

## Professor and Wick Center Director Retires Maggie Anderson Endowment Established

By Pamela R. Anderson and Judy Kirman

When Maggie Anderson arrived at Kent State University to teach classes and lead the Wick Poetry Program, the program's activities consisted of two annual poetry competitions that awarded two scholarships: \$1,000 to a high school student and \$500 to a Kent State University undergraduate.

At Maggie's departure in fall 2009, the Wick Poetry Center is a nationally known poetry incubator and showcase, featuring multiple annual scholarship awards, as well as chapbook and first book competitions; a reading series of nationally known poets and competition winners; outreach to local students, senior citizens and community groups; assistantships and fellowships; and undergraduate classes. "The Wick Center is one of only ten such poetry centers in the country," she says, "and it enjoys a high reputation among the national literary community."

Regarding her contributions to the growth of the Center, Kent State alumnus and sculptor Robert Wick, who, along with his brother Walter, is one of the original benefactors states, "Maggie has always had an evolving vision of what Wick Poetry could be, laying a wonderful foundation for the future."

Although Maggie's road to Kent State and the Wick Poetry Program was a winding one, she was already an established poet and editor, an accomplished teacher, and a veteran traveler when she arrived in Kent. Each of those experiences prepared her for this opportunity to do something special with poetry.

Early on, writing became a companion as Maggie spent time alone as a child in New York City hospital waiting rooms during her mother's illness. "I always had my writing kit," she notes. It was a tool she used to entertain herself and help interpret life, making sense of things as they were and creating new places to be. After her mother's death, Maggie and her father returned to his home in West Virginia, where she stayed to earn bachelor's and master's degrees in English and creative writing from West Virginia University.



Maggie Anderson is the author of four books of poetry, including *Windfall: New and Selected Poems*, *A Space Filled with Moving*, and *Cold Comfort*. She has co-edited several thematic anthologies, including *A Gathering of Poets*, a collection of poems read at the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary commemoration of the shootings at Kent State University in 1970, as well as *Learning by Heart: Contemporary American Poetry about School* and *After the Bell: Contemporary American Prose about School*. Her awards include two fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, fellowships from the Ohio, West Virginia, and Pennsylvania Councils on the Arts, and the Ohioana Library for contributions to the literary arts in Ohio. The founding director of the Wick Poetry Center, Anderson is Professor Emerita of English at Kent State University. She is a member of the graduate faculty of the Northeast Ohio MFA in creative writing and edits the Wick Poetry Series of the Kent State University Press.

At a poetry reading while still in high school, she encountered West Virginia poet Louise McNeill, “who helped me realize I could write about my own life in West Virginia.” An admirer of McNeill’s craft, years later Maggie edited *Hill Daughter: New and Selected Poems by Louise McNeill*, (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1991), as well as McNeill’s memoir, *The Milkweed Ladies* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1986).

Another poet who influenced Maggie was Gwendolyn Brooks. After hearing Maggie read a few of her poems at an arts festival open mic session, Brooks approached her and asked if she had a book ready for publication. “Yes,” Maggie said, even though she had not yet assembled her poems nor sequenced them into a collection. She returned home, immediately prepared a manuscript, and sent it to Brooks. The result was her first full-length collection of poems, *Years That Answer*, published by Harper & Row in 1980. *Cold Comfort* (University of Pittsburgh Press) followed in 1986.

Even with her energies firmly focused on writing and poetry, teaching has always been one of Maggie’s priorities. “Teaching is a way of learning,” she explains. After she received her master’s degree, Maggie began teaching GED and creative writing classes for the West Virginia Vocational Rehabilitation Center. When she decided to focus on writing, she resigned from DVR and was hired by the West Virginia Arts and Humanities Commission as a poet-in-residence.

