

Barbara LaMorticella

**Will Receive the first Soapstone Bread and Roses Award
International Women's Day, March 8, 2019**



The Soapstone Bread and Roses Award honors a woman whose work has sustained the writing community. Barbara is being recognized for her decades of hosting Talking Earth on KBOO radio, where she gave both established and new poets a microphone, the numerous readings she organized, including many she taped and broadcast, and the literary magazines and anthologies she edited. The award, which includes \$1000, will be given at a Soapstone board luncheon on March 8, 2019.

Barbara LaMorticella's life as a public poet in Portland began with the Portland Poetry Festival in 1972. Barbara recalled, "The Festival was a wonderful Portland institution that brought poetry luminaries to the city for big readings in Washington Park and sponsored open readings on Festival weekend nights. There was a communal spirit in the air in those years. Everybody came to the open readings. Visiting bigwigs mingled with Portland poets, both tame and wild."

“Barbara LaMorticella’s poetry is magnificent, her radio show welcomed every local poet, as well as visiting “celebrity” poets for 25 years. Her mellifluous voice, well-researched questions, and deep bank of knowledge about poetry, the world, and each writer interviewed, elevated her KBOO shows, educating and delighting listeners and guests. I was lucky to be on her show several times over the years and her enthusiasm and literary intelligence made me feel valued, important and, frankly, brilliant. Her selfless devotion to the poetry scene was also evidenced by her schlepping equipment all over town to record readings--even with a bad hip.

I met Barbara in the mid-70s when she and Judith Barrington and I read together at a Portland Poetry Festival event in the park blocks by PSU. Barbara was cawing. Caw. Caw. I couldn’t believe it. I adored it. Her writing is uncompromised, political, teeming with heart, soul, ethics--everything we are holding onto for dear life in these horrible times of DT.

Barbara and I shared our time together at Soapstone. Barbara arrived with multiple boxes of food to make soups and stews and pasta dishes. Frankly, I was planning to subsist on peanut butter sandwiches.

Barbara LaMorticella is a brilliant light and a pure soul. A rarity. Her contribution to the local poetry scene is unmatched.” —*Leanne Grabel*

Her first public reading was in San Francisco, where she wrote and acted for the San Francisco Mime Troupe, and where she and her husband Robert were founding members of the Diggers, which distributed free food in Golden Gate Park and engaged in various anti-war actions, demonstrations and stunts. “Our modest ambition was to make a new world.”

“I have always admired Barbara LaMorticella’s quirky mind and passionate political convictions in favor of justice. ...This is a woman who worked hard for her bread and who deserves the roses.” —*Penelope Scambly Schott*

They left California in 1968, headed north in an old truck, destination unknown. “It was as we were leaving the city that I began to get really serious about poetry, figuring that it is an art that can be practiced even in isolation and with few resources.” Chance brought them to rural Multnomah County where they raised their son and daughter, and where they lived together until his death last summer.

In 1974, an article in Portland’s underground paper, the Willamette Bridge, described poetry as an elite art. Barbara replied with a letter arguing that the nature of poetry is not elite, but is an art that is both vital and unkillable. To her surprise Marty Cohen, who was then head of the Portland Poetry Festival, reached out and asked her to edit the Portland Poetry Festival anthology.

There was a robust poetry community in Portland in the early 70s, divided between street poets and professional teaching poets. The two camps rarely mingled. Barbara was a young mother living in what was then the backwoods. Apparently poets in the two camps, which were mostly male, felt that one of them should edit the anthology. A few weeks after her editing was announced, several people wrote letters to the Willamette Bridge slamming the Festival because an “unknown Scappoose woman” had been picked.

Barbara relates that Portland women’s bookstores and the women’s writing community embraced her before she was accepted and supported by the larger poetry community. “One thing led to another....” Over the years she has hosted a poetry radio show, organized many poetry readings, co-hosted with Robert Davies, Free Range Poetry, a long-running series at the Northwest Multnomah County library, edited a poetry column in the Alliance, an alternative progressive paper in Portland, gone out with a tape

recorder to record and broadcast events, given free workshops, and organized or participated in a number poetry groups.

"An accomplished poet herself, Barbara LaMorticella has spent decades supporting and promoting the work of other poets. For 25 years she co-hosted "Talking Earth," a KBOO radio program featuring local, regional, and visiting poets reading their work and responding to Barbara's questions. The archives of "Talking Earth" are a history of poetry in Portland during the last 40 or more years! Year after year after year---thanks to "Talking Earth"---the voices of poets went out into the city, finding listeners, finding people who hungered to hear what speaks to us in that language of us at our best. Year after year after year, Barbara carted equipment to campuses and cafes and halls so she could record poets' readings, so she could create a record of the life of poetry in Portland, Oregon. And as she did that, she became an essential element of that life."

—Paulann Petersen

In 2013, Barbara took a five-year break from radio to care for her husband. "My aim on KBOO was to represent the entire spectrum of poetry happening in Portland, not just my friends or my favorite poets or genres. I will be returning to the station in 2019, doing one show every two months, but with a different kind of focus. The poetry scene in Portland is lively and growing, and I have been trusted with a public role in representing and sustaining it. I hope to justify that trust."

Barbara LaMorticella lives in a cabin in the woods outside Portland, Oregon. She has edited or co-edited three collections of Portland poetry including *Portland Lights* in 2000. In 1997, her second collection of poems, *Rain on Waterless Mountain*, was a finalist for the Oregon Book Award and in 2000, she received the first Oregon Literary Fellowship for women writers. Barbara was awarded the Stewart H. Holbrook Literary Legacy Award by Literary Arts in 2005, an award presented to a person or organization in recognition of significant contributions that have enriched Oregon's literary community. She was a winner of the 2005 Bumbershoot Big Book Award, and in 2010 the very first award for poetry presented at the Northwest Poets' Concord gathering on the Oregon Coast. Barbara's poetry has appeared in many anthologies, including *Crossing the River*, *Poets of the Western United States*; *Atomic Ghost: Poets Respond to the Nuclear Age*; *Pacific Northwestern Spiritual Poetry*; *Not a Muse*; *Deer Drink the Moon*, *Poems of Oregon*; *To Topos*, *Poetry International*; *The Mississippi Review* anthology; *Politics and Religion*; *From Here We Speak*, (part of the Oregon Literature Series); *Intimate Kisses*; *Eating the Pure Light: Homage to Thomas McGrath*; *Portland Lights*; *Raising Lilly Ledbetter: Women Poets Occupy the Workspace*; and *She Holds the Face of the World*, the 10th anniversary anthology of the journal *VoiceCatchers*. Her poems have appeared in TriMet's Poetry in Motion program.

I appreciate Barbara's counter-culture insights, her love of the earth, and her support of poetry and poets expressed in the long-running Talking Earth radio program. Her co-edited one-of-a-kind anthology, Portland Lights, published in 2000, was an important contribution to the regional scene. I have been lucky enough to be in more than one poetry group with Barbara over the years. Our take on writing and process sometimes tangles, sometimes harmonizes, sometimes surprises, but affection and appreciation always prevail. She is truly an inspiration and a unique and dear friend.

—Barbara Drake

Since the late 1990s, I have been Barbara's board operator for her poetry show on KBOO-FM, Talking Earth. Her quiet strength shines through, whether interviewing a guest, reading their work or reading her own over the air, or in offering advice to fellow poets and writers. She has truly been a pillar of the Portland Literary Community.

—Patrick Bocarde