

# Iconic local street poet finds new fame

A photo exhibit showcases Ottawa's homeless poet, reports Taline Bedrossian.

On the corner of George Street and Sussex Drive, homeless poet Dave Dessler sells poetry, written on cardboard scraps, in order to survive. He is an outsider but, to the director of La Petite Mort Gallery, he is also an artist.

In July, Dessler's poetry was featured in an outsider art exhibition at the gallery on Cumberland Street, showcasing artwork considered outside mainstream culture. Owner and director Guy Bérubé wanted to promote outsider art in a more accessible venue.

"Out of the four artists, [Dessler] was the one that people were most impressed by," says Bérubé. "But what really got to me was his age, he's the same age as me, we're both 45 and I was thinking what a difference in lives we have."

Recently, Dessler participated

in an exhibition called "Low" at La Petite Mort during Festival X, a photography festival that wrapped up Sept. 30. The exhibition featured photos of 12 local homeless men taken by American photographer Jesse Burke. During the project, Dessler acted as a liaison between the gallery and the models.

"Dave is a very friendly, concerned person – he was so helpful," says Burke, who explains he wanted to show these men as something other than outsiders. Burke sees the photographs as beautiful icons that reveal vulnerability beneath a calloused exterior.

He was impressed with the way Dessler's work crosses certain boundaries in the art world.

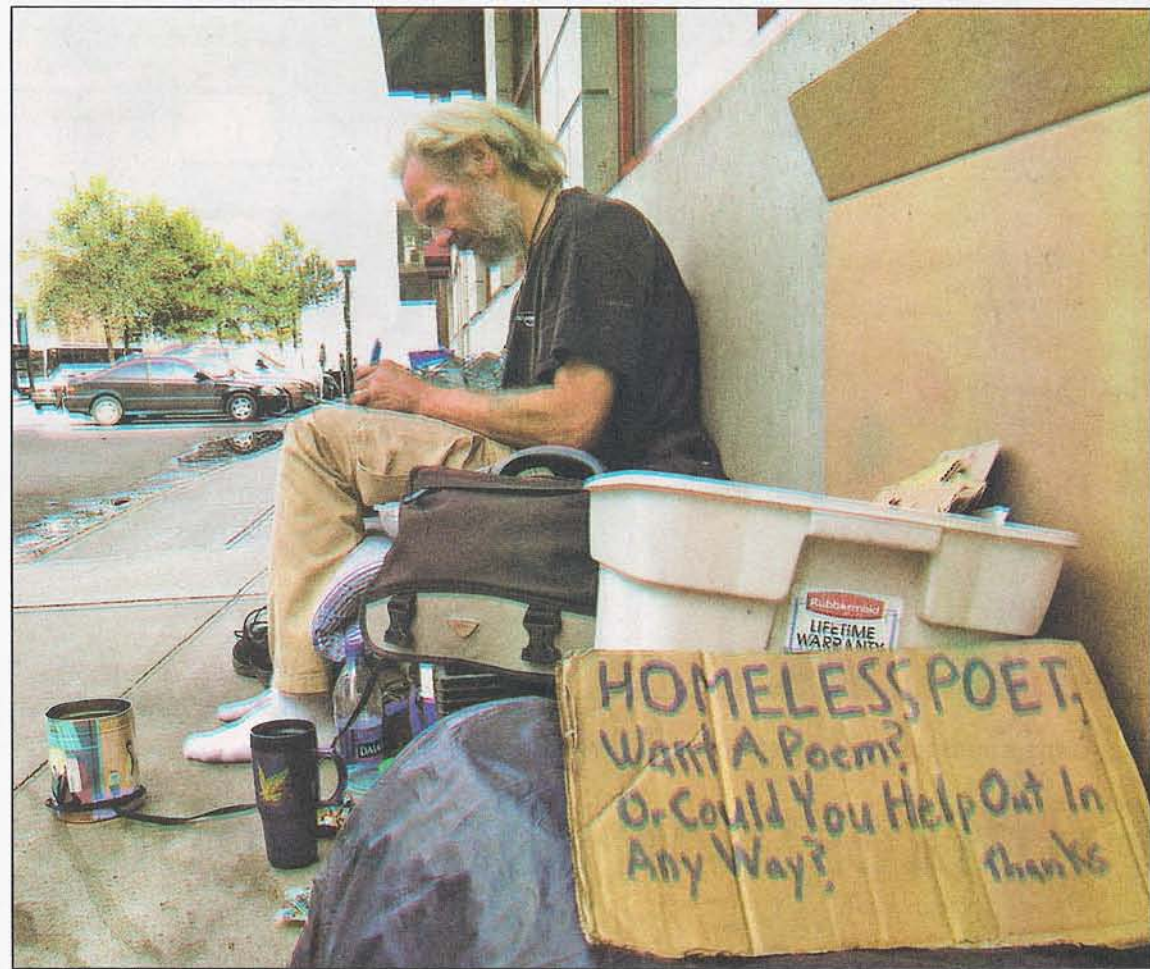
Dessler doesn't price his poetry.

He charges a minimum two dollar "creativity fee" and lets the buyer determine a poem's monetary value.

"It doesn't matter to me

because it's not about the money, it's about the poetry," says Dessler. "If it was about the money I'd be pricing."

He quit school in grade nine and earned wages by doing physical labour. Now, with back problems and arthritis, Dessler can no long-



Rachel MacNeill, Centretown News

Street poet Dave Dessler plies his trade behind Chapters in the Byward Market.

er do physical work and he isn't trained for anything else.

Dessler writes about his personal experiences, like being outside in the rain, to trigger an immediate emotional response. His first hand accounts, Burke says, are unique and have greater social connotations.

"Art work doesn't have to be expensive or manicured if the meaning is strong and it speaks to people," he says.

But Dessler doesn't see himself as a mediator between those who live on the streets and those who just walk on them. What bridges the gap, he says, is when people

let down their guard and speak with him.

Dessler has received as much as \$20 and as little as \$2.25 for his poems. But he charges a minimum amount so that he can at least afford markers, which he uses to write the short poems on cardboard squares and rectangles.

In one of his poems, Dessler writes about "pullin' a fully, up in the air, trying to land on [his] feet." To him, "pullin' a fully," means to make a full turn, like a somersault.

So far, writing poetry has had a positive influence on his life and he hopes one day it will take him off the streets.

He considers his art a way to give back to those who help him. Both Bérubé and Burke own original pieces. And because he offers up something in exchange, he calls himself a busker, not a panhandler.

"I don't sit out here just wanting people to put money in my hand for nothing," he says. "I want to give them an opportunity to walk away with something for themselves."

Dessler is currently working on a book of poetry. In the future, he would like to write short stories or a novel chronicling his observations on the streets of Ottawa.