfilling and this led to my wanting to more directly use my talents as a speaker and children’s poet with this population. I started doing poetry segments at Nicole’s summer camps for homeless children. I also looked for Title 1 schools and schools that might have a higher percentage of students in need, homeless or otherwise where I would share my “Heroes and Poets” assembly program. My wife and I would also volunteer at fundraisers that support homeless children and attend activities with them such as horseback riding or swimming in a water park where I was always quick to bring poetry into the equation. Homeless and displaced children are not easily identified, but in my area, we have a school that specifically caters to that population, where 99% of the kids live in shelters or at best a motel room. It was very exciting for me to directly impact about two hundred of these kids at their school with my program.

I gradually grew into working with homeless children and it was relatively seamless. In April of 2011, I came across an article by children’s author Janet Wong talking about the possibilities of e-book publishing in regard to children’s poetry. I was especially impressed by her



**Figure 1.** Ken Slesarik encourages a young poet

enthusiasm for promoting the genre. That got me thinking about how I could promote poetry and make a difference in the lives of children. I then presented a proposal for a poetry club at a Title 1 elementary school in Phoenix, Arizona and “Poetry Rocks” was launched. Most certainly, not all the students were homeless by any means but nonetheless many had significant issues and homelessness was among them. A typical student may have struggled in one or more academic areas but I made sure without a doubt that every student felt valued and capable. This “laboratory” is where I developed my assembly program and its main premise that heroes are strong, brave and kind and we strived to live that premise. For this school year, I took a break from “Poetry Rocks” to concentrate on my own writing and speaking but I wouldn’t trade those five or six years for anything.

The reasons for homelessness are many and varied. They may include such things as job loss, divorce, domestic violence, addictions and other traumatic life events and the common element they all share is untold suffering. In my opinion, if we can distract a homeless child from their weighty circumstances even for a few fleeting moments, then we should consider that a win. If we can further build on that and cultivate a love of poetry then even better.

I often use the Power Book series from Pomelo Books when teaching poetry but regardless of how strong the curriculum, if children are preoccupied by environmental concerns such as their next meal or home circumstance then they will naturally be less interested in poetry and school in general. That's where we, as agents for social change come in.

### A Typical Power Book Lesson

I think it's important to mention that prior to a poetry lesson I scan the room and read body language to see if anyone looks stressed or defeated and either directly or indirectly I try to cheer them up. I often bring a snack of some sort and that helps. Eye contact and genuine concern along with enthusiastic greetings such as a "high five" or "knuckles" set the tone. At this point we will do some sort of warm up such as holding an expansive, open pose, as recommended by Harvard Professor, Amy Cuddy. I also get good results out of doing a "Poetry Rocks Haka" where we do a few choreographed moves designed to make us feel strong and capable.

Now we get into the lesson with a "Powerplay Activity" that gets us thinking. It is not really poetry related but fits in nicely with the other steps and promotes self-awareness. We will then read a themed, outside poem or poem from another poetry book and a response poem and finally a mentor text poem. All of these are provided in the books. It is important to note that we don't just read the poems. Depending on the topic we will celebrate, read as if on helium, in slow motion, echo read, read in two voices and along the way we might discuss a word or poetic attribute. Step five is a writing prompt so we dive in and write. We will then revise and perform our poems where respect and being a good audience is a must and I model that. Not every kid will buy into the way I present the

lesson one hundred percent but I'm confident this playful approach, along with high expectations, reaches more kids and even the most withdrawn is better off for it.

Great curriculum can make a not so great poet good and a good one even better but it takes compassionate and caring educators to build those relationships to in turn squeeze the juice out of whatever talents and abilities students already have and then to nurture and cultivate more talent. My end goal or purpose for teaching poetry to homeless and reluctant learners is not only to bridge any gaps in academic performance but to spark creativity and confidence that spill over to other aspects of the child's life. That is social change. That is meaningful.

