

Gath'ring words, expansive, terse, to tell a Cambridge tale in verse

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CAMBRIDGE - Countless verses have been written by Cambridge poets, but now the city is writing a poem about itself.

Peter Payack is nearing the end of his term as Cambridge's first poet populist, an elected position designed to encourage the appreciation of poetry. Payack has been busy inventing the job, organizing a scavenger hunt for famous-poet sites, creating fortune cookies with original poems inside, visiting schools, and giving readings. Now he's working on his most ambitious project: the Cambridge Community Poem.

Anyone with a Cambridge connection can write a few lines of poetry and send them to Payack. He will organize the submissions into one long poem, which he hopes will be printed in a booklet, posted on the Web, and displayed in snippets on a blimp over June's Cambridge River Festival. Payack intends to find a thematic thread. "It will have a beginning, a middle, and an end," he said. "I want to find the pulse of Cambridge, to reflect what Cambridge is."

About 100 couplets have poured in so far, and some of them would make Longfellow cringe. Not all mention Cambridge, and not all are exactly poetic. "So many say Cambridge is a beautiful place / and it is mainly because of its / magnificent open space," wrote Paul Ryder, head of the city recreation division. "A scrap of thought / can lead to / gem crystals / on paper," wrote Cambridge resident Emily Lyons. Resident Rod Kessler took a wistful approach: "After twenty years I divorced my mate / and bade farewell to 02138."

Despite Payack's enthusiasm, not everyone is sure it will work. "If anyone can do it, Peter can," said Ifeanyi Menkiti of Somerville, an English professor at Wellesley College and owner of the Grolier Poetry Book Shop. "I don't quite know how it will come together. It could be done, so long as it doesn't come out looking silly."

When Methuen-based writer Jay Atkinson heard about the idea, he called it "the Beowulf of Cambridge." Even so, said Atkinson, who manages a kids hockey league, "if he can get a kid to think about poetry and e-mail it in, that kid in a few years might pick up a book by Robert Frost. If he can get a police lieutenant to send in a couple of gritty lines about what he saw on the street last week, it builds on the notion that words matter. It makes sense to me."

In school appearances around the city, Payack is asking teachers to urge their students to participate, and he plans to put posters up around the city asking for submissions. Beyond the usual Cambridge suspects - writers and intellectuals - he hopes for verses from people who have never thought of writing a poem before.

The poet populist is chosen annually in a special election held by the Cambridge Arts Council. The job carries a \$1,000 stipend. About eight local poets, none of them famous, ran for the job. Payack won and has been kept on for a second year.

Other cities, including Boston, have poets laureate, but usually not with such a focus on the masses. "Today, poetry is hidden in books," said Payack, who has published six himself. "People don't want to read it. It got a bad rap because poets wouldn't write for contemporary society. When we think of a poet, we think of Tennyson or Longfellow. If I'm a poet, I should be thinking about the war in Iraq, and writing about that. It's what poets traditionally did. Poets should be relevant."

Interviews with citizens on a street near Central Square turned up none who had heard of the community poem but also none who thought it was a weird idea. "I think it's nice; everybody can be a poet," said Willem Enklaar, who works for a social investment firm. Software developer Sreyas Srinivasan, who has written poetry, said he might submit some lines. Michelle Douglas, who has three children in the Andrew Peabody elementary school, said she'll get her kids to contribute. "This gets kids into poetry," she said, "and it's better to start young."

Payack, 59, has been an evangelist of poetry for the people for more than 30 years. He was the creator of "Phone-

a-Poem," a hugely popular Boston-area program from 1976 to 1996. People could call a number and hear the poem of the day. "We kept burning out the answering machines," he said.

At one early Cambridge River Festival, he placed short poems in 5,000 helium-filled balloons to be handed out to participants and released. One of his poems, "No Free Will in Tomatoes," is carved in the floor of the Davis Square T station. For the early years of First Night and again in 2000 he organized Star-Poems, which featured a plane flying over Boston and Cambridge displaying poems in lights.

"People would stand there, looking up and reading," Payack said. "It was the first time I had ever heard people who were not in school reading poems in unison. I wanted to take poetry out of books and put it in the public square, like a statue."

The fast-talking, exuberant Payack, who estimates he has written 1,500 poems, breaks the stereotype of the solemn poet with beard and patched elbows, pouring out obscure lines full of rage and angst. He teaches writing at UMass-Lowell and Berklee College of Music, coaches wrestling at Cambridge Rindge & Latin School, and is the president of the city's girls softball league, which he cofounded. "People say to me, 'How can you coach wrestling and be a poet?'" said Payack. "I tell them Plato was a champion wrestler."

One of his projects is a line of poetry fortune cookies. The cookies include a range of contributors, from sixth-graders at Cambridge's Haggerty elementary school to Robert Pinsky, former US poet laureate, and Gail Mazur, founder of the Blacksmith House Poetry Series, held in Blacksmith House, part of the Cambridge Center for Adult Education, all of whom will be represented in the community poem.

There are no rigid content rules for the community poem, and Payack intends to use every contribution that isn't offensive. "Write whatever is in your mind," he said, though he hopes for "uplifting themes of city life, peace, love, community spirit, the past, present, and future of Cambridge."

The deadline to submit entries is May 11; they can be e-mailed to poetpopulist@cambridgema.gov or Payack@aol.com.

SIDEBAR:

PIECES FOR THE POEM

A few of the submissions that Peter Payack has received so far for his Cambridge project:

Old time residents of Central Square still taste Necco chocolate in the air.

- DIANA DER-HOVANESSIAN

Maybe the Charles is not the Seine

but I keep coming back again and again

- DIANA NORMA SZOKOLYAI

They may not seem like much,

If only you truly knew how hard

It was to give them.

- HANNAH RASH

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Credit: David Mehegan Globe Staff. Pat Greenhouse/Globe Staff

[Illustration]

Caption: Cambridge poet populist Peter Payack hopes to incorporate submissions from people who have never before thought of writing poetry.

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