

# From the Lily Pad

The Newsletter of the Nick Virgilio Haiku Association || Spring 2019



## Writers House Opening

In August 2017, NVHA President George Vallianos and myself (VP Henry Brann) accepted the title to the house at 1801 Broadway in exchange for a dollar.

This Camden house, the site of the office and pharmacy of Dr. J.W. Donges and home to his family, was to become the Nick Virgilio Writers House. We spent the weeks and months completing unfinished construction work as well as furnishing the house and installing fire extinguishers, telephone, television and internet.



We set a date for our Grand Opening on the last weekend of National Poetry Month -- April 28th and 29th, 2018.

All that was left to do was to import Nick's books, letters, poems and other items which had been stored for safe keeping, and to create a list to invite poets and friends from around the world, plan refreshments, and design activities for children and adults alike.

Oh, and the garden we pictured in back of the house had no shape or content and no garden gate. In a process that began in January and reached fruition on April 27th, we designed, built and hung a garden gate, installed a curb separating the patio from the border garden, planted a Cherry tree, various hostas, ferns and other perennials, and created a watering system.

On Saturday we held a poets' preview to the Grand Opening, with tours, readings, and showings of our films, and on Sunday we hosted one hundred and fifty guests including representatives from the City of Camden, the Heart of Camden Housing Corporation, and our donors, American Water, PNC Bank and Campbell's Soup, from whom Heart of Camden received the \$900,000 used to renovate the historically registered property.



George emceed from the top of the ramp for the crowd out on Jasper Street. Following introductions, we all packed into the first floor for a heartfelt dedication and blessing of the house by Monsignor Michael Doyle who, it must be said, had made this day possible. We decorated the House with Ikebana (Japanese flower arrangements), held demos in origami for the kids, and invited those

who wished to write a haiku on a piece of construction paper to be tied with twine on the branches of the Cherry tree. The main events were readings held on our well-appointed second floor front “parlor.” Poets read who were from Camden, Philadelphia, Allentown, New York, New Jersey, Maryland, Russia, Japan, Ireland, and elsewhere.



In all, our Grand Opening was an auspicious beginning to a worthwhile enterprise, which now supports literacy and writing among school children in partnership with Mighty Writers, plus poetry readings, book publishing, haiku scholarship, and many more activities scheduled or planned. See our [nickvirgiliohaiku.org](http://nickvirgiliohaiku.org) webpage for details.

the life after life  
in Camden’s fertile soil  
poetry blooms



## Gravesite Birthday Celebration, 2019

This year, the Nick (and Tony) Virgilio Gravesite Celebration in Harleigh Cemetery will be held on Sunday, June 23rd, from 1:30 until 3:30 pm.

We celebrate Nick’s birthday on the Sunday of, or before, his June 28, 1928 birthday by reciting our haiku, and other short forms of poetry from the granite podium which is his gravestone.

Simultaneously, we honor Tony Virgilio, who was untiring in keeping his brother’s legacy alive and whose ashes are buried next to Nick.

The 30th anniversary of Nick’s passing is especially poignant in that we are, at last, accomplishing the twin goals of our Nick Virgilio Haiku Association.

As Nick loved to teach and as he was a world-renowned haiku master, we have made it our mission to further his legacy as both an author and teacher.

To those ends we have published a book of his haiku and we have a new one in the works. Since last August, the Nick Virgilio Writers House with the Mighty Writers is now providing an opportunity for Camden children of all ages to think clearly and write with clarity.

One of Virgilio’s influences is the poetry of Walt Whitman, another Camden native. This year is Whitman’s 200th Anniversary and Nick’s podium is a stone’s throw from Walt’s tomb.

Camden’s great poets  
Whitman and Virgilio  
lie in wait for you

Birthday cake and refreshments will be served.

## Nick Virgilio Digital Archive Nears Completion

Between 1961 and 1989, Nick Virgilio wrote thousands of haiku poems on his upright Remington typewriter. Some 200 of these poems were published in small-press magazines and in his *Selected Haiku* (1985 and 1988), but many more remained unpublished in several large boxes in the basement of his Niagara Road home in Camden. Thanks to a fund donated by his brother Tony Virgilio, the unpublished poems have now been scanned and saved in digital format by Robeson Library at Rutgers University in Camden, under the direction of Librarian Julie Still. The scans will be uploaded into a public database during the coming year. When finished, the database will make accessible the entire range of Nick Virgilio's poetic achievement. It will allow the full body of his work to be searched and filtered by words, phrases, or themes that Nick used in his poems. It will help readers trace the creation of a particular poem across days, or sometimes years, of effort. Younger poets may learn how to fashion a poem by balancing word, image, and meaning.

To enhance the usefulness of this resource, the Board of the NVHA has approved a plan to publish a selection of poems from the database that will illustrate the evolution of Nick's most significant published poems through their variant earlier states. The book will also include a selection of Nick's correspondence with other poets and unpublished critical commentary on Nick's work. It is expected that the book will be published by 2021.

### Ode to the Last Haiku, 3/8/19

This past Monday I went out in the Writers House garden to photograph the Mulberry trees for our tree surgeon. I noticed our Cherry tree still had some shreds of the twine we used to hang strips of paper at our opening celebration with haiku written on each one. There was one poem

still hanging, as it were, by a thread. The construction paper was curled and torn, the ink was so faded I couldn't read the words so I enlarged the script with my camera and was able to read the following poem:

brushing pink petals  
from her long dark hair  
the prostitute

To find this singular poem hanging in our tree where there had been dozens seemed in itself poetic in the Japanese tradition of Wabi Sabi (beauty in imperfection).