### Memories, Lessons and Bonds

The stories you hear from these children are heartbreaking as you can imagine but the memories and bonds formed are priceless. One summer at camp I met an energetic and sweet, fourth-grade child named Tanya. Despite her circumstances, she was grateful and happy. She was front and center for the poetry lessons and really embraced the activities. I was delighted when she won a signed book of poems from author and anthologist Lee Bennett Hopkins as part of my couplet challenge. For the next two days at camp she followed me around with

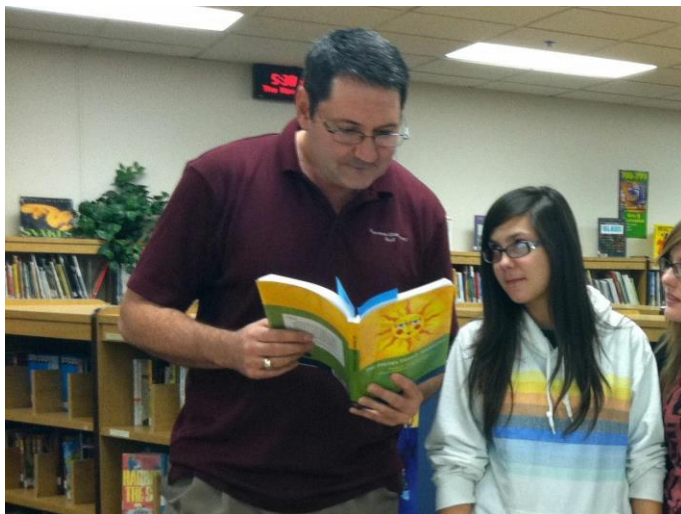


Figure 2. Ken Slesarik with a young student

her poetry book in hand. She chose to eat her meals with my wife and I and was constantly handing me scraps of paper with poems she had written. I teared up when she mistakenly called me "Dad" and embarrassingly giggled on a few occasions. I'll never forget when she showed up at the sponsored church activity, not with the provided bible but with her cherished poetry book. It was slightly irreverent but priceless. I was glad to connect with her again when I visited her school with my assembly program. I've learned that children are resourceful and I hope I

provide a positive role model. I've learned that giving goes both ways and if we fail to let someone do something nice for us we deprive them the opportunity to replicate.

I've shared the genre with the homeless, the medically fragile, autistic kids, children with emotional and behavioral challenges, students with various learning disabilities as well as the average and gifted populations. I've concluded that regardless of IQ and life circumstance it's not how far a child gets that is most important but

rather how far they come in proportion to where they started.

As you are working with students and introducing them to poetry and in turn writing with them it is very important to disproportionately praise on the smallest effort to keep them coming forward as you bring them along. We do what is called a power clap. It is a quick and effective way for the class or group to acknowledge one another while you still maintain control of your group. On the count of 3 let's give yourself one power clap. One, two, three Clap!

Not to minimize the complexity of humans at all but I read an article about how dolphins are trained. It seems some dolphins will completely shut down if a harsh tone is used with them and almost nothing will bring them out of their funk. Researchers have discovered that when those dolphins make even the smallest step towards a desired aim it is important to immediately reward them with a bucket of fish on their head as if in celebration. This disproportionate reward will break the funk. As a caution to you fish do not work very well for humans. I tried it on my wife but it had the opposite effect.

I have had great success using the Pomelo books with students but it is the human element of building a bond that has made the difference. In my experience, children never tire of smiling, expanding, raising their voices when it's appropriate and in general feeling good and escaping their realities for the safe sanctuary of poetry.

**Figure 3.** Ken Slesarik speaks at an assembly.



## Heroes and Poets

An avenue for me to reach out to students is my “Heroes and Poets” assembly program where I stress the importance that heroes are strong, brave and kind. Go ahead and take a strong breath with me now. One, two and three (breath). Nice! Now go ahead and sit like you are brave. Whatever that means to you go ahead and adjust your body. Finally, I stress that you can be strong and brave but if you are not kind and have the greater good in mind, then you are not a hero.

