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Poetry Night

Poetry Night Enjoyable for All

Grand Valley State University's 2006 Poetry Night was not just for poets and writers.

Poets Sharon Olds and Sonia Sanchez read to more than 450 professors, students and community members during the event at the L.V. Eberhard Center in Grand Rapids on Oct. 11. Patricia Clark, a writing professor at GVSU and the poet laureate of Grand Rapids, organizes Poetry Night.

"It's kind of a cool thing because it brings people together who might not get together otherwise," Clark said.

Olds read many poems that made the crowd laugh. Laughter began when Olds said she "tried to talk herself out of reading 'Poem for the Breasts,'" but she said it was impossible to resist. When she read "Self Portrait: Rear View," a poem about her aging butt, the laughter continued.

"I wish Sharon Olds would have read some more of her heavy-hitters, as she seemed to be censoring herself to some extent," said GVSU writing student Kenneth Caldwell.

Clark said that Olds is sensitive about what she reads. Many of her poems have topics that involve sex, childbearing, death and divorce.

Sanchez sang many of her poems, such as "Ballad." She did this by making parts of poems into choruses, singing the words, adding hums and clicking her tongue.

"Sanchez gave an inspiring performance," Caldwell said. "I thought the musical emphasis of her poetry was engaging and entertaining."

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However, the poets did not just read. They also gave insight and advice.

Olds told students to be positive about their work and to keep sending it to publishers. A publisher once told Olds to send her poems to the Ladies Home Journal and not literary magazines but she persisted.

Sanchez's advice was to "break all the rules" when it comes to writing prose poems, which are formatted more like an essay. Her advice to students who struggle to find peace in the world is to "write out those tears."

After the reading, audience members interacted with the poets in a question and answer session. One question that was asked was, "What keeps poets going out on the road?"

"One of the things that I like so much about the honor of traveling around...is the educational experience," Olds said.

Sanchez responded, "Poets are born—you stay on the road because of self-conscious conversation."

A book signing and reception followed.

Olds has written eight books of poetry and is a professor at New York University's Graduate Creative Writing Program. She runs a program at Goldwater Hospital in New York where her students write poetry with terminally ill patients, most of whom are children. Olds has received many awards, including the National Book Critics' Circle award for "The Dead and the Living."

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Sanchez is the author of more than a dozen books of poetry. Her book, “Does Your House Have Lions,” was nominated for both the NAACP Image and the National Book Critics’ Circle awards. She has also been recognized for her community service and activism.

GVSU’s Poetry Night is part of the Fall Arts Celebration.

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