Frank Shushok, Jr. visits with famed poet Nikki Giovanni

Frank Shushok, Jr.
OVER THE PAST 50 YEARS, RENOWNED poet Nikki Giovanni has been called many things—among them, a revolutionary, a prophet, a national treasure, and the princess of black poetry. A significant figure in the Black Arts and Civil Rights Movements and the author of more than 30 books, she is considered one of the most influential voices of her generation.

But to hundreds of college students, she is known simply as Professor Giovanni—a mentor who inspires them to embrace imagination and to trust and recognize the power of their own voices. Giovanni is a strong and unique presence on the campus of Virginia Tech, where she has taught creative writing and literature courses since the late 1980s. She brings an artist’s perspective to a university known for engineering, arguing that the “arts bring humanity forward as nothing else can do.”

On February 24, 2015, Executive Editor Frank Shushok, Jr., sat down with Giovanni in her office, surrounded by photographs, autographed posters, and books from leaders in international arts, sports, government, and the civil-rights movement, to discuss creativity, imagination, and her approach to student learning.

Giovanni on Imagination…

I SAY EVERYTHING HAS TO start with the imagination, no matter what. For example, in thinking about something scientific, like taking someone’s blood pressure, someone had to imagine how the blood circulates in the body, and so on. It starts with the imagination. We in America tend to undervalue the imagination; we really do.

I think it’s so important that we encourage youngsters to learn to imagine. Then, the rest of what’s out there for the students to learn can be learned. People can learn how to collect garbage. You can learn how to put asphalt on the street; you can learn how to be a nurse; you can learn anything. But if we start with teaching you as a student to trust yourself, to trust your imagination, then we are going to have a better human being—and a human being who’s thinking a little bit beyond the pale, and that’s what we want you to do. That’s what college needs to do.

On Adapting…

IF WE LOOK BACK 100 years, a lot of things that we take for granted didn’t exist. I think we need to recognize that we have a generation that is a little bit further along. Students know more: they are computing, tweeting, and texting. Ask them something, and they...
just look it up; they have more information at their hands than we did. We had to go to a library (which was really quite lovely at the time), and we had to use a card catalog. We had scheduled library time in school. Kids don’t do that anymore; they are learning at a different level and at a different pace, and I think we have to recognize that and keep challenging them. I think we in higher education try to do a good job, and we have to trust our students.

**On Mentorship...**

**RIGHT NOW, I’M WALKING ON** air because one of my students, Kwame Alexander, just won the Newbery Medal for the book *The Crossover*, and the book is number four on *The New York Times* best-seller list! For our school to have taught a Newberry winner is just incredible. I’m so proud of him because he’s not only a hard worker but he’s a very creative young man. It’s so nice that now I can say to my students, “Look what Kwame did!” Because the one thing he *didn’t* do is listen to everybody when they said, “You can’t write a book like that.” This is a book in verse - it’s the first hip-hop novel. When people told him he couldn’t do that, he said, “I think I can!”

One of my other students in the same class as Kwame became a lawyer, but a good lawyer is doing the same thing—again, it’s about imagination. In Kwame’s case, he didn’t write for the prize; you don’t act for the Oscar. You do the thing you are supposed to do, and then folks may recognize it. You have to give people the truth, so that they can, again, reimagine.

**On Authority...**

**I HAVE A LOT OF** respect for my students, so I say what I have to say, and they get to say what they have to say. We get to discuss it; we get to argue about it in some cases. I seldom approach anybody with, “I think you’re wrong.”

Do you see? I have authority in my classroom. I do. I run my classroom—that’s what Virginia Tech pays me to do. I am the head of my classroom, so I have the authority. I don’t need power. If my voice can’t control my classroom, then I need to do something else—Tech needs to get rid of me, or I need to recognize I need to get rid of myself.

Let me give you an example. I have a son. I didn’t have to spank him. I didn’t *make* him do anything. I said, “Will you please...” starting as early as him being potty trained. You have to be clear, and you have to be consistent. Whether you’re teaching or babysitting, you have to respect the person you’re talking to, and you have to be clear about what you need from them. And if they can’t give it to you, you have to listen to see why because there may be a reason. There may be something they don’t want to do, or can’t do, and so you try to listen to see why. So you work on it, you talk to people. I think that human beings are wonderful. I don’t think you abuse your office with them. They respect you, and you respect them, and 99% of the time it’s going to work.

**On Poetry...**

**I THINK POETRY FIRST TEACHES** us that we can put dissimilar things together. You can put any number of crazy images together, and suddenly it makes sense. Things can have different meanings, layers of meanings—like the lyric in the song, “Don’t know why I didn’t come.” Come where? Come home? Come to me?

And encourage students to be brave! I think that poetry teaches bravery more than anything. I think

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NIKKI GIOVANNI, a University Distinguished Professor at Virginia Tech, is also a world-renowned poet, writer, commentator, activist, and educator. One of the most widely-read American poets, she prides herself on being “a Black American, a daughter, a mother, a professor of English.” Giovanni remains as determined and committed as ever to the fight for civil rights and equality. Always insisting on presenting the truth as she sees it, she has maintained a prominent place as a strong voice of the black community. Her focus is on the individual, specifically, on the power one has to make a difference in oneself, and thus, in the lives of others. Over the course of more than three decades of publishing and lecturing, she has come to be called both a “National Treasure” and, most recently, one of Oprah Winfrey’s 25 “Living Legends.”

