

Creative Writing at Carnegie Mellon

Welcome to the second issue of the Carnegie Mellon Creative Writing Newsletter. In the past year, the Creative Writing Program has reached two long-term goals—the opening of the Gladys Schmitt Creative Writing Center, and the hiring of additional faculty in poetry—and now we are setting out to accomplish a third important goal: raising funds to help establish a number of enrichment programs for our students.

In January, we held a grand opening celebration for the new Gladys Schmitt Creative Writing Center, attended by over one hundred alumni, faculty, and current students. Gladys Schmitt founded the Creative Writing Program in 1968 and taught at Carnegie Institute of Technology from 1942 until her death in 1972.

She took a genuine interest in her students' development, even holding literary salons in her home to help create a community of writers. Our new space gives the community of writers here (including alumni) a literary salon of their own where they can read, gather, and discuss their work. The Schmitt Center is located in Baker Hall 260 (former location of the H&SS Dean's office).

In the same month, we added two poets to our faculty: Anthony Butts, whose first book, *Fifth Season*, was published by New Issues Press, and Terrance Hayes, whose first book, *Muscular Music*, was published by Tia Chucha Press. Both Butts and Hayes were prominently featured in Kevin Young's important anthology, *Giant Steps: the New Generation of African American Writers*.

Our latest initiative involves a fundraising campaign to support a series of new programs to help our current students connect to the larger writing community outside of CMU in vari-

**Jim Daniels,
Creative Writing
Program
Director, and
alumnus Joe
Wardone
celebrate the
opening of the
Gladys Schmitt
Creative Writing
Center on
January 25,
2001.**



ous ways. We would like to sponsor trips to gatherings of writers, such as the annual Associated Writing Programs Conference, to help students to see, meet, and hear a wide range of writers and to consider what their own next steps might be as writers. We also hope to help fund out-of-town internships for students, to start an alumni speaker series, and to fund more outreach programs to help students connect to the Pittsburgh community and mentor younger writers.

We realize that our alumni are relatively young, and not wealthy, so we are not asking for huge sums of money. The number of donors is more important to us than any dollar figure as a measure of alumni support. Please consider giving what you can, when you can, to let us know we have the commitment and support of our alumni for what we have done and for what we continue to try to do. Please make checks payable to Carnegie Mellon University and write CREATIVE WRITING in the memo section of the check and make sure CW is written on the outside of the envelope.

We are also looking for donations of books and literary journals, particularly those that include the work of alumni. If you are interested in what

we already have, we are in the process of putting our creative writing library online as a link to the creative writing website, which can be found through the main Carnegie Mellon University site.

In addition, we are also continuing to build our alumni database to help current students see what our alumni are doing and to help them figure out what they want to do. If you have not sent in an alumni survey form, or if you need to update your information, please send the enclosed form to my attention. We have also put together an email distribution list to keep in touch with alumni between issues of the newsletter, so please include your current email address.

Finally, we welcome you all to stop by the Schmitt Center next time you are in town and meet our new faculty!

Jim Daniels
Program Director

No. 2, 2001

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Gladys Schmitt Creative Writing Center Celebrates Opening

Members of the Carnegie Mellon University Creative Writing community gathered on January 25th to celebrate the grand opening of the Gladys Schmitt Creative Writing Center.

Jim Daniels, Director of the Creative Writing Program, described the new area as “a space to create” and encouraged students to view it as “their home on campus.”

Daniels noted that books and literary journals would always be available to read in the new room. Plush couches, bookcases, and standing lamps highlight the new addition.

“It’s comfortable and relaxing,” said Walter McKrimger, a 1997 Creative Writing graduate. “It’s an environment that’s very conducive to relaxed reading.”



Members of the Creative Writing community at Carnegie Mellon enjoy the new Gladys Schmitt Creative Writing Center.

Everyone in the crowd during the festivities expressed their delight regarding the newest addition to the Creative Writing Program.

“This gives our students a great place to gather and develop a real spirit of community,” said Jane McCafferty,

who teaches in the Program. “I can already see it happening.”

Peter Oresick, adjunct professor, said the new addition was very positive and “a good step forward” for the Program. He noted that the location could serve as a focal

point for writers and poets during their tenure at Carnegie Mellon. Oresick also said that the aesthetics were very pleasing and could only contribute to the creative impulses of student poets and writers.

Kim Smaczniak, a junior Technical Writing major, echoed several of the same comments, adding that the new wing was very accommodating. She also noted that it greatly improved the office atmosphere.

