

## Leanne Grabel

Will Receive the **Soapstone Bread and Roses Award**  
International Women's Day, March 8, 2020



**The Soapstone Bread and Roses Award** honors a woman whose work has sustained the writing community. The award, which includes \$1000, will be given at a Soapstone Board luncheon March 6, 2020.

Leanne was born and raised in Stockton, California. She moved to Portland in 1975 after earning a degree in English from Stanford. In a recent interview for *Portland Monthly* Leanne explained: “I moved to Portland because of poetry, to be a poet, to be a member of the poetry community such as it was, is and will probably forever be—vibrant, a little ragtag, sad, slow sometimes brilliant, always cracked open like a raw egg.” On her first visit to Portland she went to the Earth Tavern poetry open mic and knew instantly that it was what she wanted to do. She has been writing, teaching and performing ever since.

During her early Portland years she worked as a writer/columnist, writing teacher, and curriculum consultant for local organizations involved with writing and performance, and for Portland and Clackamas School Districts. With grants from the Regional Arts and Culture Council she began performing her work, including: “*The Lighter Side of Chronic Depression*,” “*Anger: The Musical*,” “*One Woman Shoe*,” and “*The Circus of Anguish & Mirth*.” It was during these years that Leanne first worked with troubled kids; as an editor at a CETA-funded magazine, *PaperRose*, she trained homeless kids in various magazine skills. Eventually she got a teaching credential at PSU in 1980, but ended up

resigning from her first job over conflicts with the school. Recently, a student from that class contacted her to let her know she was the first person who ever gave him positive feedback for his writing.

*Leanne was featured at the first Writers' Series held in Yachats in June 1997. Later she was featured as a solo poet and performed in two choreographed events with a group of touring dancers, writers, and musicians. I invited Leanne to teach a poetry writing and performance workshop for elementary school kids during the summer of 2008 on the Oregon coast. Occasionally, I am still stopped by the parents of those students who tell me of the marvelous, long-lasting effects Leanne had on their children.*

—**Carla Perry**, Founder Writers on the Edge

In 1991, Leanne and her husband Steve Sander founded Café Lena, one of the best known poetry open mic restaurants in Portland, providing a venue to street, beat and local poets for ten years. As she explained in an interview for Oregon ArtsWatch, “The idea was to do a poetry place. The restaurant aspect was secondary...but the cafe turned out to be a restaurant with three meals a day, an in-house baker, and so on and so forth.” The restaurant business was grueling. Operating Café Lena seven days a week while raising their two children, who were under one and four. Leanne remembers driving madly through town to find a babysitter the night of the first open mic. Steve loved the work, but by 2001 Leanne needed a break.

She reactivated her teaching credential and began working as a substitute teacher while attending night school at Lewis and Clark, earning a masters degree in education in 2004, with a special education endorsement. For the next twelve years she worked as a Portland Public Schools language arts and special education teacher in a variety of local treatment centers. “There was a residential lockdown treatment center for teen girls with criminal histories and charges. There was a hospital sub-acute unit for children, ages 6-18, with severe emotional dysregulation, a history of aggression, and suicidal ideation. There was a long-term last-chance rehabilitation center for teenage boys convicted of sexual offenses. Eighty percent of these students were receiving special education services for a variety of disabilities, both academic and emotional. Probably ninety percent of them had physical and sexual trauma in their past. A majority of them were wards of the state and the most common age was 15.” Leanne spent the most time at Rosemont, a lockdown residential treatment center for teenage girls.

“As a writer, and a victim of trauma myself, I knew the act of...writing one’s ugly story—could help—just help. The ugly dissipates with each telling...I knew uncovering a clear, honest voice, and using it, crafting it... could nurture, nourish, amuse, empower, and perhaps, even start to heal them. It had happened for me.” Leanne fundraised for art supplies and somehow got everyone from Dan Wieden (who came many times and donated his designers to frame the girls’ work for a show at Wieden & Kennedy) to Gus Van Sant to come work with her students.

*As a visiting writer in Leanne’s class at Rosemont, it was clear from the moment I walked in that the teenage girls—victims of abuse and now in trouble (Rosemont was a sentencing alternative)—had found someone they could trust, admire, and learn from. Leanne has a rare combination of skills: the highest level of craft, a deep knowledge of literature, and a personality that, humorous and passionate by turns, inspired excitement there, where few others could.*

—**Judith Barrington**, poet, memoirist, teacher

Personal storytelling was forbidden and could result in consequences for the kids, so Leanne had them use metaphor: “If they were a cake, what kind would they be? Why? What kind of filling? What kind of frosting? What kind of cake before treatment? What kind of cake after? Metaphor could inspire deep reflection. And imagination. And connection-making. And metaphor could communicate meaning directly with one image. No personal information needed to be revealed.” She wrote a detailed description of the

method she created, step by step, *Like Butter*, which ends with this sentence: “And they had to envision a future. With details. They had to hope. And they did.”

