

VINEYARD GAZETTE

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The House of Quiet That Nurtures Voices

Katie Ruppel



Abigail McGrath founded Renaissance House in 2001.

The dining room at Tony and Abigail McGrath's home in Oak Bluffs is delicately set up with gold-rimmed china, wine glasses, and napkins wrapped with yellow roses. First course: Clam chowder made from scratch.

"For the

newcomers, I'm just going to suggest that you pace yourself because, well, Abigail can cook," said Kimberly Ellis, an artist staying this past week at the Renaissance House artist retreat run by Ms. McGrath.



Artists come together for evening meals with talk of all things writing.

As Mr. McGrath gently cleared the plates, the meal continued elegantly with two salads, a little plate of sushi, buttery peas, and finally, a huge filet of salmon decorated with potatoes and shrimp.

Even with so much food to focus on, the dining room was never quiet; there was constant chattering, storytelling, advice giving and laughter erupting from "this complication of women," as Ms. McGrath lightheartedly described the group during grace.



photo by Ivy Ashe

Inspired by her mother and aunt, both Harlem Renaissance writers, Ms. McGrath and her husband started Renaissance House in 2001 as a haven for writers and artists of all kinds simply to have the time to work, think, write, paint, draw, and most importantly, do nothing.

This past week's house-full featured Fern

Kate Feiffer was guest at salon, sharing tales of getting work published.

Gillespie, a journalist-turned-fiction writer from New Jersey, Simone Monique Barnes, a New England creative nonfiction writer working on stories about foster homes and orphanages, and Lesago Malepe, author of *Matters of Life and Death*, a true story of an African family's struggles under apartheid.

Joining the group for dinner were Ms. Ellis, aka Dr. Goddess, a writer and actor who performs her own one-woman shows, and Oak Bluffs resident Kate Feiffer, host of the evening's salon and author of *My Mom Is Trying to Ruin My Life*, as well as several other books for children and 'tweens'.

The group talked pleasantly and passionately about all aspects of writing — what they struggle with, what they love, what writers inspire them, writers and parenthood, writers and teaching, writers and publishing.

One thing they all agreed upon: How hard it is to find time to write between jobs, assignments, kids, grocery shopping, bills and the rest of life's myriad intrusions.

"It took me two or three years to get here and it's for the same reason that the Renaissance House exists — I just didn't have the time," Ms. Barnes said. "I'm sure my application was probably like 'I don't know if I'm coming or going, I'm writing this in my sleep, but I am determined.' I was finally giving myself permission to honor that part of my artistry when I had made time for so many other things."

Ms. Ellis felt the same as busy days blocked her ability to make time for herself.

"I was horrified when I got accepted because you asked, 'Okay, so which week?'" Ms. Ellis recalled. She pretended to look at a calendar, frantically crossing off week after week. "Not that one, not that one, not that one."

"But honestly, that is exactly who I'm looking for," Ms. McGrath said. "Someone who really needs the time off." She went on to explain that her mother, poet Helene Johnson, and her aunt, novelist and short story writer Dorothy West, both struggled to earn a living as writers. They eventually picked up one or even two other jobs and lost touch with their creativity.

"People would ask my mother, 'Why don't you write poems anymore?' And she would say, 'Because in order to write you have to have time to stare out the window and do nothing.' So that's what we do here. We eat and do nothing."

Artists arrive on a Sunday and begin by getting comfortable at the Renaissance House, Dorothy West's old home off Myrtle avenue in East Chop, and that evening they make their way up to Menemsha Beach for a warm welcome to the Island with a lobster bake hosted by the McGraths.

Starting the next morning and every day until Saturday, the artists gather with Ms. McGrath at the house where they sit together from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. and work on whatever they see fit.

The presence of other artists brings focus and determination to the room, Ms. Barnes said. “There aren’t the distractions you might get if you were writing by yourself.”

After 1 p.m., the artists are free to do as they please.

Whether they’ve spent the afternoon looking out at the ocean, sitting on a quiet bench or riding a bike, they congregate at Ms. McGrath’s house for a day’s evaluation, dinner, and a salon led by a local writer or artist; unless, of course, it’s silent Wednesday.

Those days are spent in silence for the artists to meditate on their work and themselves, testing their independence and restraint.

“We used to not talk at dinner either but it was like pantomime trying to get the peas passed to you,” Ms. McGrath said. “Luckily Marcel Marceau was the speaker that night,” she joked.

Talking or no talking, the energy of the Renaissance House and the McGraths themselves makes for an incomparable week full of laughter, inspiration and the precious value of time to think and create.

“Abigail didn’t have to open up her home to strangers, she didn’t have to cook these meals, she didn’t have to have artists week after week come in with all their different personalities.” Ms. Barnes said.

Next week marks the last of the summer for Renaissance House but Ms. McGrath will be ready for more next year.

“It’s giving the gift of time,” she said. “To not feel guilty that you should be doing something else or that you have all these other things that are important. Nothing is more important than your voice.”

For more information about the Renaissance House, contact Abigail McGrath at 508-687-9966 or 917-747-0367. And for a full schedule of salons during the upcoming week, see the Gazette calendar section.

Reader Feedback

Friday, September 23, 2011 9:23pm

A wonderful article about a wonderful place. Bravo Abby and Tony McGrath and all of these talented artists!

- Janet Shartle , Fairhaven

Saturday, September 24, 2011 6:39am

Janet said it all, perfectly. Kudos to Abby and Tony!!

- Suzanne Richter , Finland

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