“Daniels has been working for a long time, and I’m really impressed with how nicely it has come along,” said Maureen McGranaghan, a 1999 Creative Writing graduate. “Everyone in the Program can have some space now, and that wasn’t possible in the past.”

Margaret Cyert, widow of

Carnegie Mellon students can use the computer work stations located in the Gladys Schmitt Creative Writing Center.



former University President Richard Cyert, said the addition was wonderful. “Gladys Schmitt would have been so pleased and impressed.”

Cyert added that Schmitt had a great dedication to several programs on campus, but the Creative Writing Program was one in which she took

special pride.

Daniels and the entire Creative Writing community encourages everyone to stop by and take a look at the new space. Everyone is welcome to come in to read, write or simply enjoy some of the atmosphere for themselves.

Carnegie Mellon University Press Enjoys Success

Sharon Dilworth, Associate Professor of English, started the Carnegie Mellon Series in Short Fiction in 1999.

Initially, she approached Gerald Costanzo for advice. Costanzo, Professor of English and Director of Carnegie Mellon University Press, has been publishing the Carnegie Mellon Poetry Series since 1975.

Dilworth said Costanzo began the Poetry Series for the same reasons she wanted to begin the fiction series: to publish many excellent writers who were finding it difficult to get their work published.

“Almost every short fiction writer I knew had a collection they could not find a home for,” Dilworth added.

Through a variety of fund-raising events and readings, she managed to raise the \$15,000 she would need to begin the Series in Short Fiction.

To date, four of the ten books she has published have been favorably reviewed in the *New York Times*. All the books have been widely reviewed in journals and newspapers throughout the country. Pamela Painter’s collection, *The Long and Short of It*, was a Wordsworth bestseller.

This is noteworthy given that the allocated advertising funds for the Series in Short Fiction represent a small percentage of its overall budget. Each author assumes greater responsibility in promoting their works through public readings in both commercial and academic settings.

Students consider manuscripts, format the texts, proofread, and help with marketing. These

students earn credit for the Editing and Publishing course, and their experience often facilitates finding jobs in publishing.

Recent graduate Becky Cowser moved from Carnegie Mellon University Press to television’s NBC in New York, where she currently works.

Creative Nonfiction hired 2001

graduate Mercer Bufter, who learned much about literary publishing while working for the Press.

Sharon Dilworth looks forward to publishing many more books throughout the years, and no doubt short story writers and readers everywhere are grateful.

Faculty Updates

Jane Bernstein’s essay “Rachel Flies Alone” appeared in the summer 1999 issue of *The Massachusetts Review*. Another essay, “On Forgiveness,” is scheduled for the “Lives” column in the *New York Times Magazine*. Professor Bernstein’s memoir, *Bereft – A Sister’s Story*, was published by North Point Press.

Gerald Costanzo has taught at Carnegie Mellon for over thirty years. He founded Carnegie Mellon University Press in 1975. His poems and articles about poetry have appeared in *American Poetry Review*, *The Nation*, *Ploughshares*, *The Georgia Review*, *North American Review*, and many other magazines. He co-edited *American Poetry: The Next Generation* (Carnegie Mellon University Press 2000) with Jim Daniels and edited *The Devins Award Poetry Anthology* (University of Missouri Press) in 1998.

Jim Daniels’ first book of short fiction, *No Pets*, was published by Bottom Dog Press in 1999. Professor Daniels and Professor Gerald Costanzo co-edited *American Poetry: The Next Generation*, an anthology of younger American poets. Daniels’ next book of poems, *City Pool*, will be published by New Issues Press in 2002.

Sharon Dilworth’s first collection of short stories, *The Long White*, won the Iowa Award for Short Fiction and was later published in trade paperback with W. W. Norton & Company. Her second collection, *Women Drinking Benedictine*, was published by Ohio State University Press in 1998. She is the editor of the Carnegie Mellon Series in Short Fiction.

Carol Hamilton has a Ph.D. in English from Berkeley and an MFA in Creative Writing from Vermont College. Her poems have appeared in recent issues of *The Paris Review*, *Salmagundi*, *Cimarron Review*, and *Cumberland Poetry Review*. She has published two chapbooks, *Xenophilia* and *Fortune Cookies*.

