

Welcome to AMERICAN MOSAIC from VOA Learning English.

I’m June Simms.

Today we hear songs from country music star George Jones.

We also tell about a Maryland group that is helping older adults avoid moving into retirement communities.

But first we go to New York to hear some very young poets read from their work.

Many people think of poetry as difficult to understand and impossible to write. New York City’s Department of Cultural Affairs tries to change those beliefs. In 2002, it launched “Poem in Your Pocket Day” to teach the joys of reading and writing poetry to everyone, especially children.

Faith Lapidus tells us about a literary center in the city that helps children learn to write poetry.

We are at Poets House, in Manhattan. The library has 50,000 books of poetry. It is 9:30 in the morning, and the children have just been told to read their poems aloud, all at the same time. This may help the children be less nervous as they wait to speak on their own.

For the past few months, they have been learning to appreciate reading and writing poetry. An eight-year-old student named John has written a poem he calls “Answer My Questions.”

“Do you know why worms have to go get back to dirt to survive?  
Why does the Sun have to rise and then fall?  
Why can’t male animals have babies?  
Why can't magic become true so we can do anything we want?  
Does a peacock know how to dance?  
Have you ever seen a mermaid play soccer without feet?”

Lee Briscetti is the director of Poets House. She says childrens’ active imaginations and endless curiosity make them natural poets.

“Seeing children as they’re going through language acquisition is experiencing the joy and the plasticity of language.”

Fourth-grader Kadijatou Darboc has written a poem called

“Elatedness is Everywhere.”

“On the street of elatedness

a cowboy catches a pig and slaps his  
leg and says, “Yee-haw.”

On the street of elatedness

a girl gets a horse painted with splats of red, white and blue with  
50 stars on its face. On the street of elatedness

gooses talk to humans and aliens  
are a girl’s best friend.”

Kadijatou says she also likes to hear other people’s poems.

“Because it can make me see who they really are and what kind  
of a person they are.”

Children can use poetry to show what is happening in their lives. Third-grader Mia LaBianca wrote about her community in "On the Colorless Street."

"On the colorless street  
a man walks in gray  
with no expression.  
Like an ant, no expression.  
On the colorless street,  
a woman dresses in white,  
like a ghost.  
On the colorless street a boy wears black,  
as if he is a shadow.  
On this street,  
no one cares for  
color, NO ONE cares for color."

A poem lets children say what they might not say in a conversation -- listen to "I Wonder," a poem by nine-year-old Ava Gardner.

"I Wonder

I wonder, does the Earth sing to the Moon when it's tired?

Does snow yell to grass when snow is melting?

... When plates are struck, are they moaning and groaning? When people yell, do your ears burst?"

Poet Dave Johnson led the school workshops for Poets House. He says poetry can help build a sense of community. He admits it can be scary to read a poem you have written out loud -- to open yourself up to criticism. But he says taking that risk can promote trust and inspire empathy from listeners.

"We had a reading this morning where one young lady was petrified of getting up in front, in front of this huge room of people...And when she finally got the courage to read, she was crying a little, they all rushed up and hugged her. And I thought, 'You know, it's poetry, but it's more than that. It's this moment, this coming together, this communal act of saying 'It's okay. We're here and we're listening to you.'"

Poets House recently published a book of the poems created during this year's project in the New York City schools.

Eighty-five-year-old Phyllis Ramberg lives alone in Hyattsville, Maryland. She lives in the same house where her parents lived for many years.

“Children keep asking me, ‘When are you going to move into one of those retirement villages?’ I say, ‘No, no. My friends are here, my church is close. I’ve got everything I need, right in this neighborhood.’”

A year ago, Phyllis Ramberg was able to take care of the land around her house. She planted things, removed weeds and dead leaves. This year, she just cannot do it herself.

“Things have changed somewhat. When illnesses happen, you just don’t have the capabilities that you thought you had before.”

