

Poet discovers alleged plagiarism



Area poet Kathy Figueroa helped expose charges of plagiarism against Canada's parliamentary poet laureate and Governor General Award-winner Pierre DesRuisseaux. / SUBMITTED

By Jim Eadie

A local Bancroft area poet has garnered international attention after inadvertently discovering and reporting alleged plagiarism by Canada's former parliamentary poet laureate and Governor General Award-winning poet Pierre DesRuisseaux, now deceased. "I was looking at Canada's national poet laureate website, and I saw that some of the former poet laureate [DesRuisseaux's] material was listed there," Kathy Figueroa told *Bancroft This Week*. "I read the translation from the French for the poem *J'Avance*, and I was completely astounded – it was derived from Maya Angelou's poem *Still I Rise* – I recognized it immediately. I was shocked – dismayed – incredulous."

Figueroa then contacted the Office of the Poet Laureate to report her discovery. She noticed the poem was pulled immediately from the website. She also reported the information to Plagiarism Alert where a British investigator and poet Ira Lightman subsequently determined that other poems attributed to DesRuisseaux had plagiarized well-known poets such as Dylan Thomas and Tupac Shakur, according to CBC News. He reported his findings to the British *Guardian* newspaper, giving Figueroa credit for her critical part in the discovery.

As a poet herself, plagiarism is not something new. In fact, Figueroa has suffered from theft of her work on several occasions in the past.

"This is not trivial," she said. "It is very dismaying when your work has been taken by someone else – and especially if that person has a respected name. There is a feeling of helplessness, and it impacts negatively on the person's creativity. It can leave you disenchanted – you don't feel like writing anymore."

In 2006 Figueroa began publishing some of her poems in Bancroft newspapers. She got a very good response.

"I would run into someone and they told me that they cut my poem out of the newspaper, and taped it to their refrigerator," she said. "It can be isolated in Paudash, so I write poems. They are part of my life, people comment to me on them, and we would chat about it."

Figueroa has published five collections of her poetry.

"Poems in these books for the most part come out of the pages of the Bancroft newspapers," she said. "I am very happy with the way my career as a poet is going."

She continues to do poetry readings at the Riverstone, and local spoken word festivals. Her net, however, is cast wider than just the

Bancroft area.

“In 2015, I appeared at a poetry event in Toronto alongside George Elliott Clarke, the poet laureate of Toronto, raising money for the Great Canadian PoeTrain Tour,” she said. Twenty poets, including Figueroa, travelled on an “epic journey” across western Canada by train to read, sing, sightsee and write about their experiences. Subsequently, she published *The Ballad of the PoeTrain Poeteer*.

“David Flack turned my poem *Come up to Maynooth* into a song and recorded it on his CD *Not Your Typical Average*, which is available at the Old Peterson Gallery in Maynooth,” she said. “The credit that I received as a songwriter has enabled me to join SOCAN [Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers of Canada] in the songwriter category.”

Figueroa is also the poetry editor for *Umbrella* magazine, a publication of the Quinte Arts Council.

“You know, less than one per cent of books published are books of poetry,” she said. “It does not have wide appeal. At one time, parents would read Robert Service poems to their kids at bedtime. There was a love of Robert Service’s work – some people could recite his poems from the top of their heads. Poetry was a lot more respected. In earlier times, it would be an integral part of social gatherings – someone would pull out a fiddle – someone else would recite a poem.”

Figueroa’s books are available at Necessities Retail Store, or Ashlie’s Books in Bancroft.