Jane McCafferty won the 1992 Drue Heinz Award and the 1993 Great Lakes New Writers Award for her book *Director of the World and Other Stories*. Her novel, *One Heart*, was published in 1999 by HarperCollins. She received a Pushcart Prize in 2000 for her story, “Berna’s Place,” published in *Witness*.

Hilary Masters’ most recent book is *Montaigne’s Tower*, a collection of essays published last year by the University of Missouri Press. Author of many works of fiction and non-fiction, Masters is currently finishing a new novel.

Martin Luther King, Jr. Writing Contest

For the second year in a row, the Carnegie Mellon Creative Writing Program sponsored a writing contest for high school and college students as a way to commemorate Martin Luther King, Jr. Day.

Students were asked to write poems, stories, and essays that in some way addressed the issue of race in America.

The winners of the contest read their work aloud on Martin

Luther King, Jr. Day at Carnegie Mellon.

Jim Daniels, who launched the contest last year, hopes it will continue to be an annual event.

He sees how the event brought together high school students, their teachers and principals and parents with Carnegie Mellon students and faculty, enlarging both groups' sense of what community is.

What is most interesting about

the event is to hear the various approaches students take toward the issue of race.

The winners are writers who manage to pack power into their work without resorting to polemics.

They are storytellers, attesting to the fact that stories, poems, and essays can be explicitly political without sacrificing craft.

CMU Continues Mentor Relationship

For the second consecutive year, Carnegie Mellon student poets worked with students from CAPA, the Pittsburgh public high school for the Creative and Performing Arts.

Jim Daniels' Advanced Poetry Workshop students each mentored one intermediate or advanced high school writer, taught by Kristin Kovacic, a Carnegie Mellon graduate herself. The Carnegie Mellon students gained valuable teaching experience by creating their own writing assignments and meeting five times during the semester to mentor their student.

"The experience inspires the older students to think more deeply about their own process as writers," said Kovacic.

Many say this teaching has stimulated their own writing. It's been a great way to connect to the community of Pittsburgh beyond the University. For the high school students, getting critiques of their work from people close to their own age is exciting. The college students present them

possibilities as to what the next step might be for them as writers. At least one CAPA student will be applying to Carnegie Mellon in the fall.

Daniels says he sees "an instant kinship" between the high school and college writers. He hopes to do the program every year. At the year's end, this program culminates in a reading where both Carnegie Mellon and CAPA students participate.

Last year's reading attracted a full house in the Adamson Wing. This year's reading was held on May 2, at Barnes & Noble in Squirrel Hill.

The poetry of all the students was compiled in a chapbook that was made available at the reading.



Pictured from left to right: Jim Balzer (CAPA student), Sarah Dunn (CMU student), and Lara Hughes (CAPA student).

Under the Spotlight

Creative Writing Graduate Visits Africa

Alumni

Shannon Gibney, currently in her second year at Indiana University's Master of Fine Arts Program, graduated from Carnegie Mellon in 1997 with a double degree in Creative Writing and Spanish.

She visited West Africa (primarily Ghana) from September 1997 to May 1998, on an H&SS Alumni Study/Travel Award.

Her project was to gather information for a short story collection examining points of intersection and disjunction between African and American experiences.

"As you can imagine, this is a pretty broad and open-ended topic, and I am still very much immersed in it today," said Gibney. "I'm currently writing and revising many stories, as well as a screenplay, that came out of this trip and the research it involved."

Gibney lived with a Ghanaian family in the city and in a village. She took a barge across the Volta Lake, interviewed administrators, officials, and visitors of the slave castles. Additional tasks included talking to a woman at a witch camp, speaking with Liberian refugees who lived at a United Nations refugee camp in Ghana; and investigating the phenomenon of Ghanaian/Ukrainian marriages and their dissolution.

"I would wholeheartedly recommend that creative writing

students take advantage of the opportunity to travel and experience other cultures whenever and wherever possible," added Gibney.

"So many of my experiences in West Africa inform and shape my writing and its development now – to such an extent that I can't really remember what I was writing before I went. I think that my work lacked an intensity, a focus, and a purpose before I traveled and began asking myself hard questions about

"I would wholeheartedly recommend that Creative Writing students take advantage of the opportunity to travel..."

the purpose of my writing, what good it could do for me, or anyone else for that matter."

Gibney said one of her professors at Indiana University, Tony Ardizzone, is always saying that fiction writers, especially, are mining the same narrow stylistic and subject fields: "we live in an age where the third-person limited narrative of the botched, urban love affair (told in an ironic

tone) prevails. Venturing outside of one's own, always limited, experience can help bring new subjects and approaches to subjects in our literary lives," she added.