Maggie went on to teach and serve as poet-in-residence in hospitals, prisons, rural and urban communities, and public schools, as well as to teach undergraduate and graduate writing classes at West Virginia University, University of Pittsburgh, The Pennsylvania State University, and the University of Oregon. “I taught elementary and high school students, senior citizens, and prison inmates,” she says. “The students I worked with – whether they were second graders or grad students – always brought as much to me as I brought to them. For me, these experiences fostered a strong sense of the act of writing poetry as a way of bringing communities together.”

Travel has always been important to Maggie – for herself and for her writing. Through her poems, readers can journey with her from West Virginia to New York, Pennsylvania and the West Coast; to Denmark, Greece, and Paris; and to the Sidney Lanier Best Western Motel in Gainesville, Georgia. “When we travel,” Maggie explains, “we always let go of a certain amount of both routine and control. We open ourselves to surprises, adventures, and new experiences that we cannot possibly have if we stay at home. I love Elizabeth Bishop’s work

because she constantly interrogates all the reasons we might travel (or not): ‘Should we have stayed at home and thought of here? / Where should we be today?’ To see the world at a different slant, in a different language, in a different register is to work from our blind side: everything is discovery; everything is new – which is what we all, I think, hope for our poems.”

It was 1989 when Maggie was hired by Kent State University’s English Department as an assistant professor with special responsibilities for the University’s then-relatively obscure Wick Poetry Program, as well as for guiding students as they sought to publish their work. Although writing and teaching were the lynchpins to Maggie’s personal success, the poetry program building blocks she inherited at Kent State came from Robert and Walter Wick and their families, who had moved beyond personal tragedies to reach out to young, aspiring poets connected to Kent State.

Robert and Walter began the program at Kent to honor the memories of their two sons, Stan and Tom, each of whom had been killed in tragic automobile accidents when they were young. The brothers were particularly resolved on one point: scholarship winners were to be chosen on the basis of talent, rather than on grade point average. Also, from the beginning, travel was built in as something the Wicks wanted as an aspect of the program. The annual undergraduate scholarship winner became the Wick Poet and received an all-expenses-paid trip to the summer Bisbee Poetry Festival in Arizona, where he or she read alongside major American poets.

After receiving tenure in 1992, Maggie was named chair of the Wick Poetry Program Committee in Kent State’s Department of English. That committee initiated an annual reading series that featured well-known national poets—the first of whom was Brigit Pegeen Kelly and, over the years, Gwendolyn Brooks, Yusef Komunyakaa, Allen Ginsberg, Maxine Kumin, Jean Valentine, and dozens more. In succeeding years, she also spearheaded Wick Festivals featuring Caribbean Writers, in collaboration with her colleague Belizean novelist, Zee Edgell; Appalachian Writers; Ohio Writers; and small presses. “I believe my years of publishing my own work and meeting other poets has been a great help in drawing nationally and internationally recognized poets to Kent State for readings and workshops,” Maggie states.

In 1994—just five years after Maggie arrived—the Wick Poetry Program took another leap forward when Maggie and the Wick Program Committee planned a 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary reunion for former scholarship winners. That year, for the first time since starting the program, Robert

and Walter Wick returned to Kent State. It also was the year when, under Maggie's guidance, the annual chapbook and first-book competitions were added, both of which included a partnership with the Kent State University Press to print, publish, and distribute the books. The annual chapbook prize is awarded to students attending an Ohio college or university (Student Competition) and to any poet living in Ohio (Open Competition). The first book prize awards any poet writing in English with \$2,000 and publication of his/her first full-length book of poetry by the Kent State University Press. A nationally acclaimed poet is selected each year to judge the competition. Maggie assumed responsibility for editing each series, which has become one of the Wick programs of which she is most proud. Since the project's first year, 44 chapbooks and 16 first books have been published in the Wick Poetry Series.

