



## Donovan L. Welch

June 3, 1932 - August 6, 2016

Donovan LeRoy Welch, 84, died at his home in Kearney on August 6, 2016.

A memorial service will be held on Saturday, August 20 at 2 PM in the UNK Recital Hall, Fine Arts Building. In lieu of flowers, memorials may be sent to the University of Nebraska Kearney Foundation and designated for the Welch Family Scholarship.

O'Brien Straatmann Redinger Funeral Home is serving the family. Condolences may be shared online at [www.osrfh.com](http://www.osrfh.com).

Don was born on June 3, 1932 in Hastings, Nebraska to Howard Leroy and Bessie Genevieve Welch. He spent his early years in Gothenburg and Columbus and graduated from Kearney High School. After receiving his BA in English from Kearney State Teachers' College, he served in the U. S. Army for two years, completed a MA and PhD in English, taught English at Gothenburg High School, and later English and philosophy at Kearney State College/UNK from 1959 until 2015.

Surviving are his wife, Marcia Zorn Welch of Kearney; his sister, Sue (Gene) Fisher of Omaha, NE; daughters Shannon (Paul) Vesely of Ottumwa, IA; Timaree (Steve) Yost of Omaha, NE; Erin (Dennis) Lane of Blair, NE; Kael (Omer) Sagheer of Elkhorn, NE; and son, Chad Welch of Columbia, MD.

Also surviving are his grandchildren, their spouses and children: Simon Yost (Elissa, Aliena, Zarah), Micah Yost (Amy, Chandler, Quinn), Noah Yost (Melinda, Brooklyn, Emma, Felicity) and Christian Yost; Van Lane (Alison) and McKenna Lane Lapp (Wyatt); Aanya, Zarah, and Sana Sagheer; Megan and Quinn Vesely, Collyn Vesely Ware (Nathan, Gracyn, Griffin), and Marinne Vesely Smith (Howard).

Don Welch loved Nebraska, its wind and plains, its migrating sandhill cranes, and its people.

He taught and mentored thousands of students, colleagues, and writers throughout his life. A great teacher and poet, his life and words will be remembered and treasured.

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Don Welch Memorial Address  
August 20, 2016  
UNK Recital Hall  
Shannon Welch Vesely

From the poem "For Your Classrooms"  
You have honored us  
By taking such remarkable care.

Few shape absence into memorable air  
Don Welch, your husband, our father, your brother, grandfather, great grandfather and uncle, your colleague, teacher, mentor, and friend has, indeed, honored us by taking remarkable care and shaping absence into memorable air.

And oh what memorable air it has been and will continue to be!

A tangible reminder of all that he was, the bronzed Don Welch stands just outside this building. But even more valuable are his words, an intangible presence, like the Nebraska wind he so dearly loved, that will carry us well through all of our days.

Many of you have known the professorial Don Welch, the poet and sage of the classroom. But for my family, the memorable air Don Welch shaped for us was filled with adventure and laughter. I am certain that my siblings will remember that moment when my mom finally gave us the go-ahead. You see we would wait until one of my dad's button-up shirts became so worn that when we asked, Is it time? my mom would look it over, smile, and then say, it's time.

Imagine this, if you will. My dad would get a ten second head start in the back yard, and then we were upon him. A pack of squealing, grabbing kids. The goal: rip the shirt off his body. Literally! There were screams as one of us tried to draw first cloth. As my dad ran, we grabbed and ripped and held on until there was little left but collar. The whole event—dare I call it an event—usually lasted not more than a couple of minutes, but oh those minutes were memorable!

As were the moments in our family kitchen when my dad's homemade fudge had finally cooled enough to eat. Let me set the record straight here: my dad could cook little, but his fudge was sublime. Except when he experimented. Imagine this: my family is salivating, waiting to peel the cooled fudge off the waxed paper-- and then we notice the small bumps in the fudge. Walnuts perhaps? Peanuts? Oh no, surprise! My dad used red hots, he said, to make the fudge more "festive." Festive is not quite the word I would use to describe

our culinary experience. A mouthful was all it took for my mom to proclaim, well that's interesting, Don. For years afterwards, the legend of the red hot fudge lived on, drawing the same laughter as the day we took our first bites.

