



Known poets appear at SMCI for writers conference

LEAKESVILLE – Check out this unique event highlighted in the latest edition of the South Mississippi Correctional Institution (SMCI)'s newsletter.



A few months ago, after one of the Area 1 Creative Writing Workshop sessions, guest instructor Dr. Keri Miller and workshop coleader Jay Coker were discussing an article they had read about professional poets visiting prisons in Louisiana. To their knowledge, no such events had occurred in Mississippi. Then the somewhat inevitable question arose: *Why can't we do something like that?* Plans were soon set in motion.

With support from the Mississippi Prison Arts and Education Project directed by Dr. Joe Peterson, Dr. Miller reached out to a number of her colleagues who enthusiastically agreed to take part in the event. Five established and widely published poets joined Dr. Miller, an accomplished author in her own right, for a trip to Leakesville to share their work, their experiences, and their advice for incarcerated writers.

SMCI Director of Programs Lisa Hemdon, working with Mrs. Amanda Huffman and Mrs. Sarah James, provided a welcoming and hospitable setting in Area 1 visitation for both the guests and the residents. An audience of nearly fifty men from all three areas mingled and perused the Spring Art Exhibit before the guests arrived. Despite the rain that had persisted for days, the panel of professional writers arrived on time. Whatever they might have expected when they entered the gates, it was clear that this warm reception caught them by surprise. "This is so nice," noted Dr. Kathryn McKenzie, a poet who had recently earned her PhD

from the University of Southern Mississippi. Mrs. Hemdon greeted the crowd and opened the festivities with a word of prayer. Everyone in attendance was then treated to an elegantly arranged buffet of refreshments and fresh coffee. Even the rain let up.

Mrs. James welcomed all the participants, and Jay introduced the presenters. Dr. McKenzie spoke first, followed by Dr. Andrew McSorley, a Postdoctoral Digital Humanities Scholar at USM. Next, Dr. Christopher Spaide, an Assistant Professor of English at USM, shared his poetry, and then Dr. Miller herself read an excerpt from a novel that she was in the process of writing. Dr. Jennifer Polson Peterson, the first Poet Laureate of Hattiesburg, read from her newest collection of poetry, *Degenerate Era of an Expanding Universe*. Dr. Angela Ball concluded the presentations with selections from *Steeplechase*, the most recent of her seven books of poetry. After a short break, the program continued with a question-and-answer session during which the residents asked the panel about their individual works and the process of becoming a published writer. Finally, the audience broke into small groups, each led by one of the guests, and performed writing exercises that engaged each participant. As the program approached its end, Dr. Miller provided the closing remark, challenging the residents to gather the "scraps" of their experiences and use them to create a unique work of self-expression.

USM's Center for Writers donated several copies of its journal, *Mississippi Review*, so each participant was given one. Exiting visitation with new books, writing tablets, and pens in their hands (and fresh fruit in their bellies), the men of SMCI discussed their favorite moments of the program. Many praised the readings, talking up Dr. McKenzie's personal poem about her daughter and Dr. McSorley's "The Bear" about a business man who turns into the title beast. Others touted Dr. Peterson's love poem, especially since it was dedicated to her husband, Dr. Joe, who runs the Book Club in Area 2. They compared notes on the exercises they did in their small groups and asked when the next conference would happen. The guests, for their part, all expressed an interest in returning. "Next year," said Mrs. Hemdon. "This is our First Annual Writers' Conference."

Spring Writers Conference