The years passed as Maggie continued to teach classes each semester and co-ordinate the Wick Poetry Program: poetry readings, first book and chapbook publications, scholarship awards, and poets returning to Kent State. All the while, she wrote, published, read her work, served as poet-in-residence in cities around the country, and traveled. In 1991, Maggie was awarded her second Individual Writer's Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts, which enabled her to live and write in Denmark for a year. In 1992, she was awarded a Fellowship from the MacDowell Colony. "These awards were extremely gratifying," states Maggie. They are among the most prestigious fellowships a writer can receive, and you are judged by your peers." 1992 was also significant for Maggie because it was the year she authored two new publications. *A Space Filled with Moving*, her third collection of poems, was published by the University of Pittsburgh Press. Kent State University Press published *A Gathering of Poets*, an anthology of poems she co-authored with Alex Gildzen and Ray Craig that commemorated the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the May 4, 1970, shootings of Kent State University students who were protesting the Vietnam War.

In 1999, as the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary approached, the Wick Program initiated what would become one of its hallmark projects: community outreach in the schools. Maggie, whose early experiences as poet-in-the-schools in Pennsylvania, New York and West Virginia had taught her the tremendous impact of community involvement, joined the community planning committee that decided to invite a poet-in-residence. To that end, she contributed funds from the Wick Poetry Program to help sponsor the three-week residency of Ohio Arts Council poet David

Hassler at Theodore Roosevelt High School and requested that the final poetry performance scheduled for the high school also be performed at Kent State's Kiva Auditorium.

It was the cusp of the anniversary when students and teachers from Roosevelt performed *Got Hope*, the first of Wick's annual showcases of original poetry and music performance scripted by David, with original music created in songwriting workshops led by local musician Hal Walker. In the following year, David was hired as the first Program and Outreach Coordinator for the Wick Program. Over the next 10 years, under his direction, community outreach was expanded to elementary, middle and high schools, senior centers and veterans groups in Portage, Summit, Cuyahoga, and Stark counties. Today, *Giving Voice* – as it was later named – is an annual celebration of poetry and music from outreach students, teachers, and senior adults. “Scholarships are still the strong and steady heartbeat of Wick Poetry,” Maggie notes, “but outreach is the lifeblood – both the local outreach to schools and communities and the regional and national outreach to beginning authors through awards and book publication.”

In the years following the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary, both Maggie's professional life and the Wick Poetry Program flourished. In 1999, *Learning by Heart: Contemporary American Poetry about School*, edited by Maggie Anderson and David Hassler, was published by the University of Iowa Press. The following year came a volume of Maggie's selected poems, a landmark achievement for a poet. *Windfall: New and Selected Poems*, was published by the University of Pittsburgh Press. In 2002, the KSU Alumni Association awarded Maggie one of just three University Distinguished Teaching Awards, and two years later the University honored her with a Distinguished Scholar Award. With these tributes, two of Maggie's lifetime vocations, her teaching and her writing, were recognized for their excellence by her students, as well as by her colleagues and peers.

One of Maggie's most gratifying honors came in 2004 when Emory and Henry College in Virginia singled her out for recognition at their 23<sup>rd</sup> annual Literary Festival. At this two-day festival, which each year pays tribute to the work of a writer with Appalachian roots, colleagues presented papers on her work, and Maggie read her own poetry. Subsequently, an entire issue of *Iron Mountain Review* was devoted to her work. “I am so appreciative of this tribute,” she says. “It's a pleasure to be in the company of writers and poets like Charles Wright, Lee Smith, and Denise Giardina, who have also received this award.”

At that point, Wick was operating at full capacity. The original two scholarships of \$1,500 per year expanded to annual awards totaling over \$25,000. The annual reading series continued to boast participation by nationally known writers: Edwidge Danticat, Philip Levine, Eleanor Wilner, Stephen Dunn, Alberto Rios, and Toi Derricotte. Two chapbooks and one first book were published each year, and the outreach programs were touching the lives of hundreds of students, teachers and community members. In addition, the Wick office itself bustled with assistants and fellows, funded with stipends from the Wick Poetry Program and Kent State.