Recently, several girls contacted Leanne, a decade or so after she left Rosemont. “One asked for grammar editing on a promo piece she was writing for her mushroom grow in Southern Oregon. The others just reached out to tell me they loved me. One was sick and wanted to write before she dies.”

In 2011, she published the chapbook *badgirls* based on her experience with the girls in lockdown. Leanne wrote: “I read them Charles Simic and make them write like Charles Simic. I read them Gertrude Stein and make them write like Gertrude Stein. I make them write daily haiku. Odes to something good. Graphic memoirs. Flash memoirs. Angry chants. Hilarious rants... I'm trying to teach them to love something beautiful, I suppose. To relax and sit and wonder and savor and speak and sing and dance. And especially learn—because that never gets old.”

Later she turned *badgirls* into a multi-media performance directed by Susan Banyas.

*Leanne is...exciting, innovative, with funny bones and a keyboard, a tribal bohemian caretaker of spoken word stories, with a pithy ravenous desire for truth expressed through word and image and voice and glittery outfits.*

—**Susan Banyas**, dancer, writer and performance artist

Also in 2011, Leanne published the memoir *Brontosaurus* which was met with much critical attention.

*Brontosaurus details a rape and abduction that happened while Leanne and two friends were on a road trip to Mexico... Apart from the brutality of the event and the visceral exactitude of the writing, the account gets at something profound that many memoirs of this sort do not—the fact that trauma does not follow a narrative arc, as much as we wish it could...a true resolution is always out of reach... Instead, the memoir reminds us that trauma remains as insidious as liquid itself, filling up spaces, leaking out and spilling over and ultimately influencing our choices, altering our very natures, whether we are aware of it or not... She has prowess over a mic, a piano, a pencil, a paintbrush, a well-curated social media page. She's one of the rare and lucky among us whose skill level can keep up with her vast imagination.*

—**Danielle Vermette**, Oregon ArtsWatch

Since retiring from Portland Public Schools, Leanne has continued to put her energy into poetry, prose, spoken-word performance, teaching, and drawing. She is working on a collection of flash memoirs called *Husband*; she is collaborating with dancer Gregg Bielemeier (one show was in fall 2019; another one is coming fall 2020) and has taken up tap dancing, which will be incorporated into her performances.

*Watching Leanne Grabel take the stage is a breathtaking moment. You can expect her to dazzle with some visual sparkle... As she takes the mic you know she will pause for the slightest moment, for the power that comes from holding silence. And then she will look up and deliver like Lenny Bruce's lost twin. Like Jack Benny's missing cousin. Like Dorothy Parker's confidant. You will laugh. You will cry. You will want to rage with her. And when she's finished illuminating her secrets you will be inspired to find a way to share yours.*

—**Julie Keefe**, 2012 Portland Creative Laureate

Leanne is looking for opportunities to work with women in their 80s and 90s who want to tell their stories, similar to the work she has done at Rose Villa, a senior living campus in Portland. She will be teaching a class on graphic flash fiction for Mountain Writers, and one at the NW Library primarily

focused on the homeless population. “I have always been attracted to sadness, had a special empathy for those who are struggling. Why? Hmm. Either genetic (the long-suffering Jews) or because of early trauma. I don’t know.”

**Leanne Grabel** lives in Northeast Portland with her husband Steve Sander. She has published twelve books and created five spoken word recordings. In addition to her work with at-risk youth, she has an established and long history as a teacher and performance artist with many literary organizations that include, in addition to those previously mentioned: Menucha Community Arts, Caldera Arts, Wordstock, Literary Arts, Neighborhood Arts Program, Soapstone, Portland Impact, KBOO, MediaRites, Community Arts, Saturday Academy, Community of Writers, Rural Writers, Artrageous and Cool School. Her work has appeared in many publications including: *Florida Review*, *Tishman Review*, *Cirque*, *Bending Genres*, *Portland Review of Books*, *Paperback Jukebox*, *Istperson.org*, *Portland Tribune*, *Stanza*, *Rain City Review*, *Cream City Review*, *Tishman Review*, *The Opiate*, *Cloudbank*, *VoiceCatcher*, *Badlands Literary Review*, *Gobshite Quarterly*, *Another Chicago Magazine*, *Blue Lake Review*, *Nervous Breakdown*, *Clinton Street Quarterly*, *Fireweed*, *Willamette Week*, *Talus & Scree*, *Bluestocking*, *Anodyne*, *Portland Monthly*, *The Oregonian*, and *WomenSports*. The upcoming issue of *The Opiate* will publish the last four chapters of *Tainted Illustrated*. ([www.leannegrabel.com](http://www.leannegrabel.com))

To see some of Leanne’s recent work:

<https://theopiatemagazine.com/2016/03/18/the-day-my-mother-died-by-leanne-grabel/>