

## Bringing Out the Poet in Children

by Liz Brown-Lavoie

Before she could reveal the power of metaphor to children, Judith Steinbergh had to release the poet in herself. As a young girl, she loved writing poetry, but because she had never heard of someone making a living as a poet, she went to Wellesley College and, in 1965, left with a bachelor's degree in economics. Halfway through business school in Cleveland, Ohio, however, Steinbergh's life took a turn.

"I saw a television show with the poet Kenneth Koch teaching poetry to some public school kids and I just said: 'This is it. That is what I would rather be doing.' So, little by little, I started to shift. I volunteered in schools for about half a year, trying to learn how to teach students of different ages. I had no education courses or experience," Steinbergh recently told the *Quarterly*.

Since then, Steinbergh has completed a master of arts in education at Lesley College and a teacher certification from Wheelock College. She has made a living by making poetry her life: She writes it, reads it, records it, teaches children how to write it, and their teachers how to teach it. In addition to collaborating on several poetry curriculum guides, Steinbergh has published three volumes of her own poetry and numerous academic articles. She also cofounded (with musician Victor Cockburn) Troubadour, Inc., a nonprofit cultural organization that presents workshops and concerts on poetry and songwriting, offers in-service training for schools and community organizations, and produces audiotapes and CDs of poetry and songs.

At the Bunting Institute, Steinbergh has spent the year conducting research on "Poetry and the Developing Child." What

## COME WITH ME

Come with me to infinity, to the great lands.  
Let us roll our wheels and squeak our squeals  
when we brake.

Come with me, let us live above living  
when God defies gravity,  
when the feeling of dreams comes to you.

Rush to me, rush to me,  
let us go to infinity.

— SCOTT TRANG, GRADE 3



Judith Steinbergh working with students at the Maltahunt School in Boston.

she has found in her research and years of teaching is that through poetry children acquire power over language and are better able to assimilate knowledge, act on it, transform it, and, ultimately, to make it their own: "I think poetry really teaches children about close observation, which is an important skill in almost every subject area."

But is there a poet inside every child? "I think it is like any other discipline; you can learn a lot about it, but some people really have a natural affinity for it," said Steinbergh. "Even so, I can expose children to themes and techniques, just as the art teacher and music teacher do."

Steinbergh recalled one second-grade student she taught eight years ago who really had a natural ear for language. The child wrote poetry incessantly and even made her own little books. Recently, Steinbergh was not surprised to hear the

student's name mentioned by a teacher as an outstanding high school poet.

"This is someone who self-identified as a poet early on. Sometimes the teacher's concept of what a child is capable of is enlarged or changed when they see a child writing poetry," said Steinbergh. "I worked with another third grader who wrote quite a lyrical poem about roller-blading [at left], which gave his teacher an opportunity to see him in a different light."

Steinbergh said her time at the

Bunting has been an opportu-

nity to return to a life of the mind: "This is the ultimate learning place. The temptation is to go to class morning, noon, and night. Last term I audited Helen Vendler's poetry class and Howard Gardner's class on art and mind. This term I've been to several of Stephen

Jay Gould's history of life classes, and heard lectures on modern painting and Irish poetry."

Steinbergh will soon be back in the schools, working with children and, without a doubt, loving it. In one of her books, *Beyond Words: Writing Poems with Children*, Steinbergh alludes to at least part of the reason why:

"I am engaged in helping children to express what they think and feel. I encourage them to articulate their experience, even if this experience might be difficult for them, involving conflict, anger, pain, loss, separation, sexuality, or violence.... It is essential to realize that we are involved in a process which can help us toward greater freedom and also enhance our feeling of responsibility toward others." ■

Liz Brown-Lavoie is senior writer in the Radcliffe Office of Communications.