That is when the group “Aging in Place” can help. The non-profit group opened two years ago to help older adults in the neighborhood with their everyday needs. Founder Lisa Walker says she and her friends are among the seven percent of Hyattsville natives who are 65 or older.

“A number of my neighbors are also around my age. We started talking about, you know, some of the concerns we had. Several of us had had issues with parents that were getting older and they were far away from them and didn’t know how to take care of them or get support.”

Hyattsville seniors can call “Aging in Place” for help with work around the house or for a drive to the doctor. Then a volunteer is asked to provide the help. Lisa Walker says her crew of volunteers is growing.

“We have about 40 people that have signed up to be volunteers. About 30 of them have gone through background check. And if they’re driving, we check their motor vehicle records as well.”

Most of the calls are for rides to the doctor. Louise Battiste began using Aging in Place services last year.

“They take me to all my medical appointments. Anytime I need something, I call them up, ‘cause I can’t see. I’m an old lady. I’m almost 90.”

Lisa Walker says she and the volunteers gain from the experience.

“I’ve learned a lot about what I need to be thinking about myself in terms of staying connected to people, your family and friends. Do I stay close to them? Or do I try to keep myself immersed in the community, relating to people younger than I am?”

Volunteer Sally Middlebrooks agrees.

“I’m learning a lot about this whole process of aging in my town and in my state and in my country. And I’m learning, to my alarm, that it’s very difficult. But I’m also meeting people who astound me with their flexibility and their sense of humor and their ability to stay very much alive despite aches and pains.”

Not all Aging in Place volunteers are retirees. Twenty-four-year-old Courtney Wattai is a student at American University in Washington. She studies caregiving and plans to have a career working with older people.



"I want to be very involved in their lives, not just sitting at a desk doing things. So, I thought this would be kind of a good way to give tribute to my grandparents and what they had done for me and my brother."

It makes Lisa Walker happy to see the younger generation stepping up. She hopes that's how residents in her neighborhood will always care for each other.

Americans are mourning the loss of a true Country Music great. George Jones died last week at a hospital in the capital of Country Music -- Nashville, Tennessee. He was 81 years old. Christopher Cruise has more about the singer.

George Jones recorded "Why Baby Why" in 1955. It was his first hit song for Starday Records.

Jones was born 24 years earlier in Saratoga, Texas. At the age of 10, he began performing at local night clubs and other businesses. In the late 1940s, he worked at a few Texas radio stations, before joining the United States Marine Corps in 1950. Jones completed his military service three years later, and returned to performing at Texas nightclubs.

He signed his first recording contract with Starday Records, but worked later with several other companies. In 1969, he joined Nashville’s Grand Ole Opry, which has been called the home of American music.

Also that year, Jones married singer Tammy Wynette. Their marriage lasted only six years. But they worked together on a number of songs, including the number one hits “We’re Gonna Hold On,” “Near You” and “Golden Ring.”

Through much of his life, George Jones battled a dependency on alcohol. The addiction almost ruined his career. Some critics called him “No Show Jones” for missing numerous performances. Jones credited his fourth wife Nancy for helping him defeat his alcoholism and giving his life new meaning.

Garth Brooks, George Strait and countless other singers have identified George Jones as a major influence in their music. At age 62, he was accepted as a member in the Country Music Hall of Fame.

In 1999, Jones suffered life-threatening injuries when he lost control his car and struck a bridge near his home. After making a full recovery, he returned to recording and performing shows.

Jones often said that he played, sang and wrote Country songs because of his deep love for the music. He said, “It’s not really that important to me, as far as glory, popularity and those things. I just feel like I’m making people happy. And they sure make me happy when I walk out on that stage. That’s all that’s really important to me.”

We leave you with George Jones’ most famous song, “He Stopped Loving Her Today.”

I’m June Simms. Our program was written by Christopher Cruise and Caty Weaver, who was also the producer. Faiza Elmasry and Adam Phillips provided additional reporting.

Join us again next week for music and more on AMERICAN MOSAIC from VOA Learning English.