### Heroes and Poets Program Highlights

1. In a playful and kid-centered manner I introduce the three virtues of a hero that I want to elicit in my audience. Heroes are strong, brave and kind.
2. Walt Disney would have his animators step into a squared “magic box” marked with masking tape. I do a very powerful, modified version of that and children start to realize just how strong, brave and kind they really are.
3. Often, I will call on a very shy and reserved child to assist me in reciting a poem or poems and through a series of questions and teaching my “hero move” I turn that shy and reserved kid into a rock star.
4. My program is filled with tons of my originally written, high quality poems and I proceed to demonstrate my number one poetry writing technique where I put on a cape and “strut” like a superhero before putting pen to paper.
5. My program builds to a crescendo and before I’m through every person in the room, from the most gifted to the most challenged is feeling strong, brave and kind.
6. I proceed to expand on the idea beyond poetry to empower and challenge them to be their best before their next classroom test, sports game or when interacting with each other.

Why teach poetry to reluctant and struggling learners anyway? One reason is the performance aspect inherent in the genre. Poetry is meant to be spoken and the link between public speaking and self-confidence is unmistakable.

In returning to our question, I ask again, is teaching poetry to homeless and reluctant learners different than teaching the average child?

My answer is twofold, it is not different in that good teaching and strong curriculum are cross categorical and most of what works for a reluctant learner applies to and can only enhance the poetic skills of the average child and the two are different because we must consider the unique child and their individual circumstances to build that bridge with a compassionate hand.

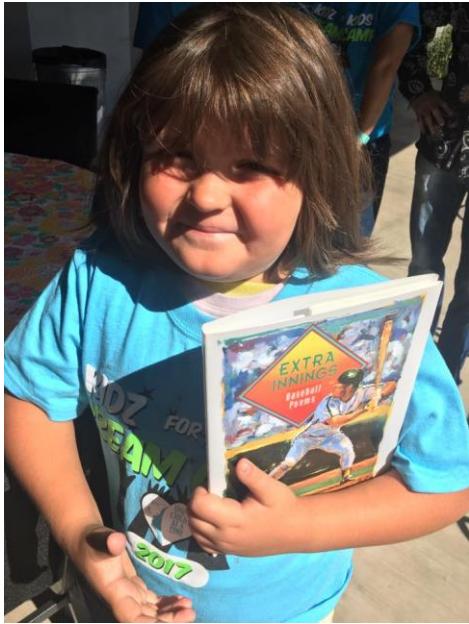


Figure 4. A young reader with a book of baseball poems

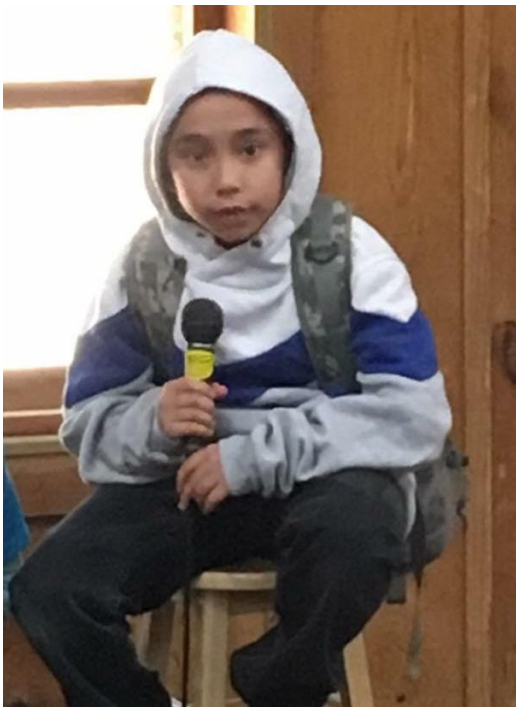


Figure 6. Sharing stories

### A Highly Recommended Book

The Poetry Friday Anthology K-5 Edition (Pomelo Books) promotes diversity and acceptance and has something for all students. I highly recommend it and it includes two of my own original poems. I use this in poetry groups and the topics are grade leveled but poetry does not come with a Lexile level so you can use most of the poems with multiple grades. The accepting, overall tone of this anthology is a great addition to any classroom library.