But the piece de résistance was the annual family 4th of July brunch at Ft. Kearney Recreation Area. My family and neighbors would gather early to cook eggs and bacon, eat donuts and wait until it got warmer so we could swim. As the sun rose and the water warmed, however, the beach would also fill with swimmers. And when the beach was full, we would summon my dad for his annual "spastic run."

He would retreat to the changing rooms to don his Hawaiian print trunks and then emerge, pasty legged, at the top of the beach. The rest of us would wait, expectantly, in the water. And then, he would begin. Jerry Lewis had nothing on my dad, for his spastic run down the length of the beach into the water is legendary still today. Arms and legs flailing, fish-lipped and cross-eyed, my dad would make his way through the sun bathers that dotted the beach. As he ran, by-standers looked on, sorely amazed. We yelled our heads off, announcing that this year's run was the absolute best—that dad really outdid himself this year. Until the next year, that is, when his spastic run was clearly better.

Yes, my dad shaped absence into such memorable air for us. Without an X Box, an iPad, or a smart phone, we had more fun than we could imagine. And it did not cost a dime. My dad shaped fun from nothing but imagination and heart.

Some of you have known the memorable air my father shaped in his other life with homing pigeons. Honestly, I cannot remember my dad without pigeons—pigeons held expertly in his hands, pigeon journals on the bookshelves, pigeon feathers in his hair, and—truthfully--pigeon poop trailed throughout the

house. . . Indeed, there have been pigeons that have shaped the air in and around the Welch household!

The exquisite nature of homing pigeons in flight, their indefatigable drive to get home, and the comradery my dad shared with other pigeon breeders and racers were all things he loved. Dearly.

The image of my dad wearing his “loft hat”, shaking a can of pigeon feed, looking skyward, and whistling his special “pigeons-it’s-time-to-come-in” whistle will remain with my family forever.

The fact that we have to occasionally rub the pigeon droppings from my dad’s statued head is a befitting act for such an ardent pigeon guy.

Those of you who have been my father’s students know how he shaped absence into memorable air in the classroom. One of the greatest regrets of my life is that I did not take my dad for every single class that UNK would have allowed me to take. Still, in those classes I did take, I learned how to think, how to learn, how to teach, and how to live. My father was simply a great teacher, the best I have ever had and will ever have. Those of who visited and wrote to my father this summer have testified to the teacher my dad was.

When my father retired the first time, I had the privilege to attend his final class in Philosophy of Poetry. As we walked the three blocks from our home to campus, my dad told me about the course and the students he had that semester. When we arrived, I took a seat in the back, found the notebook I brought for the occasion (I never missed an opportunity to take notes when my dad spoke), and sat back to take it all in. I was amazed to see my high school English teacher, several matriarchs from town, and a host of traditional and non-traditional students.

And when my dad began to speak, I felt the familiar pull of his speech rhythms. I often lost myself in those rhythms, well-chosen words in well-crafted sentences. It was simply as though we were all standing on holy ground.

I recall what my grandfather said when my dad read a poem at my wedding: “Don, when you read that poem, I almost understood.” Even before you were fully aware of what was written or said, my dad’s voice, his rich tone and easy rhythms, had a way of convincing you that you belonged, that you understood.

As the class ended, I closed my notebook and prepared to walk home. But this walk would come an hour later after each student had approached my dad to thank him and tell him what the class had meant, how it changed his or her perspective and life. Humbly, I looked on, hoping that someday, I would grow into the teacher, the writer, and the human being that was Don Welch.

As a teacher of poetry, my dad’s words from his book *Gnomes*, remain words to live by for those of us who aspire to write and read well.

- Few good poems are fastballs. Most are curves and sliders.
- Once into a poem write for its life.
- The easy is what we dream of. The hard is what defines us.
- Our hope? To write one poem with a truly remarkable shelf life.
- Write down. Work hard on your grains. Whoever you are lives under countless laminations.
- Always leave your children a few poems to grow into.
- Every would-be writer has one good poem in his hidden head.

For those of you who have taken my father’s courses and have gone on to write, publish, and perhaps teach yourselves, you have undoubtedly taken

these words to heart. They, too, have shaped the air around you into something memorable, good, and true.

But there are others, those we often least expect to be impacted, who have also benefitted from this memorable air. These have often been individuals whom, my dad understood, had at least one good poem in their hidden heads. It was his mission to tease them out.