"The most rewarding part of the trip was realizing that I had, as an African American, been romanticizing my relationship to Africa and Africans, and that part of my goal as a writer is to complicate this relationship on the page," Gibney explained.

She said the most difficult part for her was accepting her own limitations as a human being – coming to terms with the fact that there are limitations to shared experience and communication and that both Africans and African Americans have a lot of work to do before they can approach each other honestly and openly.

"I would definitely make the trip again – in fact, the next time I have the chance, I would like to visit eastern or southern Africa (especially before all the lions and other wildlife disappear)."

Gibney noted, "I am always suspect of the American/Western urge to go 'save people' in developing countries – especially after this trip, so I would have to say that the only substantial difference I hope I made was in my own life."

She said she returned home exhausted, but also excited about the challenge of how to

Creative Writing Welcomes New Faculty Members

write a place for “our somewhat common, somewhat contradictory experiences as people of African descent.”

Gibney said that she has learned a lot from her trip to Africa and chose to pass along some advice.

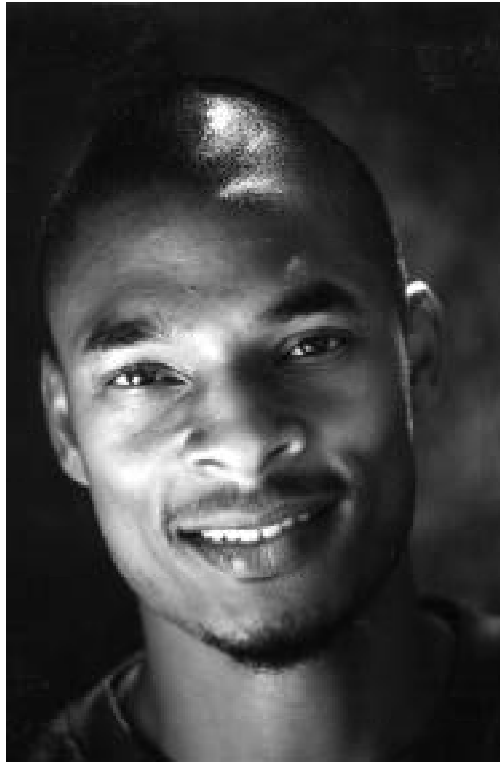
“Don’t let anyone (especially yourself – we are often our own worst enemies...) define what is possible of what you ‘should’ do in terms of your writing or your career,” Gibney said.

“My family and close friends have always been incredibly supportive of my choices, but I still had plenty of people ask me what I was going to do with a degree in creative writing before and as I graduated.”

“My answer was to spend a year in West Africa, teach Spanish to kindergarten through fifth graders at Shadyside Academy in Pittsburgh, and enter an MFA program,” Gibney noted.

“In other words: you can do whatever you want with a [Creative Writing] degree,” said Gibney.

“One other piece of advice: keep writing and keep reading the best new work in your field. This gets more and more difficult as other responsibilities impinge on your time, but you have to be fairly militant about it or nothing will get written or read,” she added.



Two poets were recently added to the Creative Writing faculty: Anthony Butts (below), whose first book, *Fifth Season*, was published by New Issues Press, and Terrance Hayes (left), whose first book, *Muscular Music*, was published by Tia Chucha Press.



Under the Spotlight

CW Graduates in the Peace Corps

Alumni

For most students, graduating from college means entering the work force or going on to graduate school; however, several Carnegie Mellon Creative Writing graduates have found a less-traveled path.

"I wanted the adventure of going to a new country and learning a new culture," said Erin Gay, a 1999 CMU Creative Writing major who joined the Peace Corps after she graduated.

"My senior year, I didn't make a big effort searching for a job and I wasn't ready for graduate school. When I thought about why I didn't feel any motivation to look for a job, I realized that none of the professional jobs I was exposed to really interested me. Volunteer work allowed me to have a few extra years separation from the workforce and school while doing something that made a difference."

Gay's Peace Corps assignment took her to Malawi, a small country in southeast Africa, where she taught mathematics and history in a rural community.

"For the first three months, the group I arrived with went through an intensive language, culture, and technical training," Gay said, adding, "after the training we were sworn in as volunteers and went to different villages throughout the country."

She lived on the school

grounds in a brick house with a tin roof, which was located in a village that was a three-hour truck ride from the nearest city.

