

Neighborhood Writing Alliance takes to the stage

By Nina Metz

SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

How much do you really know about the people who share our city—be it the person next to you on the “L” train or in line at the grocery store?

The annual Chicago Humanities Festival, now in its 19th year, is generally known for its international roster of big names that fly into town as guest speakers and performers.

But the event (continuing through Nov. 16) can always be counted on to feature local groups, many of which get little press attention during the rest of the year, including the Neighborhood Writing Alliance, which is teaming up with Chicago Danztheatre for a performance Nov. 2 at the Newberry Library called “Unheard Voices and Overlooked Ideas.”

The writing group, which also publishes the quarterly “Journal of Ordinary Thought” (featuring the work of its members), is principally focused on Chicagoans sharing their own stories. In a world that couldn’t care less about you as an individual, why be anonymous in the city where you live? The writers group is like one giant



Chicago Danztheatre’s Denise Parkhurst (from left), Morgan Christiansen and Wannapa P-Eubanks will perform Nov. 2 at the Newberry Library.

water cooler.

Or as program director Rupal Soni explained, “It’s about normal people talking about the questions that they’re thinking about, as opposed to having the media and other bigger systems—political parties and the people running the debates—decide what we should be talking about.”

For this year’s event at the Humanities Fest, 15 writers will perform their work in collaboration with Chicago Danztheatre, an ensemble that blends aspects of traditional theater (in this case, direct address through monologue), phys-

ical theater (expressing story and emotion through body language) and multimedia (slide projections and film). “The model is that every person is a philosopher and that everyone has a story to tell,” said Soni. “It’s less a writing workshop about grammar and punctuation than about what themes are coming out, what issues are we talking about here?”

Which means the group is reluctant to single out any of its writers who have had success getting their work published outside the journal. When I asked Soni about this, she said, “That’s the hardest part

about explaining what we do. It’s not our mission to turn people into published authors. We certainly encourage it, but we don’t have the resources for that.”

Plus, “sometimes that becomes a slippery slope because it changes the atmosphere and the writing workshops then become about form and structure” rather than about the stories themselves.

I spoke with two members of the Neighborhood Writing Alliance about their experiences and the upcoming Humanities Fest event.

Kay Frances, who attends workshops on the West Side, will perform a story from her recent past, when she was visiting her mother in Englewood back in 2004. There was a block party that day, and a shooting occurred.

“To my surprise, nobody stopped what they were doing to see what had happened,” said Frances.

“They heard the shots, they saw the police, but no one stopped doing what they were doing.”

It was an image she couldn’t shake. “I tried to get rid of it. But some things just get on the inside of you, and this just stuck to me.”

Frances said she hadn’t done much writing before joining the group four years ago. “Only as a child, I had a diary like all little girls do.”

When I asked about her style she told me, “I think I write conversa-

tionally because I like to talk. I think that’s my style—I’m talking to another person. I’m talking to you; I’m having a conversation with you; I’m sharing me with you.”

The themes are broader in Phillis Humphries’ poem, in which she breaks down the meaning of democracy. “For each letter I wrote about something that democracy stands for,” she said.

“It’s almost like how the kids on ‘Sesame Street’ learn the alphabet: ‘D: Deter not from equality mindf men of ordinary optimism overcoming doubts.’ So it goes like that—I use each letter to find the words that would match the idea of what democracy means to me.”

Lately at her writers group on the South Side, the election season has prompted a number of conversations about what it means to be an American.

“We’ve discussed how people are asking Obama if he’s patriotic because several times he wasn’t wearing a flag pin. Do I have to wear a flag pin for you to identify me as an American? If I wear a flag pin or if I have a flag hanging on the front porch, would you say I’m more patriotic than the next person who doesn’t? We use symbols to say so many things, but what are the symbols really saying?”