The Center for Environmental Literacy at Saint Mary’s College of California
The Center for Environmental Literacy

at Saint Mary’s College of California
The Center for Environmental Literacy (CEL) was founded to promote innovative, low-cost, community-based strategies for connecting youth to the wonder and workings of the natural world. CEL provides “education for sustainability,” striving to meet broad goals of education reform, community building, and leadership training. CEL enables students and their communities to work toward creative, environmentally responsible, equitable societies by finding common purpose and deepening the connections between people and place.

In 2011 River of Words Collection of Children’s Environmental Art and Poetry, which was co-founded by former US Poet Laureate Robert Hass and writer Pamela Michael, became a part of the new Center for Environmental Literacy in the Kalmanovitz School of Education at Saint Mary’s College in Moraga, California.

The River of Words Collection of Children’s Art and Poetry, one of the largest in the world, now resides at Saint Mary’s and is available for scholarly research and the enjoyment of the public.

River of Words: Education for Sustainability

River of Words is an innovative program that advances environmental literacy in youth by combining Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) with the Arts, and utilizing the student’s own community (and watershed) as the context for learning.

Integrating the Arts into our curriculum—transforming STEM into STEAM—provides a key set of creativity-related components that are critical to innovation, and thus, to cultural vitality and economic prosperity.

Our hands-on, place-based approach to learning is designed to:

- Develop informed, civically-responsible citizens, capable of creative and critical thinking, compassion, and problem solving—skills that will be needed to face increasing environmental, social and economic challenges
- Promote a heartfelt and informed understanding of the natural world
- Cultivate a passion for environmental stewardship and justice
- Familiarize students with the process of scientific inquiry
- Nurture a sense of wonder and an appreciation of beauty and nature
- Teach the “language of landscape”—the cultural expressions and events inspired by a particular “place in space”
- Seek comparisons and commonalities between students’ homegrounds and other places and cultures
- Inspire young people to discover the richness and complexity of language, cultural history and the arts
- Give voice and recognition to the creativity and concerns of young people
Since 1995 River of Words has invited children and youth to explore their communities and watersheds and to creatively express their observations through poetry and art. This effort is supported by:

- River of Words’ two innovative, place-based K-12 curricula: Watershed Explorer and One Square Block
- Professional development workshops for educators
- Student workshops for kindergarten through 12th grade
- A free, annual international environmental poetry and art contest, conducted in affiliation with The Library of Congress
- Art exhibitions and presentations in the US and abroad
- Educational publications, including an annual anthology of extraordinary art and “poetry of place” from children around the world
- Leadership and advocacy on behalf of environmental literacy, STEAM education and the arts
- Research and scholarship on effective pedagogical practices and issues
- A network of state and regional River of Words coordinators, based mostly at state agencies, libraries and universities
- A broad coalition of educators, policy makers, business leaders, technology experts, community leaders, conservationists, service providers, artists, designers, and writers, etc. supporting STEM/STEAM programs and implementation

Our Award-Winning Curriculum: Integrating Head & Heart

ROW's two curricula—Watershed Explorer and One Square Block—integrate community engagement, environmental science and the arts, and provide educators with easy-to-use tools that encourage student participation enriched by depth of study in science, technology, engineering, the arts and mathematics (STEAM).

A pioneer in the field of place-based education, River of Words provides investigative, fun, real world learning experiences that help students develop stronger ties to their communities, and enhance their appreciation and understanding of the cultural and natural history of the places where they live.

Watershed Explorer

ROW’s award-winning Watershed Explorer curriculum helps young people explore and interpret their watersheds through a multidisciplinary series of classroom and field activities that combine science, history, geography, math, language, and the arts. Students are encouraged to learn their “ecological address” by honing their observation skills (the basis of both science and art), then reflecting through poetry and art their own “place in space.”
River of Happiness
Mustafa Baqiry, age 15
Quetta, Pakistan (Afghan national)
One Square Block

The One Square Block curriculum builds on the success of our Watershed Explorer curriculum and makes quality, place-based education more accessible and relevant to diverse communities, including urban schools.

Every block tells a story—of plants and animals, history and culture, soil and water. One Square Block invites students to explore a single block of their community—the schoolyard, a local park—then record and interpret what they find there. Each block project posts a detail-rich, standardized “Block Print” online and compares its block with other blocks around the world. The curriculum includes many opportunities to engage the neighborhood in service-learning projects, oral histories, Block Parties and other community-building events.

River of Words curricula are implemented in a variety of settings:

- Classrooms in public, private and religious schools, home schools
- After-school programs, youth and scouting programs
- Summer camps, parks
- Museums, bookstores
- Libraries, community organizations
- Detention centers, homeless shelters

Our Watershed Explorer and One Square Block curricula help educators and students address some of the most challenging learning issues of our day: water resources, climate change, environmental justice, and sustainability.

