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“The Expression of Life” at The College of Idaho

BY CYNTHIA MWENJA, PhD

Diane Raptosh, professor of English at The College of Idaho, demonstrates the vital role that poetry plays in the human experience through her published volumes, her course designs, and her community-engaged work. In her own writing, Raptosh examines the idea and experience of America from many angles; in her courses, she introduces students to a broad array of voices to support them in developing their own. In every aspect of her work, Raptosh centers the human stories that reveal one’s deep truths to another.

Raptosh has garnered a great deal of recognition in her career. An undergraduate alumna of The College of Idaho, Raptosh joined its faculty ranks in 1990; since 2002, she has been the Eyck-Berringer Endowed Chair of English. Raptosh has earned the Idaho Governor’s Award for Excellence in the Arts, and she was named the first poet laureate of Boise. She has also served as Idaho’s Writer in Residence.

Published Works

Andrew Gades, assistant professor of Music and interim dean of the Undergraduate College, says that Raptosh has had a “fantastic career”; he points to her nine published books of poetry as a “mark of her productivity as an author.” He admires that her collections explore different poetic forms and collectively focus on a wide array of subjects. Some of her books, he explains, are autobiographical, while others focus more on more universal aspects of the human condition. For example, Raptosh wrote *Dear Z: The Zygote Epistles* as an aunt to a potential niece, explaining and exploring contemporary America in letters

written in many poetic forms, while other collections delve into climate and criminal justice. While Raptosh’s body of work spans themes and forms, Gades states, it is always deeply human.

During Raptosh’s 2018 sabbatical, her brother endured a catastrophic airplane crash in which his husband died; Raptosh became her brother’s primary caregiver as he recovered after the event. She says that he and his husband had been “talented and generous people,” and the experience was “too painful to touch” in terms of writing about it for some time afterward. As she later started creating pieces related to this experience, she centered the developing collection on personal and national trauma, with the idea that “this age is a patient.” As a caregiver, she noticed that people in pain tend to project it on those around them, and she sees this dynamic played out in the wider American culture. The collection that developed from these experiences and observations, *I Eric America*, was published in October 2024.

Current Projects

Raptosh is developing a collection of American sonnets in her current sabbatical year. For the past five years, she has been using this form almost exclusively. She explains that the American sonnet doesn’t need to rhyme and has no strict meter; the only rule is that each one contains fourteen lines. She loves that the form provides a balance of “latitude and limitation” which allows her to “take off into the world of the poem.” For her current project, entitled *Come Across*, she is generating poems by interacting with a set of German-language flash cards that she had in her house. To begin a new poem, she pulls a card from the set and lets the English translations guide the poem in some way; the words might become part of the title or a refrain in the piece. The combination of chance and the rule—she must use the content of the card—have been generative for her sabbatical project. During the interview, she was delighted to pull a card with a word meaning “Pleasure, enjoyment, joy, fun”; her eyes lit up with the possibilities contained in those words. She points out that this was the “perfect card to



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pull” because writing is always hard, but there’s no point in writing if it does not also contain joy.

Raptosh is also working on a second collection during this sabbatical year. This project, entitled *Cowboy Ropes Mars*, focuses on cowboys and “cowboy-adjacent” figures, such as colonizers. Calling this collection a “cornucopia of forms,” Raptosh states that it includes prose poems, parables, and flash works—along with poems written in the Korean *sijo* form, which has three lines—six in English—and 44 to 46 syllables. While Raptosh has not often worked on two projects at once, she appreciates that she has more freedom to do so now that she is past her child-raising years.

Facilitating Connections to Creative Writing

Raptosh deeply enjoys teaching, and her students revel in the ways she constructs her classes. Patricia Lazalde, Literature and Creative Writing major at The College of Idaho ('26), notes that one strength making

Raptosh a “wonderful teacher” is that she has a “deep love for the craft of writing” and she helps her students explore that craft “in productive ways.” Raptosh “helps students create authentic connections to the art” via her love for many kinds of poetry and poets, exposing her students to a variety of poetic forms and different poet’s voices. She encourages her students to try out many of the poets’ styles so that they develop a style of their own. Because she “didn’t create boxes” that the students needed to stay within, Lazalde remarks, they learned “what it means to write something that means something to us.”