Doug H. from York High School was one of these individuals. Doug was a hulking, second-year high school senior.

When my dad visited his school for a poetry residency, his teacher took him aside to prepare him for Doug. He won't do anything, she said, but if you leave him alone, he will just sit quietly in the back. True to form, Doug's sullen shape cast a foreboding silhouette in the corner of the classroom. He was a presence.

As students bent over their desks, writing themselves out of their hidden heads, Doug alternately looked on and slept. On the final day of the residency, my dad asked students to think of a person who had made a mark on their lives, a person whose life and work deeply mattered to them. Then, he instructed, think of that one object that most represents that person. For my father, it would be his duck decoys, he said, and for my father-in-law, his tackle box. Write about that object.

In a cinematic moment made for Lifetime television, Doug raised his head from the desk, searched his pocket for a pencil, removed a single sheet of notebook paper, and began to write. My dad recalls that he walked about the room watching students write, but he stayed clear of Doug, not wanting to spook him. At the end of the session, students passed their poems to the front, and my dad quickly read through them, selecting a few to be read aloud.

When my dad came to Doug's poem, "Grandpa," he understood, once more, the power of the hidden head.

Grandpa  
He was six foot three  
with old age  
carved on his face.

He usually sat  
in a rocker  
whittling a stick  
and humming  
a certain song.

He was rocking  
one day  
until he rocked  
no more.

Eyes and mouth  
I shut, stick and knife  
on the floor.

As my dad read Doug's poem aloud, anonymously, a pall fell upon the room until one student exclaimed, Who wrote that? As was my dad's practice, he let the poet claim his own work—or not. From the corner of the room, Doug said, I did. Although no one in the room spoke, it was evident that something sacred had happened, something that all would remember as an authentic testament to the power of poetry.

This would be a great story if it ended right there. But it does not. Several years later when my dad was traveling through that town en route to another residency, he stopped at a local gas station. Just as he was about to fill his car, he heard a voice: Hey, do you remember me? It was a grown-up Doug, now working at the local gas station. I do, my dad said. Doug smiled, patted his wallet in his back pocket and announced, I've got my poem with me still. Right here.

I think we all would do well to carry our best poems—or someone's best poem—in our pockets. Daily. For the words of these poems, the poems that come dearly from the hidden head, are the words of life, the words of beauty and truth, the words of pain and wisdom. They are the words that anchor us to all that matters.

In the introduction to the anthology, *Few Shape Absence Into Memorable Air*, my dad writes: A very few of these poems occurred as gifts. More, like diamonds, were given worth by force. All are crystallizations of solitudes now past.

There are those rare poems that burst from the hidden head as gifts. Almost perfect in their imagery and prosody. On that day in that Nebraska classroom, Doug's poem was a genuine gift—to his class, but most importantly, to him.

But most poems, as my dad writes, take their worth by force. In reading through my dad's notebooks, I am profoundly moved by the force through which his poetry was crafted. Sometimes a line is changed, sometimes a single word or punctuation mark. Sometimes a stanza is removed, sometimes just one line retained. Yet in the end, the poem, the crystallization of solitudes now past, remains. What has been taken by force for my father becomes a gift to all of us.

If I were to carry a single poem in my pocket, I would find it unbearingly difficult to choose just one of my dad's poems. I have come to believe, however, that we can carry poems in the pockets of our hearts and souls. And these pockets are those that are deep enough to house as many poems as we want to store there.

My family and I are humbled and inspired by the fact that there are hundreds, maybe thousands who, like us, are carrying Don Welch poems in very deep pockets.

The memorable air my father shaped on the page will continue to fill our pockets, his words a touchstone for our lives. There are days that I find myself hungry for those images that give voice to the beauty I see around me. And so I turn to my father's imagery:

- This morning the sky is a brilliant blue. And for you, a necklace of snow geese, a string of moving pearls.
- Sunrise, and the green streaming from your eyes is the liquid tense of emerald.
- A kid again, I am standing in an alley eating snow from my mittens; feasting on intricate minutes, the crumbs of cold sighs.
- The voices of flowers are ocher and umber, the voices of flowers are vermilion and rum. Sometimes it is like this when you listen to a pavane, the petals of the flowers, their sounds in the wind, amaryllis, sweet William, vermilion, and rum.

