

Thank you, Ann, for your generous introduction, and also for hosting Poetry Day once again this year in the Blaine House.

Ladies and gentlemen, this is a big day, because we have some special guests with us, namely, Richard Blanco, Maine's and America's 2013 Inauguration poet, and the 2013 winner of the Poetry Out Loud competition in Maine, Dyer Rhoads. Moreover, we have a small group of poets on hand to do something here at the Blaine House that's never been done on Poetry Day before -- that is, to launch a brand-new poetry book – an anthology -- this one right here, called *Take Heart: Poems from Maine*, just published by Down East Books.

Take Heart is the first of two anthologies Down East will publish during my term as poet laureate, each of them based on my five-year *Take Heart* column for Maine newspapers, featuring a previously published poem a week by a Maine poet. And I want to start things off by reading just a bit from the introduction of the book about the current situation of poetry and its audience in the United States.

“If we had set out to create a program that was more threatening to the connection between poetry and its audience, we could hardly have done better than the system we have in America today. Poetry books are routinely printed in runs of less than a thousand copies, and only a few are given reviews, or shelf space in bookstores. Partly in self-defense, poets band together in groups or aesthetic schools and offer bookstore readings attended by fellow poets and a few of the like-minded, or university readings attended mostly by students pressed into service. Meanwhile the general public, standing at the edges of such events, decides that today’s poetry is probably not for them.

“Yet people in general continue to value poetry. They understand the poem’s unique power to express in a few words the feelings that matter most to us. That is why they turn to poetry on milestone occasions like weddings and funerals and commencement exercises. It is my mission as Maine Poet

Laureate to find new ways of bringing poetry to the people, reminding them in the process that poetry is not only for such special occasions, but for every day of our lives.”

And so, the *Take Heart* column itself, my first initiative as poet laureate, which was kicked off here back in 2011 and now appears in 30 Maine newspapers with a combined circulation of over a quarter of a million readers – its poets collected in this new *Take Heart* anthology. My second initiative to bring poetry to the people is called, as you may know, “The Maine Poetry Express,” rolled out here at the Blaine House in 2012 with a generous grant from the Maine Humanities Council – a whistle-stop tour of 14 towns all over the state, assembling at each stop two or three Maine poets who read briefly from their work, together with ordinary townspeople of all occupations -- lobstermen, town selectmen, store clerks, and school teachers – who recite Maine poems chosen from two anthologies I've edited explaining what their choices mean to them personally, in their own experience. The Maine Poetry Express is still chugging away, with stops up ahead in Solon, Camden, Portland, and on Chebeague Island, and plans afoot to create new routes for the train in the coming years.

So let me tell you now about that third initiative the First Lady referred to, the brand-new one for 2013. As she mentioned, it's called “Poets in Public,” and its objective is to increase the visibility and presence of today's Maine poets. So, all during the year, with the help of my ongoing and invaluable partner, the Maine Writers and Publishers Alliance, I will sponsor group readings from the *Take Heart* anthology at locations across our state, beginning this month. The featured poets at the events will be residents of those locations, and through their readings, they'll become known by their neighbors through the poems they write. To make Maine poets more visible, we'll also create a CD of selected *Take Heart* poets and others, both reading and discussing their work. Finally, we'll prepare a series of videos of Maine poets for distribution on YouTube and Vimeo, so we can display their gifts not only to their fellow Mainers, but to viewers throughout the country and the world.

In fact, to kick off this new initiative, we have today's program, with its own remarkable set of Maine poets in public, that is, Richard Blanco, and Dyer Rhodes, and our group of *Take Heart* poets

But before we get to the program, let me take just a minute to thank some people who've been instrumental in spreading the word about poetry in our state. One of them is Donna McNeil, who is stepping down at the end of May from her duties at the Maine Arts Commission. Of course, the contributions Donna has made over the years to the arts of Maine are well known, but let me tell you about one that may be new to you. Donna actually founded this annual celebration of poetry at the Blaine House. Yes, she did. So I want to thank Donna for making this event and all the others like it held here over the years possible – and for everything she's done to support my coaching sessions for Poetry Out Loud over the past two years, and to support this laureateship in general. Would you please give a round of applause for Donna McNeil?

Thank you, Donna. And since I just referred to Poetry Out Loud, I must thank Suzanne Nance, who's not only emceed the final competition for two years in a row, but brought Poetry Out Loud to the screen, so to speak, by way of her two beautifully produced specials on Maine Public Television. We all thank you, Suzanne. Maine thanks you.

