

Ellen Goldberg

Will Receive the **Soapstone Bread and Roses Award**

International Women's Day, March 8, 2026

The Bread and Roses Award honors a woman whose work has helped to sustain the Oregon writing community. This year we celebrate **Ellen Goldberg**, a feminist trailblazer who created possibilities for and recognition of women poets in Portland, for her lifetime dedication to poetry, community, and political activism. She will receive a bouquet of roses and a check for \$2000 at a private gathering on March 15, 2026.



Ellen was born and raised in Philadelphia. She started writing in elementary school and wrote all through her high school years at the Philadelphia High School for Girls, where she was the editor of the literary magazine. At Barnard College she studied writing. Named a “Senior Scholar,” she was given a full year to write a book of poetry instead of a regular courseload. Her advisor/mentor was Elizabeth Hardwick and she also studied with Jean Valentine. It was the era of the New York School of Poetry. At Columbia she went to readings and talks by John Ashbery, Kenneth Koch, Frank O’Hara. “I fancied myself or aspired to be one of the poets of the New York School!”

But in college she had become a political activist and had desires to fulfill besides the literary career Elizabeth Hardwick urged her to pursue. “I worked against the Viet Nam War and Columbia University’s

racist policies as a member of SDS—Students for a Democratic Society. Later I was involved in the Women’s and Gay Liberation Movements and my writing became combined with my activism and community organizing. I understood that you could use poetry, especially spoken word, to inspire and rally people. It was ‘cultural work’—using art to promote our ideas and as an organizing tool. As a feminist, I understood that poetry was a major way we re-conceived of ourselves and our lives. Poetry was at the heart of the movement. So being a writer and an activist became woven together.”

After college, in 1971, Ellen moved to Portland and became a member of a writing group offered by the Women’s Liberation School. The group put on readings at the women’s bookstore on Grand Avenue and produced a much-loved anthology, *Naming*. These were the early years of the Second Wave.

Ellen began teaching at Willamette Learning Center (an alternative school, part of Portland Public Schools). “We taught kids who’d dropped out. They were rebels and artists and amazing people. I did a poetry class there and was inspired in my own writing by their openness to pouring their hearts out.” Her friends made a chapbook of her work from this period, *Rocking the Boat*.

In 1972 Ellen and a group of friends who also happened to be alternative schoolteachers and also involved in leftwing politics, anti-war activism and Women’s and Gay Liberation, formed a collective to create The Mountain Moving Café, a non-profit restaurant and political community center in a former paint store at the corner of SE Stark and Cesar Chavez. “We modeled it after La Peña in Berkeley, which was modeled on Chilean centers where a community gathered to socialize, make progressive change and use music and the arts to do that.”

They learned carpentry and together built walls, kitchen counters and cabinets, a stage—all of it. The Mountain Moving Café opened in 1974 and became a crucial fixture in alternative Portland. “Women, men, gay and straight went there to meet friends, eat, dance to live music, enjoy readings, folk dance, talk politics. There was a different event every night of the week. Ellen organized spirited poetry readings. The collective members worked into the small hours of the morning cleaning up after a day of cooking, planning, political discussion, organizing and serving meals.

One night a week was for women only. “That was pretty radical in those days (and technically illegal)—it was the first women-only public space in Portland.” Once on Women’s Night the mayor, who had come for the cheesecake (it was named the best cheesecake in the city that year), was turned away.” The Café supported and nurtured many grass-roots organizations and gave a new generation of lesbians, gay men and activists a community for change-making via art, food and celebration.

The name of the Café came from a 1911 Japanese poem by Yosano Akiko that had been made into a silkscreened poster that was popular in the early days of the Women’s Liberation Movement.

The day the mountains move has come.
I speak, but no one believes me.
For a time, the mountains have been asleep.
But long ago, they all danced with fire.

It doesn't matter if you don't believe this,
my friends, as long as you believe:
All the sleeping women
are now awake and moving.

After working at the Café, Ellen became an apprentice carpenter. “In those days there was outreach for women to become tradespeople.” On her first job, she helped build the Nordstrom building in downtown Portland.

In the early 80s Ellen was awarded a Performing Arts in Public Places grant by The Metropolitan Arts Commission of Portland to perform poetry and teach writing workshops in the schools and places such as halfway houses where women were coming out of prison. She put on large group readings with other women poets—one in particular she remembers, was at the Northwest Service Center, titled “Resistance.”

For years, from the mid-70s through the 90s, Ellen organized poetry readings at the annual International Women’s Day celebrations that were held in PSU’s Smith Hall and later at the YWCA downtown. These were wildly popular, with overflow crowds. She read her poems at rallies and marches, including on the Walk for Love and Justice (from Eugene to Portland, sleeping in churches and synagogues along the way) to protest Measure 9, the 1992 anti-gay ballot measure.

From the mid-80s to early 90s Ellen taught English at Jefferson high school, then studied at the PSU School of Social Work. For the rest of her working life, she was a social worker and did child and family therapy. From this work, she joined Naomi Morena and a group of women to put on The Wayback, an annual celebration of using the arts to heal from abuse. She organized the Wayback poetry reading as part of the event which also included music and visual arts. Her book of poetry, *Meeting Street*, came out at this time.

She is a longtime member of The 29th Street Writers, which puts on readings and events, and has put out a CD, *This Is the Welcome*. In 2012, *Each Perfect One* was chosen as the winner of the Robin Becker Chapbook Contest and was published by Seven Kitchens Press. In 2017 she organized a standing-room-only reading, “Of Course I’m a Feminist” for Soapstone, held on International Women’s Day, with twelve poets. She produced a chapbook of the poems women read that night.

And of course, she’s never stopped writing. She is finishing her latest collection of poetry and hopes to find a publisher soon.

And she’s never stopped being an activist and community organizer. Along with her spouse Izetta Smith, Ellen started the Postcard Party in January 2018, one year into Trump’s first term. It met in person at New Seasons Broadway café and then, after Covid ended the lively socializing at the café, shifted to assembling packets distributed from their home. In 2025 the Postcard Party wrote and mailed about 13,600 postcards.

They choose from organizations working on voting rights, registration, vote by mail, get out the vote, and presidential, senate and congressional races. They also join or create campaigns for other progressive causes and issues such as demanding that Oregon PERS funds not be invested in private prison corporations that maintain inhumane facilities for immigrants and refugees. They respond to events, legislation and boycotts, sometimes sending supportive thankyou's—raising a ruckus on behalf of love and justice. Ellen writes a weekly Postcard Party email to provide humor in the face of despair and inspire a vibrant community of committed activists. One recent email began: "Dear Cruisers, Schmoozers, Callibrators, Salivators, Doozies, Floozies, Giants, Defiants, Devotees, Emotees, Friends and Acquaintances, Comrades in Raininess.

As Ellen said when we interviewed her, "Poetry thrilled me, but my activism drove me, and so the combination has always energized me."