

Worcester poet Dan Lewis dies

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WORCESTER — Dan Lewis had already designed the broadside for the award of the 2017 Stanley Kunitz Medal to Carle Johnson that will take place July 27 at the Worcester Historical Museum.

Lewis knew something about the award, having won it himself last year.

Now he'll be remembered in a tribute and the reading of four of his poems at Thursday's Stanley Kunitz medal event.

Lewis, who had lived in Worcester many years, died Wednesday after a long illness. "He was a good poet and a wonderful man," recalled his friend and fellow Worcester County Poetry Association colleague Rodger Martin.

With his distinctive long white "Walt Whitman" beard, Lewis was a presence in Worcester poetry both at readings and behind the scenes, friends said.

The Stanley Kunitz Medal, awarded by the Worcester County Poetry Association and named after the late Worcester native and former poet laureate of the United States, is given to "a person with a strong Worcester County connection who best exemplifies Stanley Kunitz's lifelong commitment to poetry and poets."

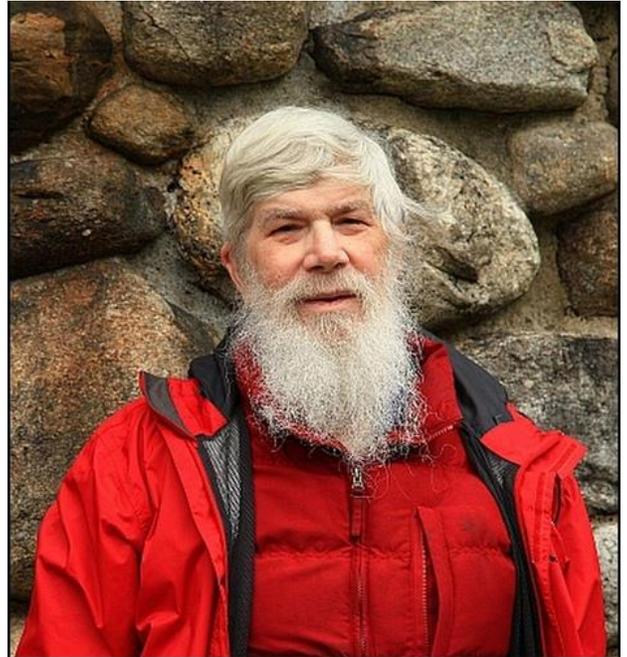
Lewis published four collections of poetry, and was an active volunteer with the WCPA serving as typesetting, graphics and design editor of its Worcester Review publication and designing many of the association's distinctive broadsides celebrating the work of featured poets.

In describing himself Lewis wrote that while his true vocation was poetry, over the years he had "made his living as a retail clerk, milk tester, wire stripper, fish cutter, librarian, typist, freelance editor, and technical writer." He enjoyed living with his wife Ann Lewis on the edge of Patch Reservoir which he described as having "many fine hiking trails through the woods and ponds that abound in the area." Nature was featured in his poetry.

Martin said that Lewis always loved poetry but came to writing his own poems somewhat later in life over the past 30 years or so.

"His poetry was changing right up until the end. He took language and the individual word and it was the words that made his work distinctive. He used them to make these intuitive and metaphorical leaps," Martin said

In his poem "Pike's Peak, May 1997," Lewis wrote, "I somehow didn't understand/ that you must surrender at least/ the world/ to climb alone/ to this altitude/ where everything/ falls away."



[Photo Courtesy Michael Lewis]

In 2012 Lewis won the Frank O'Hara Prize, awarded to the first-place poet in the WCPA's annual poetry contest, for his poem "Windraker."

Lewis' collections were published relatively recently. He had been diagnosed with cancer about eight years ago and given a poor prognosis, "but he just kept going," Martin said.

In 2014, poet Eve Rifkah wrote a letter to the editor of the Worcester Telegram & Gazette nominating Lewis to fill Worcester's vacant poet laureate position.

Lewis was also a member of 4x4, a Worcester area collaborative of four poets and four visual artists. Patty Youngblood, also a member of the group, said collaborating with Lewis was a "moving, terrific experience." The collaborative has a book coming out later this year that will include his work.

"He was generous with his home, his time," said Martin, who was managing editor of the Worcester Review for 27 years. "He was pretty steadfast in his decisions. He was someone you could count on. In a volunteer organization (such as the WCPA) that was an incredibly important value. You knew if Dan committed to something it would get done, and get done right."

Meanwhile, his white beard "got longer and longer," Martin said. "I don't know if it was his tribute to Walt Whitman but it got more distinctive and distinguished the longer it got."

Lewis liked to ride his scooter at a summer place he had on Lake Winnepesaukee in New Hampshire. Martin recalled being in New Hampshire one time when he saw "This white bearded fellow like Walt Whitman scooting across the road. I thought, 'That looks like Dan Lewis. It is Dan Lewis.'"

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