And I have more thanks left – you see, it really does take a village. So here's my gratitude to the remarkable David Turner, who very much wanted to be here today, but couldn't make it. For nearly two years David was my assistant on the *Take Heart* column, creating the system for permissions and publication we still use today. Because of David's invaluable work, he's one of the people to whom I dedicated my new *Take Heart* anthology.

The other person named in the dedication is Joshua Bodwell, MWPA's Executive Director, who's helped with the Take Heart and Maine Poetry Express initiatives in every way you could possibly imagine, and some others you *could not* possibly imagine. For instance, at my request, Josh and his partner Tammy Ackerman have brought their skills as designers to the task of creating a certain special document – a certificate that I could award to outstanding champions of poetry as I go around the state. Here's a copy of that special document. It's called the Poetic License – fitted out with a beautiful

antique font and lots of curlicues and other decorative elements, and of course, suitable for framing. Oh, and there's an elegant banner Josh and Tammy have placed at the optical center of the poetic license which will bear the name of the recipient – and just underneath the banner, in the midst of all the fun, these serious words of admiration “To honor your commitment to truth, beauty, and the feeling life.” So thank you for your service, Joshua Bodwell, yet again.

Just so you know, following this ceremony, I'll be handing out to every single person I'm thanking today an official signed copy of the Poetic License. Including the First Lady, Ann LePage, who has faithfully welcomed us here each year to celebrate poetry in the Blaine House, and Lizz Sinclair of the Maine Humanities Council, for her help in funding the Maine Poetry Express project and her support of poetry in general. A Poetic License will also go to my editor, Michael Steere of Down, seated among you with his wife Billie. Mike is not only a lover, but writer of poetry, and he's worked with me for more than ten years to bring anthologies of Maine poems to readers here and elsewhere, including, of course, the *Take Heart* anthology itself.

These are some of the prominent citizens of my growing village, I am proud to say, and there are others as well, some who are not here today, and others sitting in this audience – financial sponsors and enthusiasts of the *Take Heart* column, Maine Poetry Express poets and conductors and participants and local photographers, and more, including all the poets who'll soon take to the road to read from the *Take Heart* anthology, and last but not least, Gibson Fay LeBlanc, the award-winning Maine poet who has just agreed to join with me and help with poetry initiatives in the future. So let me ask you now to give one final round of applause for all of them.

Now, at last, to our program – which begins, as it must begin, with Maine's own Richard Blanco, who inspired this nation on Inauguration day with his poem “One Today,” and who was on hand at the Poetry Out Loud ceremony on March 20th, offering encouragement to all the young contestants there. As Richard knows, one of my favor of his website is his description of the dance he does when he's

high from a good poetry day, a dance he calls (and here I quote) “a little Michael Jackson-inspired schtick I do I my pajamas.” After Richard finished reading his poem on the twenty-first of January people across this country felt like dancing, too. Please welcome the poet who made us Mainers so proud on that day, Richard Blanco. – –

-- – Thank you, Richard, for being here today in the Blaine House to inspire us with your work. And here's another poet to inspire us, namely, Dyer Rhoads, who will soon travel to Washington, DC, hi for the for the national Poetry Out Loud competition. Dyer is a student at the Waynflete School, and he's accompanied today by his proud grandparents, John and Kristen Scarcelli, and his proud teacher, Michelle Lettiere. Would you please put your hands up, John and Kristen and Michele? Thanks for coming to show your support today. It probably shouldn't be a surprise that Dyer's favorite academic subject is theater arts. In the future, he says, he wants to become a performer on the professional stage. So maybe we should think of his upcoming performance in DC as the beginning of his future career. Please welcome Dyer Rhoads. – --

-- -- We are proud of you, Dyer. Congratulations, to you, and to your grandparents, and to Michelle and the Waynflete School as well. And break a leg in Washington.

We close the program today with those *Take Heart* poets who who today represent all the others – seventy in all – in the new anthology of poetry I told you about called *Take Heart: Poems from Maine* I'll let them introduce themselves as they come up one by one to read to read their poems on the theme of Maine seasons -- two poems per season, beginning with summer, and concluding with our current season of spring. I'll just add that the last poem you hear today will will be the very first poem we featured in the *Take Heart* column, back in early May of 2011. So, poets? – --

-- Thank you, poets, for your fine reading to launch this new book and conclude our program. Let me point out to everyone that there are copies for purchase of the *Take Heart* anthology directly across the street at the Maine Arts Commission, signed by me and all the poets who read today, together with

volumes signed by Richard Blanco, including his new one called *One Today*, which contains his Inauguration poem.

Thank you all for coming this afternoon to celebrate Maine poets and poetry.