Arantza Teres-Martinez, Literature and Creative Writing major at The College of Idaho ('26), deeply appreciates Raptosh’s approach of “unconditional positive regard” for each of her students, saying that “She treated all of us as if we have wisdom; she treated our opinions with care and grace.” Additionally, Teres-Martinez notes that, unlike many other college professors, Raptosh asks her students to use every type

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of language they have available. For Teres-Martinez, who speaks Spanish, that stance opened up exciting possibilities to explore. The question is not whether any language is right or wrong but “are you using language effectively?”

Teres-Martinez also appreciates the way Raptosh interacts with her students as human beings. If she polls a class and they’re overstressed, she might give them a mental health day or schedule a workshop day in class. Raptosh begins each class with a check-in and encourages students to use that material in the pieces they develop. She also allowed her students to ask about her opinions and experiences regarding big, human concerns, such as “love, marriage, and aging.” Teres-Martinez said that this openness, along with the wide array of texts in Raptosh’s classes, “opened up multiple ways to live life in a way that fulfills.” When working with young people who are “trying to learn

how to be human,” Teres-Martinez emphasizes, nurturing and facilitating that part of their growth—as Raptosh does—is crucially important. Partially in response to her experiences as Raptosh’s student, Teres-Martinez plans to enter the field of mental healthcare in graduate school, where she intends to “engage with people’s stories” and focus on telling what has not yet been told.

Working within American Carceral Systems

Gades notes that, in many ways, Raptosh “pioneered what we now call high-impact instruction.” More than 25 years ago, she and Robin Lorentzen, now emerita professor of Sociology, pioneered a January term course entitled “The Prison Experience.” During the course—which is offered annually—students read literature by and about incarcerated people, and they visit area prisons, jails, safe houses, and juvenile detention centers. Guest speakers include attorneys, jail employees,

and prison residents, who talk about their crimes and life in prison. Through this class, Raptosh remarks, she “became obsessed with the system.” Since the United States is the largest incarcerator in the world, she points out, “understanding the prison system is understanding the U.S. itself.”

Over the past decade, Idaho’s prison system has become one of the most progressive in the U.S.—though it was one of the least progressive when the class began. Now, prison residents work with prison administrators to create more humane living conditions and establish mentoring programs for those who are incarcerated. These changes were brought about when local prison administrators toured Scandinavian prisons and borrowed ideas from them. For example, in Norway, correctional officers hold master’s degrees in counseling or social work so that they work with incarcerated people in a helpful capacity. Raptosh appreciates that Idaho is now leading

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the charge for meaningful prison reform in the U.S.

Gades notes that Raptosh was taking students out of the classroom many years before the guidelines for high-impact instruction called attention to this practice; connecting work in the classrooms to the wider community provides “transformational experiences” for the students. Raptosh explains that students often begin the course thinking that “everyone in prison is a monster, but then they hear the stories ... hearing stories is the best way to learn.” As students are told firsthand about the deep trauma, poverty, drug addiction, homelessness, sexual abuse, and more that the prison residents have endured, they are profoundly impacted by the experience. Raptosh has even seen some students change their major to criminal justice after taking the class. She states that “Young people always want to contribute to society.”

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In addition to the January term “The Prison Experience,” Raptosh also teaches a regular term class called “Prose and Cons: American Prison Literature.” Lazalde, who had not previously explored this area of study, remembers that not only were the books impactful, but that Raptosh’s passion for the subject further enhanced the experience. Lazalde appreciates that Raptosh assigns creative writing in this class, as well, because “She understands that the learning goes beyond memorizing the information in the texts.”

Expressing Life through Poetry

Raptosh inspires students and colleagues alike through her zeal for both writing and teaching. Gades notes that “It’s a joy to have Diane at The College of Idaho”; he loves to tell campus stakeholders stories of the work she does, both inside and outside of the classroom. Teres-Martinez, however, describes Raptosh best as someone who embodies her discipline: “Her life is poetry, and poetry is the expression of life.”