And there are days when I find myself hungry for those words that give voice to the wisdom of the ages. Again, I turn to my dad's poetry.

- "An alley is a dump of bits and pieces connected by an air of disregard." No. An alley's still a poor kid's way to wealth. No hopes are ever quite so crushed as rocks, no black-eyed susans unable to seed themselves in smashed-down fences. It takes the sun, and an innocent angle of the mind, to make coal gleam; and the discovery of old hex bolts can weld minutes into moments.

- Angel. She parted the air, she scattered the gnats. She turned on more sun. Later, I cycled her through town. In a world gone off the angelic standard, I peddled her right up to the last.

Truthfully, it does seem—most days—as if the world has gone off the angelic standard. And yet. Don Welch peddled her right up to the last.

A few days before my dad died when others were sleeping and I was sitting by his bed, he said:

I want to tell you something that I have never told anyone before. Since adolescence, I have had a vision of Christ standing in a field. A grain field after the harvest. And the workers, the gritty, earthy men and women who have worked the field, are standing before him. Christ opens his arms to them, inviting them into grace and peace, rest from the bone-weary work of the day. This, he said, is the pre-church Christ. Before all the trappings and rules of religion. This is the Christ for all.

Indeed. This is the angelic standard that my dad peddled right to the last: a world in which Christ's beauty, truth, and goodness define the angelic standard. And this is the Savior who dares to love the unlovable, who dares to

live among the dirty and the hopeless. This is the Savior whose sanctuary moves with him into leper colonies, desert places, solitary mountain tops, gutters and back alleys, taverns and soup kitchens, refugee camps and prisons. Yes, this is the Savior whose sanctuary is omnipresent and yet transcendent, earthly and yet holy.

My father also understood Christ's promise of life beyond this world, a life in which the angelic standard is alive and well, and cyclists are peddling it joyously.

I think it is safe to say that my father would wish all of us to take up our bicycles and peddle for all our worth, knowing that our destinations, and the memorable air we will shape along the way, are simply more than we can imagine.

I would like to leave you with a poem from *The Words Which Marry You to Me*. This is poem that my dad wrote for my mom, and I think he would like it very much that we could all share in these words and that he could, once again, affirm his undying love for my mom. If he were here, I am quite certain that he would say that there would be no Don without Marcia.

And although these words are meant for her, I think they are also meant for others who loved him and who understand how his words marry us to his legacy, a legacy that will continue to bless and to sustain us all.

However dark the night  
love makes it less opaque.

A lilac will leave a thrush  
in heart-shaped song,

and long after dark the thrush's afternotes

will gleam on every leaf's dark tongue.

It is not an illusion of the moon:  
when I am gone,

these words which marry me to you  
will be that thrush's song.

Don Welch

# Previous Events

## Memorial Service

AUG **20**. 2:00 PM (CT)

UNK Recital Hall-Fine Arts Building  
Kearney, NE

# Tribute Wall



“ O'Brien Straatmann Redinger Funeral Home created a Tribute Video in memory of Donovan L. Welch



O'Brien Straatmann Redinger Funeral Homes and Cremations - September 06, 2016 at 10:40 AM



“ Donovan L. Welch

January 28, 2023 at 08:01 AM



“ A New Sunrise Spray was purchased for the family of Donovan L. Welch.



August 18, 2016 at 02:19 PM



“ Legacy School Staff purchased the Simply Elegant Spathiphyllum for the family of Donovan L. Welch.



Legacy School Staff - August 18, 2016 at 01:56 PM

BK

“ *To paraphrase Jimmy Buffet: Some of it's magic, some of it's tragic, but he had a GREAT life all the way. With sympathy and understanding -- Bill Kalous*

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**Bill Kalous** - August 18, 2016 at 10:42 AM

