

EMBRACING MULTICULTURALISM

People have gathered on these steps

By David Madden

Since 1996, the Academy of American Poets has set aside April to salute poetry's "integral role in our culture" and to assert that "poetry matters." The Academy celebrates poetry's central artistic and cultural role by issuing a unique annual commemorative poster based on an image and a quotation by an American poet.

This year's poster recognizes "raising the boats" by African American poet Louise Clifton (1936-2010). It depicts a young African American girl sailing through the air on a dive into the water by Jack Wong, an award-winning children's illustrator. The poster quotes Clifton's words, "May you in your innocence/sail through this to that." It is inspiring.

Since Westerly ARC's beginnings in 2020, poetry has been a cornerstone of our group's community-building efforts. It has fostered creativity, strengthened friendships, and facilitated the sharing of ideas. It binds, challenges, and inspires us; a poetry share has become a regular part of ARC's monthly programming.

This year, ARC events have emphasized the arts in new ways - a groundbreaking African American art exhibition at the Artists' Cooperative of Westerly, professional programming supported by the Washington Trust Foundation at the Westerly Library, and a screening and discussion of Ava DuVernay's movie *Origin* at the United Theater (based on Pulitzer Prize-winning author Isabelle Wilkerson's trailblazing work *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontent*).

For ARC, the arts—literary, visual, or

differences, see our humanity, and respond with empathy and compassion.

Our column this month features an original piece by Westerly Multicultural Committee member David Madden, a resident, retired teacher, community volunteer, member of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), husband, father, grandfather, and published poet.

This piece, written last year, expresses ARC's mission, goal, and solidarity with America's dedication to the ideals of equity, justice, and freedom for all in our community.

People Have Gathered on These Steps

*For over three years,
since May of 2020 to be precise,
people have gathered on these steps
to raise their voices
in a variety of strong emotions,
to sing, to play instruments,
to pray, to hold up signs
expressing heartfelt longing,
to advocate on behalf of justice,
to urge this country to live up
to the ideals it has always espoused
in principle, but not always in practice.*

*In January's biting cold, in July's
blistering heat,
in pelting snow, in pouring rain,
in brilliant sun and blustery wind,
people have gathered on these steps,
perhaps inspired to be here
by a great cloud of witnesses
composed of men and women such as
Frederick Douglass, Rosa Parks, John
Lewis,
Coretta Scott King, Bayard Rustin,
Susan B. Anthony,
Medgar Evers, James Meredith,
Shirley Chisholm,*

Cesar Chavez.

*People have gathered on these steps
as others once did at the Lincoln Memorial
on August 28, 1963 in Washington D.C.
a much larger gathering then and there
but the purpose here and now is the same
for those who meet today also seek
to bring ever closer that day when,
in the words of the prophet Amos,
"justice will roll down like water
and righteousness like an ever-flowing
stream,"
that day Martin Luther King, Jr. told us
must come before we will be satisfied,
that day when all God's children
will at last hear freedom ring.*

Madden's words inspire us to remain focused on our community's treasures talents, history, and people — all people. As we continue creating space to engage, educate, and empower, we invite the community to join us as we honor and celebrate Juneteenth in two months. Our theme is "Freedom to Celebrate: Honoring our Community." We will celebrate folks who have made a difference in Westerly and beyond, as well as honor our shared democratic freedom to make our voices heard in upcoming political arenas.

This column is written by members of the Westerly Anti-Racism Coalition, which embraces multiculturalism to address racism. Geoff Serra is a contributing editor. A community coalition, unaffiliated with any state, national, or international organization, ARC meets on the steps of the Westerly Post Office each Sunday, 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. All are welcome. Learn more and subscribe to ARC's newsletter at westerlyarc.weebly.com. Contact them at westerlyarc@