We love feedback. Send letters to executive editor Frank Shushok Jr. (aboutcampus@vt.edu), and please copy him on notes to authors.
anytime you are telling whatever truth it is you are telling, there’s bravery to it, no matter what.

I was recently in the hospital beginning on a Monday, and by about Wednesday I realized what I needed was a good cry! I’m in a hospital room, and I’m thinking I have all these sad things inside, and thank God I had a pad of paper with me—I’m a writer and I always have a pad. So, I wrote that down, “A Good Cry.” That’s the title of the next book! But I just started writing, and I wrote about six poems as I was dealing just with the idea of “a good cry.” So that’s also what poetry does—it lets things out, and it’s your truth coming out; it’s not anybody else’s.

Then, what you are doing as a teacher is reminding students: “It’s your vision…It’s your life. You are not there to please anybody else.” I think poetry reminds you of that. We poets are trying to tell a truth, and it’s our truth. Everybody is not going to be a part of our truth. The people who are, well then we’ve offered them something.

On Generosity…

THERE’S A CLICHÉ—THE MOST GENEROUS heart is in the person who gives away time and love. I think you have to learn to give things in life, and poetry also teaches you that: you have to give something. You can’t just sit around and take things in.

I’m not a psychiatrist, but what you want your students to do is be true to themselves, and that’s the easiest thing in the world to read. I can always tell when a student is trying to figure out, “What do you [the teacher] want?” as opposed to writing what they have to say. That’s incredibly easy, because you are just reading a bunch of shit, thinking, “Oh my God.”

We [creative writing] are not mathematics. We are not physics, or science, where you have to give back exactly what you are taught, because that is what you are supposed to learn. But teaching poetry is teaching you to trust yourself, so I have to be able to pick up on that.

NIKKI HOLDING HER COPY OF KWAME ALEXANDER’S THE CROSSOVER. Photo by Matthew Ebert

On Civility…

CREATIVITY ALSO HAS TO DO with civility. I think that universities need to have a space where we go back to the old days of sitting down and eating, and some kids serve, and rotate it to make sure that every kid serves. That way the kids learn to sit at the table, and someone serves them, and they learn to say “thank you.” I’m a fan of old-fashioned manners, and I think old-fashioned manners are an important part of creativity because that allows a shared way of looking at things. It’s important to have a system that says to people, “This is how we look at things.”

I went to a small liberal arts college, and when I first went to Fisk, we had tablecloths! But tablecloths are important because what are students going to do? They are going to graduate from Fisk, which I did, and they are going to get a job doing something. Students are still meeting people, and still sitting at the table with a knife and fork to have conversation. Conversation can’t be gossip, and can’t be negative, because no one will want to be around you. So, you learn to find that shared ground that says, “You know, I was thinking about…” That’s a part of what we in the creative field should be doing to set the tone.

On the American Idea…

WHEN YOU THINK ABOUT AMERICA, what do you think about? An idea! Columbus didn’t come here and say, “We could build a great factory here!” Explorers didn’t think that. They said, “We could be free!!” Of course they didn’t follow through on that, I’m not a fool, but they had an idea that people should be free. It wasn’t the first time, but they had a new land. People said, “We’re going to come over here and start a new life.”

On History…

LAST TUESDAY, I SENT THE students in my “Writing for a Young Audience” course to see the film Selma. Their assignment was to write about Selma as if they were explaining it to a 12-year-old. They will turn that in today and in class, we will talk about Selma and what happened. I want to see how they are handling
history. Kids, little kids, all kids need history. The students need to know something about the history of this country, what we’ve gone through, how we’ve grown. If we don’t teach them, they don’t know.

On Change…

I DON’T THINK OF MYSELF as an icon or a change agent. You can't think, “I want to be an agent of change,” because that makes you crazy, you know? What I want to be is me, and I want to contribute as best I can, and I want to feel that I have made a difference. But if Kwame hadn’t won the Newberry, I would still feel like I’m a pretty good writer and teacher of writing.

As for me, I write poetry, and there might be a poem or two talking about, “this is a bad idea,” and “to have both power and authority is a bitch.” But I’m not trying to change the world; I’m just trying to put ideas out there. All you can do is put the idea out there—sometimes it works, and sometimes it doesn’t. It’s like anything else—you throw a seed out, and eventually you are going to get grass growing and you’ll have a lawn. Then someone is going to walk on it, and you say, “Damn, someone is walking on my seed.”

But the seed is out there; it is going to be all right. The seed is underneath the ground: it is warm and safe. Then there will be someone who says, “You know, a hundred years ago someone put this idea out there,” and you don’t care, you’ll be gone. But you did your part—you planted the seed, and someone else has to bring it along.