The 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary reunion in 2005 was a three-day celebration and homecoming for Wick poets, scholars, and supporters. Indicating the eminence of the Wick Poetry Program, returning poets included National Book Award winners and Pulitzer Prize recipients, many chapbook and scholarship winners, all First Book poets, and all but two of the first book judges. Robert Wick, along with his children, and Walter's son Christopher attended to demonstrate the families' commitment to the program. At the conclusion of the anniversary events, the Wick families made a gift of \$2 million to the Wick Poetry Program. When asked what makes the Wick brothers unique as benefactors, Maggie emphasizes "their support of the art of poetry, their desire to honor their sons through creative art, and their generosity of spirit that continues to expand and create new possibilities all the time."

Within the year, the Wick Poetry Program became the Wick Poetry Center, operating within the College of Arts and Sciences, and Maggie Anderson was named director. "A poetry center in a university can serve as a link from the academy to what some call "the real world," through community outreach, public readings and publications," Maggie says as she explains the significance of this change. "We are all, as Walt Whitman wrote, 'hungry for equals/by day and by night.' An athlete knows how to find company ('equals') in the gym; an actor, in the theater. A poetry center provides a place for the poets (and there are always more of them than one might imagine) to gather and share their own poems and their passion for the life of poetry."

Maggie continued to add new activities to strengthen the Wick Poetry Center. Building on her own personal passion for travel with Robert and Walter Wick's ongoing desire to incorporate travel into the Center, in 2006 she launched the Bisbee Summer Fellowship Program. In this intensive three-week, multi-genre summer workshop, graduate writing students spend one week at the home of Robert and Estelle Wick in Bisbee, Arizona. While there, these students, who are selected from the Northeast Ohio Masters in Fine Arts program, write, study and

experience the landscape and culture of the desert southwest. Explaining his strong support of the Workshop, Robert Wick states, “Traveling to new places and meeting with other poets is one of the best ways [for writers] to expand their own minds, experiences, and hearts.”

In 2008-2009, Wick celebrated its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary with grant support from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Ohio Arts Council with meals and housing for visiting poets provided by University and Kent community members. Throughout the school year, there were monthly tributes to scholarship winners, chapbook and first book authors, fellows and interns, and outreach students and teachers. It was Maggie’s 20<sup>th</sup> year at Kent State and, after spending nearly two decades steeped in the communities connected to Kent, Kent State, and Wick Poetry, she began to consider retirement—but only if she also could ensure the long-term vitality of the Center and the programs that she had either established, strengthened, or encouraged during her tenure. David Hassler, familiar with the Center’s activities from his years as Outreach Coordinator, was named Director in fall 2009, and the university replaced Maggie’s faculty position with poet Catherine Wing, who will begin teaching in the Department of English in fall 2010.

David’s appointment completed a circle begun when he was Maggie’s student at Kent in 1990. While serving as Outreach Coordinator, he and Maggie edited two anthologies, the first, *Learning by Heart: Contemporary American Poetry about School*, was followed in 2007 by *After the Bell: Contemporary American Prose about School*. “David is exactly the right person to build on Maggie’s wonderful work with Wick Poetry,” states Walter Wick. “I can think of no individual more fitting to fill the spot.”

In the autumn of 2009, immediately after she became Professor Emerita of English at Kent, Maggie made one more lasting contribution to the Wick Poetry Center and to poets connected to the University: an initial gift to the Maggie Anderson Fund of the Wick Poetry Center. The Wick brothers and their families honored her dedication and friendship and simultaneously acknowledged her significant impact on the Wick Poetry Center when they added to Maggie’s initial gift and officially established the Maggie Anderson Endowment.