River of Words Workshops: Sharing What We’ve Learned

River of Words provides professional development opportunities for educators seeking tools, support and inspiration for incorporating sustainability concepts and practices into their teaching.

We offer standards-based, customized workshops for both classroom teachers and informal educators—park rangers, home schoolers, youth leaders, etc.—who work for schools, libraries, museums, community organizations and government agencies. We also lead workshops for students in kindergarten through 12th grade. All our workshops provide ideas and activities for integrating nature and the arts into core subject areas.
Annual River of Words Contest: Our Youth Creativity Awards

Each year we conduct the River of Words International Youth Poetry and Art Contest on the theme of “watersheds,” designed to help children fall in love with language, the arts and the earth.

The renowned competition inspires children around the world to interact with, observe and interpret the natural world, especially their local watersheds. We receive thousands of entries from around the United States and over thirty countries every year. All entrants are acknowledged with a Watershed Explorer Certificate. Winning art and poetry is published in our annual anthology, which is distributed to schools and libraries.

Winners and their families, as well as the River of Words/Kalmanovitz School of Education Teacher of the Year, are honored at a public ceremony in the spring, our Youth Creativity Awards.

The River of Words Collection of Children’s Art & Poetry: An Unparalleled Resource for Research and Scholarship

The Collection

The River of Words Collection of Children's Art and Poetry is comprised of approximately 10,000 drawings, paintings, poems, photographs and collages, created by children and youth, ages 5-19, from around the world.

Of the thousands of submissions received annually, the contest judges select approximately 200-300 entries each year to be added to the permanent collection. The young artists and poets are mostly from the United States, though about one-quarter of the pieces are by young people representing almost thirty other countries.

River of Words art and poetry from the Collection is exhibited extensively in museums, libraries, conferences, schools and other venues, and is also reprinted in textbooks, magazines, annual reports and other publications.

ROW art is also included in several permanent installations, including the Georgia Aquarium, California Science Museum, Library of Congress, Nimbus Fish Hatchery, as well as several outdoor public art settings.
Research & Scholarship

During the last twenty years, River of Words has accumulated not only the world’s largest collection of children’s art and poetry but also a unique treasure trove of original source material for academic research on how children acquire knowledge and interact with the world around them.

Aside from the fact that almost no one saves children’s creative works in any great number, the River of Words Collection is especially valuable for researchers for several reasons:

- Its size
- The span of time it covers (20 years and counting)
- Its geographic and ethnic diversity
- The opportunity it affords for studying children’s developmental progression (because it contains pieces from a given child at age 6, age 8, 13, or 16 and so on.)

To date, the Collection has been the subject of one doctoral dissertation and three master’s theses, as well as numerous articles in scholarly publications. The collection also contains fascinating sub-collections on various themes, for example, a large number of paintings and poems by youth from the Afghan Hazara ethnic group, Taliban victims now living in refugee camps in Quetta, Pakistan. The works, collected over almost two decades, document the displacement and genocide of an entire people, as experienced by its children.

Expanding our Reach with the Help of Many

Partners

River of Words’ founding principles were borrowed from proven conservation movement practices, which include a strong commitment to collaboration, partnerships, savvy use of media, and leveraging of existing resources.

Among the many partners who have helped us further our mission are:

- The Library of Congress Center for the Book
- United States Environmental Protection Agency
- National Endowment for the Arts
River of Words Coordinators

ROW Coordinators work at the state or regional level to promote the River of Words Contest as well as to disseminate our Watershed Explorer and One Square Block curricula. Some administer state-level ROW contests in conjunction with our international contest. Others conduct teacher-training workshops, publish River of Words state anthologies, create state-specific teaching materials, or host traveling ROW exhibits.

Currently, ROW has coordinators in about half of the U.S. states, as well as in France, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Bangladesh and Malaysia. Most of our US coordinators are based at state natural resource agencies, humanities councils, libraries or universities.

