

Local Poet Pens Patriotic Song Calling for Unity

Maria Sonnenberg, for FLORIDA TODAY – Sunday March 1, 2015



(Photos: TIM SHORTT / FLORIDA TODAY)

Bill Moyers said that "poets are witnesses to life."

Poet JoAnna O'Keefe has indeed been a witness to America's growing tribulations, starting very young — years old, in fact — when her family attended the funeral of her father's cousin, a Marine killed in Guadalcanal. She still remembers the scene of the Marine's fiancé sobbing over the draped casket as if it had happened yesterday.

Years later, when her daughter's Brownie troupe baked cookies to send to the young soldiers from their Long Island town serving in Vietnam, O'Keefe's daughter received a heartfelt letter of thanks from one of the soldiers. It turned out to be the last letter he wrote before being killed in action.

"Our community was devastated, we were devastated," O'Keefe said.



Husband Jack gives a hug to JoAnna O'Keefe, after "America at a Crossroads" was played. JoAnna wrote the song that was performed by Chris Finlayson. (Photo: TIM SHORTT/FLORIDA TODAY)

O'Keefe and her husband, Jack, a Marine, spearheaded "A Night for Americans," an event at the New York State Armory to raise funds for the USO and to unite both the "hawks and the doves," as folks for and against the Vietnam War were known at the time. The event brought together a wide range of people, from Bob Hope to Nelson Rockefeller, as the Blue Angels flew over the parade.

"I experienced firsthand that even when divided, the American people love their country and unity is possible," said O'Keefe.

During the war in Iraq, O'Keefe, deeply moved by human sacrifice, delved into those long-ago memories to pen "A Call to Arms," which won first place for poetry from the National League of American Pen Women Florida State Conference.

"Writing poetry helps me to understand what I am feeling and thinking," the Melbourne resident said.

"It feeds my soul as does sharing my poetry with others. It allows me to share my insights, observations and inspirations, my journey, one that has led me through valleys, deserts and dark nights to mountain tops and monasteries, to the quiet place within."

O'Keefe is again on a mission to highlight the need for unity among us. This time, she has chosen song as her medium. Actually, make that a poem turned into song.

With the help of her granddaughter, a graphic designer, O'Keefe created and printed a stunning visual version of the poem centered down the middle of the page with red, white and blue abstract brush strokes subtly showing division.

She calls the poem "America at the Crossroads," for O'Keefe believes unity is critical to America's survival in a world torn apart and that Americans must choose to stand together or risk losing all. Hundreds of copies of the poem were printed.

"My friends and I gave them to our family and friends, even to strangers," O'Keefe said. "The response was resounding. Americans want unity. They want the country to work together and get things done. They want to be that city on the hill, be that light. I was overjoyed that the message of my poem was being received with such fervor."

The poem evolved into a song when O'Keefe heard more distressing national news.

"The refrain came to me," she said. "Let us come together, one mind, one heart. A nation united in a world torn apart."



JoAnna O'Keefe released a song that she wrote titled "America at the Crossroads," performed by Chris Finlayson. The song debuted at the Women's Center Guild brunch held Dec. 10 at the the Lance home on Lansing Island in Indian Harbour Beach. (Photo: TIM SHORTT/ FLORIDA TODAY)

Friends Christine Lance, Robbi Storts-Gray, Susan Masiello, Peggy Gagnon and Lauri Hart became O'Keefe's "poetry in motion" team to help find an arranger and singer for the song. Tony Smith of Magic Lamp Studio suggested pastor and gospel singer Chris Finlayson to record the song. The deal was done.

The song made its formal debut Dec. 10 at the Women's Center Guild holiday brunch held at the home of Christine Lance on Lansing Island. Guests purchased the CD with its flag-covered jacket to send to friends and relatives across the country, launching O'Keefe's grassroots movement to bring unity, healing and hope to the nation.

The song is now on iTunes, Amazon and CDBaby.

"We are thrilled with the response of those who have listened," O'Keefe said. "The American people, and, yes, people of good faith the world over, want our nation to come together, to hold high the torch."

Truth be told, O'Keefe is more of a contemplator than a torch bearer. She studied at the Pecos Benedictine Monastery School for Spiritual Directors, the Center for Action and Contemplation in Albuquerque, New Mexico, and the Benedictine Monastery in Snowmass, Colorado. She also studied Christian spirituality at the Einsiedeln Conference in Switzerland.

Her first book, "Come to the Garden: An Invitation to Serenity" is a spiritual missive to her Maker. The poem was read at the 51st National Prayer Breakfast in Washington, D.C.

Other poetry volumes include "The Shepherd's Promise: Words of Comfort and Hope," "The Path Less Taken: Words of Encouragement," "Morning's Light: Poems from my Journal" and her collection of love poems, "Embraced."

An inspirational speaker, O'Keefe eloquently shares the journey that can lead toward peace both within us and outside us.

O'Keefe is currently working on a new collection of poems titled "Moment to Moment."

It's almost finished, but is still a work in progress.

"I sense there are a few more poems waiting to be written," she said. "They reside, as Longfellow experientially wrote, "in the misty realm of the unknown."

As for the future of "America at the Crossroads," O'Keefe compares it to a beloved child.

"It now has a life of its own, and we hope, a destiny," she said.