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Poetry and Culture Compute for Clarkson University Professor

Monday August 1, 2016

Associate Professor of Computer Science Jeanna Matthews puts her own imprint on Clarkson University's motto, "Defy Convention." As she says, "computer scientists don't conventionally write poetry and Amish/German girls from Ohio don't conventionally love Spanish."

Her love of language and culture recently earned her the Rhina P. Espailat Award and a \$500 prize in a contest sponsored by the Poetry Center at West Chester University. The award recognizes poems written in Spanish and translations of English poems to Spanish.

Espailat, born in the Dominican Republic, started writing poetry in Spanish and English after her family was exiled to the United States. She is widely published in both languages.

As you may well guess, the girl from Ohio was honored for a poem she wrote in Spanish, "Regalos del Invierno" (Winter's Gifts). It is from her book of poetry *Playing Hard to Get and Other Sins/Haciendome la difícil y otros pecados*.

"It means a lot to me to develop parts of my life that are not necessarily related to computer science," she says. While she has no Spanish genealogy, her heart clearly beats in Latin rhythms. She even teaches Latin dance.

"Spanish makes me happy. Latin music makes me happy. I do like languages in general but none quite as much as Spanish," she adds. "I feel a little bit like a different person in Spanish than English. In Spanish, I'm much more likely to listen carefully, and to be patient."

Matthews joined the faculty at Clarkson in 2000. She's happy with her success in computer science but was "really delighted" to have one of her poems win. At the awards ceremony, she was especially thrilled to meet Rhina Espailat, who gave her the "great gift of detailed feedback" on her writing. Matthews also enjoyed hearing other poets read their work.

So how did this writer emerge from the esteemed engineers, scientists, mathematicians, entrepreneurs and health care faculty at Clarkson? Matthews has always loved poetry and recently completed a bachelor of arts degree in Spanish from SUNY Potsdam. She has also been studying writing at SUNY Potsdam, which finally opened the door to thinking



Clarkson University Associate Professor of Computer Science Jeanna Matthews recently won the Rhina P. Espailat Award in a contest sponsored by the Poetry Center at West Chester University. Above, Matthews (center) is congratulated by Rhina Espailat (left) and Kean Spencer, whose family sponsors the award in the name of his mother, Iris N. Spencer.

of herself as a poet, she notes. She also expresses her creativity through art. A photo she took was published in the Fine Arts Up North calendar for April, and some of her work was exhibited at the Frederic Remington Art Museum in Ogdensburg last summer.

To others interested in writing and language, she suggests these venues to find like-minded friends: Saint Lawrence Area Poets (SLAP), SUNY Potsdam Writers' Cafe, Potsdam Poetry Club, and Cafe Latino at SUNY Potsdam.

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</sites/default/files/media/image/2017-06/jmatthews-espallat-award.jpg>

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