BF

“Don Welch was the best of the best and was so very important to me as a teacher and as a poet and as a man. My very first college teaching job was in the English department of what was called then Kearney State College, and it became clear to me that he was a model college teacher and poet. I immediately realized that his abilities and values as a teaching poet were also what I aspired to. He had been a student of the great Karl Shapiro at the Univ. of Nebraska, and having learned prosody from Shapiro, Don taught his own version of it at Kearney. It opened up for me what might be called the "inner life of the poem." It was a turning point for me in my own efforts at the craft of poetry. I was astonished and had questions, and Don was incredibly generous in answering them and offering helpful advice. But as I began to know him, I could see that he was also a man who lived his life consistently according to the most humane values of generosity and kindness and courage and self-sacrifice. It was just the best way possible to begin my teaching career and life as a husband and father. It's not just me, of course; there are many who owe in their development as teachers and writers a huge debt to Donovan Welch. I suppose the only thing to do now is to pay it forward to our own students, colleagues, and families. I must add that he was a brilliant poet, but one who never sought a national audience, one who always treated it as an art rather than career and published many poems, though often in small, regional venues. I hope that the state of Nebraska will find a way to honor him for his poetry and his dedication to the craft and the teaching of it. Thank you, Don, you will be missed by everyone whose life you touched.

*B.H. (Pete) Fairchild*

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**B.H. Fairchild** - August 12, 2016 at 11:41 PM

JM

“*Dr. Welch touched the creative gene in the minds of thousands of students I am sure. I was one. He brought the beauty and the reality of life through poetry. I will always remember the walk through Frostiana and how it makes me look at nature and see things through the eyes of my heart. A fantastic teacher and mentor, Dr. Welch I will miss the talks and I am grateful for the written word that will keep you alive in our hearts and minds. john moore KSC alum*

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**John Moore** - August 12, 2016 at 07:50 AM

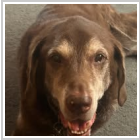
DL

“*Don and June Lewis purchased the Peaceful White Lilies Basket for the family of Donovan L. Welch.*



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**Don and June Lewis** - August 11, 2016 at 12:13 PM



“*(I'll try this again; don't see my earlier post.) 20+ years ago, the Welches were my neighbors. At the time, I didn't appreciate what a fabulous person/poet/teacher Don was -- he was just my nice neighbor with homing pigeons! My thoughts and prayers are with his family and all the others whose lives were enriched by his.*

*Judy Heiserman*

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**Judy Heiserman** - August 10, 2016 at 12:06 PM

BC

“ Don was a giant in his field and in influence on others but a quiet common man at the same time. He left his mark on so many people. I feel privileged to have known him and we all have been blessed by his life. Also, I will never forget those pigeons!

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**Becky Crofoot** - August 10, 2016 at 09:16 AM

AM

“ Where to begin. Dr. Welch's impression on me lasted a lifetime, weaving as a gold thread throughout, in some fashion, my everyday life. It might glint if the light caught it, if I tripped over a decent lasting memory of good writing. But, on the whole, Donovan Welch's influence on me was experienced more as a deep glow. I understand now what I didn't understand as a young adult writing student: Donovan L. Welch was a rare man. Who I first thought was a rare writing teacher was a rare person deploying his considerable gifts to the making of his life. That's the kind of human I wanted acting on me at the molecular level. Donovan Welch was someone whose native kindness, whose deliberate utterances and awareness sank deep, got under my skin, and generously created the likelihood of a lifetime of "aha" moments, all five senses honestly employed in service to discovery.

*Anne (Pierce) McCollister, Lincoln, NE*

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**Anne McCollister** - August 08, 2016 at 01:18 PM

JM

“ Our thoughts and prayers are with you all/ So many memories have been passing thru our heads in the last few days. Don was truly a remarkable person! Thank you Marcia for putting up with the "pigeon people" over the years. May God be with you all.  
*John and Vickie Marks*

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**John and Vickie Marks** - August 08, 2016 at 11:04 AM

MS

“ Don was one of the most important influences in my life. I met him in 1974, when his book *Dead Horse Table* was published. It was the first book of poems I ever bought, and his poetry and his teaching of poetry at Kearney State College set me in the direction that became my lifelong vision and mission. How I teach my college classes is due his teaching; my writing is due his mentorship. I know many others feel this way about Don. His quiet yet passionate approach to poetry and the sacredness of words filled our lives and enriched it in measureless ways. We will celebrate his life and poetry for generations.

