

FROM OPEN MIC TO MFA

LEA DESCHENES TALKS ABOUT HER TRANSITION IN POETRY

By Dawn Coutu



Lea Deschenes

Lea Deschenes entered the open mic scene in the early 1990s with a bachelor's degree in theatre performance. Once slam poetry hit Worcester, Massachusetts in 1993, Lea found that she enjoyed the way it blended the two disciplines of theatre and poetry. "It was a contrast to the prevalent reading style at the time," she observed.

By 2005, Lea had advanced to representative status in the Individual World Poetry Slam, but has since stopped slamming. "A lot of people have this idea that you need to discuss political rhetoric or put on a Broadway show," she noted. "But, for me, it's about presenting the

poem well." Now, when Lea performs at an open mic, she gets back in touch with her theatre background and has made a solid connection between her reading style and the emotional content of each poem. She and her husband, poet Victor Infante, travel around the country, performing poetry and visiting friends. She finds it is a way to freshen her perspective and continue the learning process.

Before she was accepted into the MFA program at New England College, Lea was nominated for a Pushcart Prize, she had won a Jacob Knight Award, and had compiled two manuscripts. As Lea discovered, writers often wonder what they can do to take their work further. "One of the things I appreciate most about the MFA program is how well it supports students' individual voices. I'd heard stories about MFA programs that turn out graduates that all sound the same, and was relieved and excited that NEC was so different."

Lea found that MFA program mentors showed her how to improve her work and encouraged her to push her boundaries to develop her own unique voice. "The program changed my writing process a lot. You begin to understand where your own

placeholders and mannerisms are in drafts and that tightens up the editing process. You know what your own weaknesses are. This program did a lot for my development as a writer that I couldn't have done working on my own." As she noted, the MFA program itself also continues to evolve through the recent addition of new concentrations.

Since her graduation from the MFA program in 2007, Lea has kept in touch with many colleagues. They act as sounding boards for her ideas, offer support and feedback for new material, and share in her excitement when a poem or manuscript is published. She has successfully collaborated with colleague Lisa Sisler on the anthology *Knocking at the Door: Approaching the Other*.

Lea also works as an editor at *Radius Journal*, and as a builder of book interiors for Write Bloody Publishing. Her first full-length poetry collection, *The Constant Velocity of Trains*, a Pushcart Prize nominee, is now available through Write Bloody Publishing.