Congruent with Maggie’s longtime passions, the purpose of her Endowment is to assist talented Kent State writing students with writing-related travel expenses. Of their decision to support Maggie’s newest vision, Robert Wick says, “This is a wonderful endowment that has been established and shows the wonderful vision Maggie has in the life of the poet and what the

poet needs to grow and expand. She has always been a wonderfully nurturing person who has a great gift for poetry—judging it as well as creating it.”

Maggie’s legacy fund speaks to her lifelong love of travel and to her belief that traveling can be an invaluable experience for writers and poets. She hopes that the Endowment will make a difference for student writers in the same way that traveling shaped her own writing. “To have had the privilege in my life to travel to Greece, Russia, and eastern Europe; to live in Denmark; and to live and work in many states in this country has not only been a vital source for my writing, but it also expanded my view of the world.

Every summer I see how travel changes the lives of students accepted into the Bisbee Workshop,” she continues. “Many have not had the opportunity to travel; some have never been out of the Eastern Time Zone or flown in a plane. There is a wind that blows through people when they get a chance to go elsewhere and see how other people live. It changes their lives and work, and it promotes openness, empathy, and imaginative possibility.”

Maintaining a balance between her “poet life” and her teaching/administrative “Wick life” was something Maggie strove to achieve during her years at KSU. “The life of a poet (at the moment of writing) is solitary. The work of an administrator and teacher is necessarily collaborative, cooperative, and rich with associations and friendships. While these may not seem to go together, I found a way of balancing the two that, I think, was to the benefit of both,” she states. As the Wick Poetry Series editor for nearly 20 years, Maggie edited all the chapbooks and first books and, as one more tribute to all the Wick authors, she edited an anthology of selections from their work, *The Next of Us Is About to Be Born*, published by the KSU Press in 2009.

“I look forward to seeing what the Wick Poetry Center will become,” Maggie says. “I would hope that many of the aspects of the program that I helped to start will continue – the reading series, the book series, the outreach – and that the original impetus to the program – the scholarships to KSU students – will remain at the heart of the work. I look forward, eventually, to seeing more travel and exchange programs made possible by the Maggie Anderson Endowment. I feel curious about the specifics of the future, and since I know the Center has a strong base and excellent leadership, I expect to see it grow and change in ever more original and innovative ways.”



In this new journey, Maggie has many friends and colleagues who wish her well, including Robert and Walter Wick. “Maggie has been the heart of the Wick Poetry Program,” says Walter. “I have personally enjoyed reading her poetry. She has brought forth stories of great strength with her poet’s words.” His brother adds that Maggie “has worked hard and has given her heart and soul to Wick Poetry. In many ways I am sad that she has retired, but it is time now for her to have private time to enhance her poetry.”

After years of balancing a poet’s life and a teaching career, along with administrative challenges and responsibilities, how will Maggie respond to this new chapter in her life? “‘Retirement’ feels more like a beginning (or a re-tread) than an ending” she says. “I have begun to organize my days around reading and writing again. I am working on a new collection of poems and a book of essays, while also trying to shape some of the notes I wrote while I was teaching and administrating into something less scattered, more whole, but in an as-yet-unnamed genre. I am reading, reading, reading – listening to music – of course, traveling -- and for the first time in many years, I have had the joy of watching the spring arrive day by day, blossom by blossom.”

***The Maggie Anderson Endowment of the Wick Poetry Center assists talented writing students at Kent State University with writing-related travel expenses. Gifts or pledges of any amount—small and large—are most welcome and will support this vision. To contribute to the Fund or for more information, visit the Wick website at [www.kent.edu/wick](http://www.kent.edu/wick) or call the Wick Poetry Center at 330-672-2067.***

Note: Kent alumna **Pamela Anderson** (’89; ’94), who is not related to Maggie Anderson, is Director of Philanthropic Giving at WKSU and a student in the NEOMFA program at Kent State.

Kent alumna **Judy Kirman** (’63) is a retired educator, who currently volunteers at Kent Social Services and Change Hunger of Portage County.