*Mark Sanders, Nacogdoches, Texas*

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**Mark Sanders** - August 07, 2016 at 08:54 PM

SB

*I was blessed to have Dr. Welch for Freshman English my first semester at KSC. (1969). Great teacher. Great person. Great asset to the college. Sorry to hear of his passing. My sympathy to his family & the entire community*

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**Sue Batie** - August 08, 2016 at 02:00 AM

ES

*One of our brightest lights gone dim, the sweetest voice now silenced. Thanks be to God for Don and his wonderful poetry. How we will miss him. Our love and prayers to Marsha and family.*

*Ed & Diane Stevens*

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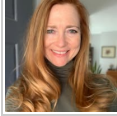
**Ed Stevens** - August 08, 2016 at 08:36 AM



*I've been lucky in life to get to meet and write about so many amazing people, many of them "stars" of the world. But no one soared higher to me than Don Welch. He was so humble and wise and talented. His life was poetry. His home now is heaven.*

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**Colleen Kenney Fleischer** - August 09, 2016 at 08:45 AM



<https://nufoundation.org/-/article-unk-poet-remembers-white-shadows-in-the-grass>

**Colleen Kenney Fleischer** - August 09, 2016 at 08:46 AM

JO

*One of the true treasures who, fortunately, chose to share his talents with students who probably didn't appreciate his talents until years after they left his class.*

*Jan Jensen O'Connor*

**Jan O'Connor** - August 09, 2016 at 03:20 PM

JG

*I am so sad to hear about Dr. Welch's passing. I was blessed to have him as my undergraduate professor and later when I earned my Master's degree. He touched so many lives in such positive ways. I taught junior high English and reading for 32 years and just retired. I hope I was able to pass on to my students a love for learning like he did to me.*

*"Your life is your story.*

*Write well.*

*Edit often."*

*Dr. Welch definitely did that!*

*Janelle Grabowski, Ravenna, Nebraska*

**Janelle Grabowski** - August 09, 2016 at 05:38 PM

JH

*Over 20 years ago, I lived next door to the Welches - at that time, I didn't appreciate what a fabulous person, poet, teacher, that Don was - I just knew him as my nice neighbor with the homing pigeons! But I've never forgotten him. My thoughts and prayers are with his family and others whose lives were enriched by him.*

*Judy Heiserman*

**Judy Heiserman** - August 10, 2016 at 08:46 AM

SP

*Dr. Welch literally made me the teacher I became! I enrolled in every course of his, and I repeated his words when teaching the writing process to middle school kids. Because he taught me how to love poetry and write it pretty well, my interest became contagious for my students. A few years ago, I sent him a poem I had written about his influence. He responded so kindly. Prayers are for Marcia and the family. What a wealth of memories you have!*

*Sue Zikmund Pocock, Castle Pines, CO*

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**Sue Zikmund Pocock** - August 12, 2016 at 12:22 AM

JJ

*Lucky  
to  
have met  
you.*

*Jason James*

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**Jason James** - August 16, 2016 at 12:26 PM

JS

*Don Welch was a wonderful teacher, poet and person. The poetry class I had with him was one of my favorite classes. He was a smiling and joyful person and so patient with students. I wrote to him from time to time after college and would send along a poem which he would reply to with encouraging and uplifting words and a recent poem of his own. He used to say everyone has at least one good poem in them. Don Welch had thousands. My sympathies and prayers go out to his family.*

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**Julie Shaw** - August 17, 2016 at 05:46 PM

HZ

*Dr. Welch was a teacher who really 'taught' his students. He cared what we thought and shared his ideas about the topics we wrote about. He was truly a teacher who made an impression on his students. I was in one of his English classes in 1959/1960 and took several summer writing classes during the years later. One summer he even invited students to walk over to his home to see the pigeons and told us about them. No other instructor influenced my loving to put words to paper like he did. I will always treasure memories of him and of his writing classe. I owe him a great deal of gratitude. God Bless his family.  
Harriett (Yost) Zade, Red Cloud, Ne.*

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**Harriett (Yost) Zade** - August 21, 2016 at 06:57 PM

PO

*Dear Don,  
You are "The Mythologist" of words becoming the artful image of indelible, mysterious appearances that live bequiling and beautiful in the imagination! I know this to be: how your soul expressed wise power in creating beauty; worlds revealed (personally) to each reader by your side. Your heart is what you gave to us through the love of your poetry... and your amazing life! Thank you, Don, for enriching my life with so many stunning ways to "see" art on so many levels! Genius is you in all these ways of learning!  
May God's loving Grace and Light keep you safe in His loving Heart!*

*With love,  
Paul Otero*

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**Paul M. Otero** - July 30, 2025 at 04:04 PM