"No one in the area had electricity or running water," Gay said. "I learned to teach through trial and error."

Gay said the Peace Corps training was a good introduction to the Malawi school system, but she added that the problems were hard to visualize until she was in

***Most people who
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the impact they will
make...***

the situation.

"Many volunteers don't actually believe in the prevalence of students sleeping with their teachers, cheating on exams, or the low work ethic in both the teachers and students."

"I learned that I had to start without any expectations in order to see what was around me."

"I learned that the basics of teaching are the same everywhere: every school has students who need an extra push, fair discipline is always respected, and that teaching is more about pa-

tience than techniques," she added.

Gay was hesitant to endorse volunteer work for everyone, especially the work she chose.

"It is a good experience, but you have to be ready for it. I really enjoyed the traveling and exposure to a different lifestyle. Every day seemed to be exciting, and yet I think back and remember the days as being really simple. I lived fifty yards from the school, a five-minute walk from the market, and everywhere people were willing to help. I had a lot of solitude in the evenings to concentrate on my writing and think through the day."

Gay said she would volunteer again, but she would make sure that the country was a "good fit" and added that another person to share the experience would make it more worthwhile.

"Most people who join Peace Corps are idealistic about the impact they will make," Gay said. "After a month or two, the realization sinks in that the change is slow and the greatest change will occur in the volunteer. Malawi schools are overcrowded, the students don't have the necessary learning resources, [and] teachers are greatly underpaid."

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Making the subjects she taught accessible and showing compassion were two of Gay's primary focuses.

"Only five percent of all seniors pass their exit exams, and, therefore, most students don't feel hope for academic success," Gay added.

She said she tried a number of techniques to make the experience better for her and for her students.

"At the beginning of the year, I gave a speech to my classes about how I didn't expect them all to pass the senior level exam, but I did want them to learn math as a tool to help them if they ever owned a business, needed to budget a bank account, or just to be smarter," said Gay.

Gay tried to make classes fun, stayed after class to help students, and even told a few corny jokes along the way to lighten the

mood. "On several occasions, I had students come up to me as I walked to the market and tell me they didn't do well in math, but wanted to learn it just to be smarter, and I could tell that my speech had stuck with them. I hope the difference I made was to open students up to learning, giving them encouragement and practice."

Student Poetry Highlights Semester Reading Schedule



Junior Sabrina Small reads during one of the monthly gatherings where students showcase their work in the new writing center.

Under the Spotlight

CW Graduates in The Peace Corps

Alumni

The choice of going into the Peace Corps is often very emotional and thought-provoking.

Aimee Beal, a 1994 Carnegie Mellon Creative Writing graduate, said, "My parents met in the Peace Corps in Bolivia in '65, so I had always known about the program. I didn't consider it seriously, though, until I found myself graduating from CMU without a clear plan for the future. I knew I wanted to go to graduate school eventually, but in the meantime I wanted some worthwhile and life-altering experience."

Beal said that "helping people" was at the core of her motivation, but she realizes that the best way she could help others was through making herself more capable and enlightened on the individual level.

"There has to be some selfishness involved in joining the Peace Corps," Beal said. "Otherwise it might be hard to complete two years' service." Beal noted that her decision was not completely selfish as she certainly didn't choose the easiest or most glamorous position.

For her experience, Beal taught English in a public high school in the prefecture (county) of Mandiana in Guinea, West Africa, to classes of eight to thirty students. Additionally, Beal wrote exams, attended teachers' meetings, and served as a constant presence at

school performances.

"I lived in a hut with a thatched grass roof. I helped with a community garden which a previous volunteer had established. I hung out with friends, people in the market, kids... all sorts of different people.

I traveled all over the country and to neighboring Mali, and saw more amazing things than I could possibly say here." Beal also said her diet was something that changed while she was abroad.

"I ate all sorts of wild and fantastic things, from the sublime perfectly ripe mangos, and plantains fried in red palm oil, to the most frightening: roasted termites," she added.

Beal's other experiences ranged from the horrific to the exciting. An attempted military coup was an experience she said she would like to forget, but the trips to a Liberian refugee camp in southern Guinea and sitting out on a national teachers' strike were experiences she never wants to lose.

"I learned how to bargain for fabric, and how to argue with taxi drivers and when to quit arguing with taxi drivers," Beal confessed. "I learned to speak Malinke, more or less, and how to use my Malinke to strike up conversations with all sorts of people."