This unsigned poem by an attendee at the Writers House opening almost a year ago had the quality of one of Virgilio's urban haiku -- as Sacred Heart pastor Fr. Michael Doyle said about Nick, "he mined beauty from the gutters of Camden."

Our Cherry tree blossomed and had begun to drop petals at the time of our opening . . .



*Pictured above is the poem on a wisp of a paper beneath the tree.*

### "Virgilio" Appears in Paul Muldoon Poem

"American Standard," a poem by the Irish poet Paul Muldoon, features a character named "Virgilio." The poem, five pages in length, is published in the February 1, 2019, issue of the *Times Literary Supplement*.

As in all of Muldoon's poems, the sense is not perfectly clear. Nor is the identity of "Virgilio," who first appears as a waiter, "Virgil," at the poet's table in Laredo ("Tonight we're offering gator-ribs marinated in Colt 45 / with a reduction of primeval slime"). As the poem continues, Virgilio becomes the poet's companion in a cross-country ramble ("Tonight Virgilio and I will sleep on gunny sacks / stuffed with Spanish moss"). Virgilio's mother, Verónica, works as a housemaid, laboring in vain "to wipe out a housefly baked into the porcelain."

Whether or not the character is based on Nick Virgilio, there is little doubt that Muldoon is acquainted with Nick Virgilio's name and works. Muldoon is a professor of poetry at Princeton University and the author, among other books, of *Hopewell Haiku* (1997). We'll have to ask, next time he visits Camden, if he had Nick Virgilio in mind.

## Nick Virgilio Writers House Winter & Spring Programs

This winter and spring, the Nick Virgilio Writers House made its first steps towards becoming a home to a variety of literary and arts programs and events. Last fall, we hired our first part-time staff member, Program Director Stephanie Cawley. Stephanie is a poet with an M.F.A. in Creative Writing from the University of Pittsburgh. While Stephanie has moved on to full-time work elsewhere, in her months at the Nick Virgilio Writers House she worked to develop and implement programs that promote poetry and build inclusive literary community. In addition to behind-the-scenes administrative and communications work, she coordinated writing workshops, literary events, and a bi-weekly meditation program held at the Writers House. She also helped coordinate with and support the efforts of Mighty Writers Camden.

This winter, the Nick Virgilio Writers House was home to a monthly poetry reading series, Unknown Flower, which takes its name from a haiku Nick Virgilio wrote for his younger brother Larry who died in the Vietnam war: "deep in rank grass, / through a bullet-riddled helmet: / an unknown flower."

The reading series spotlighted the work of emerging and established poets in the South Jersey and Philadelphia area including Gregory Pardlo, Cynthia Dewi Oka, Patrick Rosal, Kirwyn Sutherland, Nomi Stone, and Sham-e-Ali Nayeem. We also featured poets Cassie MacDonald, Kate Delany, and Therése Halscheid at a Women's Poetry Reading organized by board member Theresa Banford.

Our cozy living room space has been enriched by all these poets and their brilliant work.

## A Mighty Partnership

In 2018, the Nick Virgilio Haiku Association partnered with Mighty Writers to create a vibrant series of after school and evening programs at the Writers House. Mighty Writers is a Philadelphia-based non-profit engaging children in writing with a mission "to teach kids to think and write with clarity." Participants are children from elementary school through high school from Camden, many from low-income households, in a city where bringing high-quality writing and literacy programming to youth is especially crucial.

The program reached almost 60 children and teens in the 2018-2019 school year.

We are pleased to be able to share the results of a survey of participants fielded by Mighty Writers. Of the 26 respondents from Mighty Writers Camden (filled out by parent, child or teen after participation in MW workshops), findings showed the value of the 10-workshop program:

- 65% of participants said their grades in writing, English or language arts have improved.
- Children who attended the workshops were moved to do more writing on their own than those who did not. Asked “how often did you write on your own, outside of school,” before taking the workshop, nearly half (47%) said they wrote outside of school maybe a few times a month or never. After, nearly  $\frac{3}{4}$  of attendees said they write outside of school every day or a few times a week, saying they “enjoy writing more” (85%) and even identify as a writer (53%).
- Attendees found they enjoyed writing: Asked how they felt about writing before attending the workshop, the children were pretty evenly divided between “a little bit good” to “not good at all” and “good/ to very good.” After the program, 95% had shifted to the “good to very good” group with fully 60% saying “very good.”
- Nine out of 10 children who attended said they want to return for another series of workshops.

We are thrilled that these young people are writing in the Nick Virgilio Writers House nearly every day, and we hope to continue to serve as a home for young writers for many years to come.



# Give

If you like what we're doing to promote poetry and literacy in Camden and beyond, give as you are able to support our mission.

You can donate by PayPal on [www.nickvirgiliohaiku.org](http://www.nickvirgiliohaiku.org) or by check made out to the Nick Virgilio Haiku Association and mailed to 16 Sandringham Terrace, Cherry Hill, NJ 08003.

If you would like to support our mission through volunteering, contact us at [nick.virgilio.haiku@gmail.com](mailto:nick.virgilio.haiku@gmail.com) to find out how to get involved.

# What's Coming Up

at the Nick Virgilio Writers House

**Saturday, May 18, 12PM-4PM**

**Festival for the Arts**  
a celebration of the arts  
in the Waterfront South



**Sunday, June 23, 2PM-4PM**

**Annual Gravesite Reading**  
honoring Nick Virgilio  
in Harleigh Cemetery

## Find us Online

**Website:** [nickvirgiliohaiku.org](http://nickvirgiliohaiku.org)  
**Facebook:** Nick Virgilio Haiku Association  
**Instagram:** @nickvirgiliowritershouse  
**Twitter:** @NVWritersHouse