My goal at the ILA conference, as well as in this short article was to share some of my experiences. However, my overall goal was to encourage you to fearlessly introduce your own brand of literacy and never give up on those often-faceless students who may have been dealt a bad hand. My advice to those wanting to help is to contact homeless organizations in your area. With a short proposal, you can bring your own brand of literacy to children weather it is poetry, short stories, picture books or young adult novels. We all have a story to tell and what better audience to share it with than homeless or displaced children.



### About the Author

Ken Slesarik is a special education teacher and children's poet from Phoenix, Arizona. His "Heroes and Poets" assembly program has been well received by teachers, students, parents and administrators. When not teaching, or visiting schools Ken writes poetry for children with poems published in several world-wide anthologies and magazines. Ken's mission is to empower students through the medium of poetry and he is a poetry advocate to children and teachers alike.

<http://kenslesarik.com/>

## Sample Lesson

AN EXCERPT FROM THE POETRY FRIDAY ANTHOLOGY

WEEK 6: ON THE GROUND

SECOND GRADE

### THE WOODLAND VOLE

by Ken Slesarik

The Woodland Vole  
prefers to stroll,  
walking leisurely.

A tiny soul,  
the Woodland Vole,  
don't chase it, let it be.

The Woodland Vole  
just doesn't know,  
when fleeing fast and free,

how very slow,  
the Woodland Vole  
can seem to you and me.

poem copyright © 2012 Ken Slesarik  
from *The Poetry Friday Anthology*  
by Sylvia Vardell and Janet Wong  
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Learn more about Ken and his poetry  
at [KenSlesarik.com](http://KenSlesarik.com).

#### Take 5!

1. To prepare for reading the poem aloud, **display an image of a woodland vole and talk about this unique, mouse-sized animal** that lives in the woods and loves apples. Search Flickr.com or other sources for quick images to share.

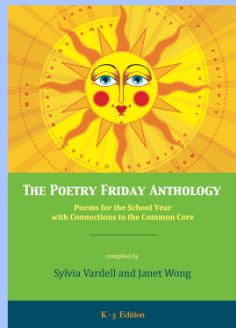
2. **The title, "The Woodland Vole," is repeated in each stanza of the poem—the ideal opportunity for students to chime in** on that line as you read the rest of the poem aloud again.

3. For discussion: *What does it feel like to be small?*

4. The repeated use of the title, "The Woodland Vole," is a key building block in this poem. Each stanza in this poem includes an end-rhyme with the word *vole*—even a "slant" rhyme or "almost" rhyme in *vole* and *know* and *vole* and *slow*. **Challenge the kids to identify each rhyming pair (*vole/stroll*; *soul/vole*; *vole/know*; *slow/vole*) and then share the whole poem aloud again.**

5. Pair this poem with another about a small, slow creature, "**The World's Most Ancient Ant**" by Jack Prelutsky (Kindergarten, Week 6, page 32).

#### THE POETRY FRIDAY ANTHOLOGY



**"FIND A PLACE FOR THIS BOOK ON YOUR DESK SINCE YOU'LL BE TURNING TO IT TIME AND TIME AGAIN."**

—IRA'S READING TODAY

Look for *The Poetry Friday Anthology*, with 218 poems by 76 poets including Jack Prelutsky, J. Patrick Lewis, Linda Sue Park, Margarita Engle, Nikki Grimes . . . and Ken Slesarik!

*The Poetry Friday Anthology* series is available in both paperback and ebook versions at [Amazon.com](http://Amazon.com).

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