Beal also said she got malaria, but added that it wasn't too

dangerous and took overnight taxi rides through the mountains, which she admitted were fairly risky. She said more of her experiences would be outlined in her book of poetry that she hopes to get published.

She said she would recommend the experience to other students interested in such an adventure, but added that it certainly wasn't for everyone. Students need to research the location and culture they might want to visit before they decide to make the trip.

"In Guinea we had a fairly low rate of volunteers leaving early, before the end of the two years, but still there was a solid double-handful of people who didn't finish for one reason or another," Beal explained.

"Don't go thinking it's all easy and fun, and don't go thinking that you're going to save the world. Either way, you'll probably be disappointed. But if someone has an interest, and isn't too [accustomed] to running water, then I'd definitely recommend it. Heck, it changed my life."

Beal had a number of unique experiences during her overseas venture, but said that some of the "smaller things" were what she remembers the most.

"One thing I was forced to learn in Guinea was to value the minutiae of life," Beal said. "The most rewarding times, for me, were the many hours just hanging out with

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friends and strangers, my neighbors, people I'd meet waiting for taxis. Talking with people, finding out about their lives and telling them something about mine, became the highlight of a day."

One of her closest friendships developed with her neighbor, Fanta Sangare, who had three kids: Sekou, Bebe and the baby, Abou.

"The older two would spend hours in my hut, looking through my books and magazines, drawing, singing in Malinke, French and even English," Beal added. "There are so many wonderful people in Guinea, and I'm really lucky to have spent so much time with them." Beal said she would consider going back to the country at some point, but was doubtful about a return trip in the near future.

"Probably not any time soon, though I might reconsider after I retire or something - it might be interesting to work with adults in some kind of extension program, or something," Beal explained.

"But I don't think I would gain anything by trying to repeat the same experience: you can only be young, naive and infinitely energetic once.

"I wouldn't mind returning in a professional capacity, or perhaps develop the country's small publishing industry. I'd love to give Guinean writers more opportunities to be heard, and to encourage writ-

ing in a country where literacy has been a real struggle." Beal added.

Beal also mentioned she would like to return as a tourist to continue to study Djembe drumming and to visit the country.

Even though she greatly enjoyed the experience and was optimistic about the adventure, she was hesitant to quantify the impact she had.

"This was often a source

"I ate all sorts of wild and fantastic things, from the sublime perfectly ripe mangos... to the most frightening: roasted termites,"

of frustration, because it's so hard to see many tangible results," she explained.

"Why does anyone need to learn English, anyway? Still, I think my students truly appreciated the opportunity which English could afford them, not to mention that they need it to pass the national examinations."

For a year Beal said that she was the only English teacher in the school because one left, and it took a while to replace him because there are not enough teach-

ers in the country.

"If I hadn't been there, the students wouldn't have learned English at all," she added.

"So that's tangible. In my interactions with people, again, the results are hard to see, but I think it's truly valuable for all people to be exposed to other cultures."

I had the advantage in that I was there, in the middle of a very foreign culture - an advantage which most of my Guinean friends will never have. Still, I'd like to think that they learned something about Americans and the world through me. In spite of my doubts about my individual efficacy, and there are many, I believe that, dollar for dollar, the Peace Corps is the best spent foreign aid money that the U.S. gives."

Beal continued: "There's no panacea for the problems that a country like Guinea faces, but the Peace Corps works at the grass-roots level, touching the individuals who really need it, rather than the governments, which aren't exactly starving, all for 'relatively' little cost. So, overall, I feel that what I did was worthwhile."

Share Your News

We want you to keep in touch! Please share news about your work and your family with your Carnegie Mellon University friends and classmates.

Simply fill out this form and return it to us so that we can release your updates information in the next edition of the Carnegie Mellon Creative Writing Newsletter.

Please send your news to Professor Jim Daniels, Creative Writing Program, Baker Hall, Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh PA 15213. Or you can fax information to Jim at 412.268.7989 or email him at <jd6s@andrew.cmu.edu>

Student Updates

Kevin Gonzalez's "Noche de Bohemia Frente al Man" appeared in *Puerto del Sol*, Spring 2001 and "Self Portrait Without Diego" in *Carnegie Mellon Magazine*, summer 2001.

Karen Rigby's poem "Sunflower Prayer" was published in the *Mid-American Review*, Spring 2001.

Name _____ Graduation Year _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Email _____

Phone (home) _____ Phone (work) _____