Points of Pride

Publications

- Annual anthology of children’s art and poetry, *River of Words: The Natural World as Seen Through the Eyes of its Young People*
- Full-color anthologies of ROW art and poetry published by two American publishing houses, Heyday Books in Berkeley, California and Milkweed Editions in Minneapolis, Minnesota. The poems are primarily written in English, with some in Spanish, Arabic, Dari, Chinese, Dineh (Navajo), American Sign Language, and a scattering of others.
- Numerous articles in academic journals, magazines, etc.
Bird Playing with an Elephant
H.N. Rathnayaka, age 11
Colombo, Sri Lanka
Exhibitions

Art from the ROW Collection has been shown at many museums and public venues, including:

- Sangre de Cristo Museum and Buell Children’s Museum in Colorado
- Library of Congress Young Readers’ Center
- Exploris Museum in North Carolina
- Bay Area Children’s Discovery Museum in San Jose, California
- Children’s Discovery Museum in San Rafael, California
- Cleveland Public Library
- National, state and regional parks

Music Compositions

The freshness, vitality, currency and variety of the poems in the River of Words Collection have been an inspiration and source for composers in many genres. Many have utilized ROW poems in their compositions, which have been performed at venues from Kennedy Center and the National Cathedral to schools and music festivals. Many of the compositions, which range from classical to jazz, have been recorded (even by Frederica Von Stade!) and published as well.

Awards

- Named one of the “100 Most Effective Nonprofits in the Country” by Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University
- Named one of the “100 Best Educational Nonprofits” by Guidestar
- Commendation from US Senator Dianne Feinstein
- Achievement Award from Northern California Independent Booksellers
- Commendation from California State Assembly
Remembered Water
Eunsil Choi, age 17
Lilburn, Georgia
Here or There

In a diverse world,
A world of narrow alleys,
And of wide open green space,
One where the old,
Must accommodate the new,
Where speeders,
Must tolerate the loafers,
We return to our roots,
To learn the strength of our branches.

David Lauve, age 18
Baton Rouge, Louisiana

The Forest’s Haiku

Walking the deer path
Milkweed seeds catch in my hair
Eight Quail in bramble.

Ben Santos, age 13
Columbia, Missouri

Rattlesnake

Rattlesnakes are packed with lots of colors,
no legs, and bad habits
They have tails to shake at you
so you won’t die

Cole Morales, age 7
Laguna Niguel, California

Summer

Flowers bright colored
Blowing in pieceless prairies
I hear them singing

Laura Clemmons, age 11
Lyons, Kansas
**Colorful Shooting Star Night**

In Puerto Rico it’s midnight. We are on the beach. My friend Jason is on his cell phone. I’m tired and looking at the sky.

Out of nowhere I see a blue star go WHAM like a getaway car. Five minutes later Jason says, Juanito, look at the shooting star! And you didn’t believe me before? I say.

We see more colors that night. Yellow, a brightish white. I wonder if they see them in the city. The sky that night was like a flash of snow falling in the streets.

**Destellos de Estrellas Fugaces**


De repente de la nada vio una estrella fugaz Que hizo Wham…como un carro volador.

Cinco minutos más tarde Jason dice, Juanito mira la estrella fugaz! Y no me cresiste anteriormente.

Vemos muchos colores esta noche.

El cielo esta noche parece un destello cayendo sobre las calles.

Carlos Alameda, age 11
Lancaster, Pennsylvania

---

**I Am**

You may think
I am a shadow,
But inside
I am a sun.

Damia Gates, age 9
Pasadena, California

---

**Horizon please continue**

until the end of the sky

Your

Mingled tinted twilights

Prelude to a pearly sliced moon

You are

the dividing line

between gravity and geese

Crossed by dimmed silhouettes.

Ginny Drake, age 14
Seattle, Washington
I am paper without a drawing.
I want people to write on me.
I know all the kinds of ink in the world.
I come from trees.
I have seen all the animals of the forest.

Yo soy papel sin escritura.
Yo quiero que las personas escriban en mi.
Yo se todos los tipos de tinta en el mundo.
Yo venga arboles.
Yo he vista todos los animals en el bosque.

Snowflake

Six pointed wonder
Look at the blanket of snow
Snowmen start like this

Andrew Baxter, age 11
Gibsonia, Pennsylvania

Reflection

Yesterday,
I found a person just like me
in the frozen pond.

Noah Jordan, age 9
Alma, Maine

My World

I stand on the moon
Looking at the big, round, blue earth
And I’m going to eat it
Very, very slowly.

Alexa Beaver, age 7
Fruita, Colorado
The Center for Environmental Literacy at Saint Mary’s College of California

The Center for Environmental Literacy (CEL) was founded to promote innovative, low-cost, community-based strategies for connecting youth to the wonder and workings of the natural world. CEL provides “education for sustainability,” striving to meet broad goals of education reform, community building, and leadership training.

The Center for Environmental Literacy (CEL) is located in the Kalmanovitz School of Education, Filippi Academic Hall, Suite 240.

Pamela Michael, Director
p: (925) 631-4289
f: (925) 376-8379
e: pm7@stmarys-ca.edu
www.stmarys-ca.edu/cel

1928 Saint Mary’s Road
PMB 4350
Moraga, CA 94575-4350

Fishermen at Work
Jerrika Shi, age 17
Manila, Philippines