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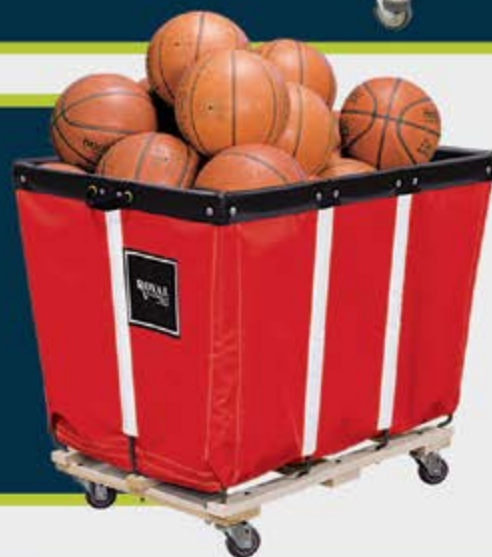
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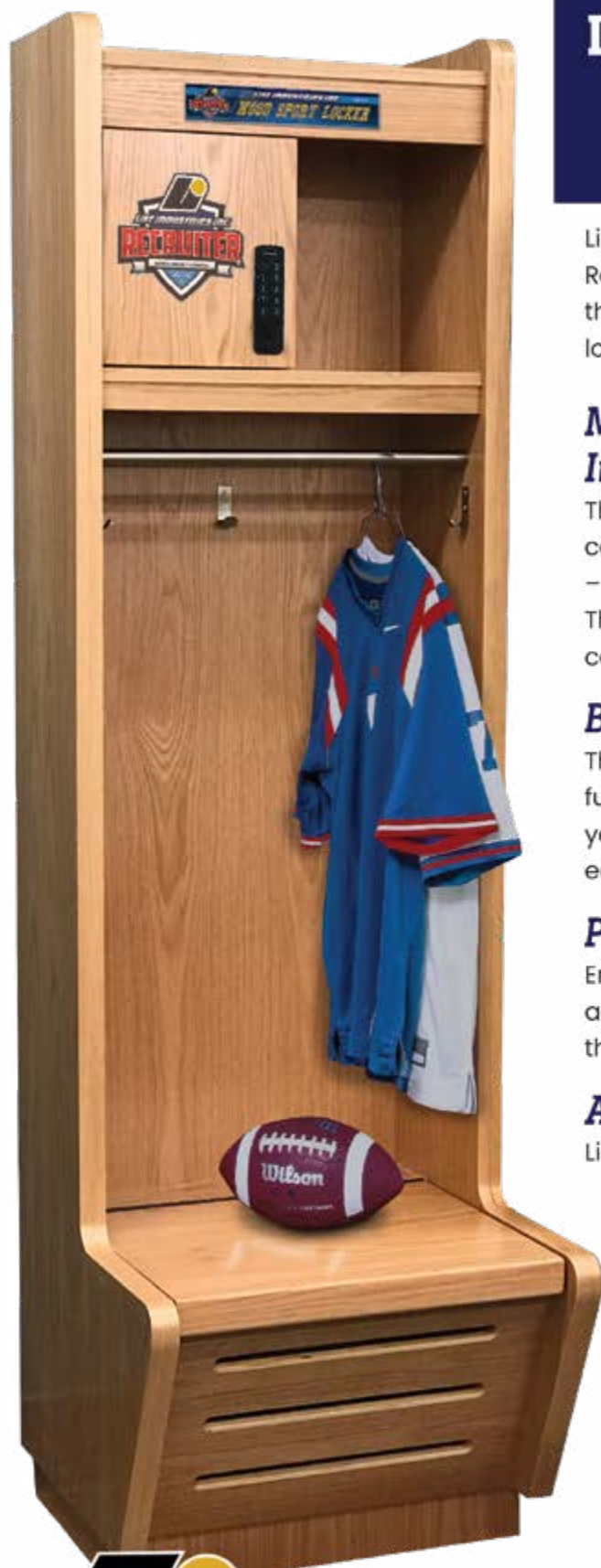


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