

# Hillside youths express feelings through poetry

By Mike Latona  
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — *I look outside and I see the world as it's being lived in a lifetime today or tomorrow.*

Written by Pete, this poem best expresses the feelings of many residents at Hillside Children's Center, according to the young man's instructor.

"It mentions a today and tomorrow but it doesn't talk about yesterday. And a lot of these kids are trying to put their past behind them," said Todd Beers.

The 30-year-old Beers is in the midst of conducting a six-month program known as the Hillside Poetry Project. During this program, which began last month, Beers introduces Hillside clients to his own poetry and then encourages them to produce their own.

The program allows Beers, in his own way, to carry out Hillside's main purpose: to better the lives of children — mostly teenagers — who are emotionally disturbed or mentally ill. The not-for-profit center, which has been in operation since 1837, serves more than 2,000 clients with a staff of 725 paid workers and 300 volunteers.

Hillside Poetry Project is a first-time outreach program being offered through Writers and Books, where

Beers is employed full-time. In its 12th year of operation, Writers and Books is a non-profit literary center located at 740 University Ave.

Beers noted that poetry writing can be a therapeutic process for Hillside youths.

"Healing can take place from writing just as much as telling your story to someone," he said. "That's the magic."

Funding to make the program possible came from Rochester Community Savings Bank. Previously, that bank also helped finance a similar project called the Strong Writing Program — a series of workshops conducted by Writers and Books in the long-term care units of Strong Memorial Hospital throughout most of 1991.

During the Hillside project, Beers meets weekly with clients both at the children's center, 1183 Monroe Ave., and Hillside's Day Treatment Center, 2000 Lehigh Station Road, Henrietta.

Following Beers' introductory session, children can opt to return for additional classes. Those who continue in the program will have their work published in an anthology, to be compiled at the project's completion.

Poetry writing can be a difficult concept to grasp initially, as a recent Monday session at the children's



S. John Wilkin/Photo Intern  
Todd Beers (left), who works full-time at Writers and Books, serves as the instructor for the Hillside Poetry Project. Here he discusses the finer points of creative writing with Aaron at the Hillside Children's Center in Rochester.

center revealed.  
"This is hard," said 17-year-old Gerry.

"Nobody said it was like eating a piece of pie," replied Beers.

Beers, however, encouraged the six youths, telling them that if each person's feelings were reflected in his or her writing, it didn't matter if anybody else understood the poem's meaning. "As long as it comes from you, it's got to be good," he said.

Gerry later told the *Catholic Courier* that his initial stab at poetry was "a little strange, but it was kind of good

for the first time." When asked if he might return for future sessions, Gerry replied cheerfully, "Oh, sure."

Beers emphasized that even though poetry is an intensely personal craft, he also respects the clients' privacy.

"I'm not going to pry into their personal lives at all, because they're not asking about my personal life. We've all got a story," he said. "I don't care if they write about flowers or God or Satan or trees or love or hate. I just want to let them know they can get something out of writing about their feelings."

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I'll never forget my first two-wheeler.  
I first saw it leaning up against the garage -  
shiny red and bigger than life.  
It was beckoning me, daring me to hop on. But  
I was only five years old, and I was a little  
afraid.  
My friends rode by as I stood there in self  
doubt. They looked so safe on three wheels. I  
told myself, it's only a bike, I can handle this.  
So I mounted my fear, gripped the handlebars  
and pedaled. I was a little shaky at first. But I  
wanted to fly so badly, so I hung on. And  
before I knew it I was soaring.  
My friends stared in envy as I rode past, and  
they tried to follow me. But I was gone...  
Many bike rides later, it's now time for me to  
choose my high school. Slick brochures sit on  
my desk, beckoning me to read them. But I'm  
only twelve years old, and I'm a little afraid.  
Some of my friends are going off the same high  
school. Safety in numbers, I guess.  
But this is my education, and I have to decide  
what's right for me. I'm an individual, a  
risk-taker. I never forgot how to ride that bike.  
And I never forgot the lesson that first ride  
taught me. I don't just follow the crowd.  
I lead it.

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