



A POET'S JOURNEY

by Shirley J. Lutz, NESTA Personal Fitness Trainer and FITOUR Group Exercise Instructor

Interview with Craig Czury

While working as a high school administrator in Berks County and writing grants to secure an artist-in-residence from the PA Council for the Arts, I met Craig Czury. He became a Poet-in-Residence in the three schools in which I worked. We became friends.

Craig, a former Berks County Poet Laureate, born March 10, 1951, grew up outside of Wilkes-Barre, in the Back Mountain, which straddles both coal mines and natural gas drilling (fracking). "It was time to go home and document the effects of the gas boom the way I had 30 years earlier hitchhiking around the coal region, writing from the gouged earth, gouged people. For the past three years, I've been hitchhiking up and down Rt. 29, between Tunkhannock and Montrose (Wyoming & Susquehanna Counties), conducting interviews with whoever picks me up," as Craig explained his new project. "My dad always picked up hitchhikers, which taught me at an early age that when you need to leave town for any reason, all you had to do is stick your thumb out." Craig's new book, *Because Although Despite*, is a collection of his hitchhiking journal and "thumb notes." Early next year his full volume, *Thumb Notes Almanac*, with photos of the N.E. PA "fracking" scapes, will be published.

Craig moved to Berks County in 1991, as a Poet-in-Residence at the Glenside Elementary School. He continued as an Artist-in-Residence, getting grants and publishing his poetry around the world. In 1999, he was awarded a National Endowment for the Arts community arts grant, through Berks Arts Council, which allowed him to conduct poetry writing and performance workshops throughout Berks County with kids and elders. "For two years I made poetry happen at the homeless shelter, the juvie, senior citizen high-rises, the

state hospital, all of the boys and girls clubs, after-school programs, church programs and summer parks," Craig recounted. "It was my way of creating a documentary of Berks County through the voices of our often neglected people." Craig has gone on to create similar documentaries through poetry in Northern Ireland, Russia, Argentina, Lithuania, Colombia, and Poland.

In 2005, Craig earned an MFA degree in creative writing from Wilkes University, and began a teaching career at Albright College. "At this stage of my life, I get a lot of dignity out of being a college professor. I try to stretch my students beyond an insular campus life into some of Reading's more vibrant hip hop and poetry scenes. They also know of my hitchhiking and always want to hear about my adventures." Craig also rents a room in the Kempton Hotel, where he plays harmonica with the house band on Wednesday nights and is working on a new book from Berks County's oldest hotels, *Bed, Berks and Beyond*.

Many of Craig's books are available at the GoggleWorks.

<http://foothillspublishing.com/2014/id86.htm>

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