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### Ahwatukee professor mourns poet's death.

# Local prof reflects on poet friend Nikki Giovanni

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AFN Guest Writer

Poet Nikki Giovanni's death on Dec. 9 hit me in a way that I had not expected. First, I didn't know that she was sick—her third bout with cancer, I later found out.

Secondly, she and I had just texted briefly the day after the US presidential election when I shared with her that I had just had a "good cry"—the title of 2017 volume *A Good Cry: What We Learn from Tears and Laughter*. The typically uncensored part of Nikki's response back to me was: "We will get through this ... Forward to cultivate our own garden. Take care. Keep your job."

That message was on Nov. 6, at 9:33 am (MST/AZ). When I received the news of her death as I was fumbling in my garage, I immediately forgot what was I was doing and grabbed my laptop to reflect on, process, and grieve a friendship that blossomed from a 1980's undergraduate letter that I sent to her, never really expecting a response.



Poet Nikki Giovanni, who died last month, and Ahwatukee professor Dr. Neal Lester were long-time friends and the first seeds of that relationship were sown when he was a college undergrad. (Rebekah Ross/Submitted)

Ours was not a friendship where we phoned each other everyday or met at conferences but rather a connection

that first began when I was an undergraduate at what is now the University of West Georgia College in Carrollton,

GA, taking a summer modern and contemporary poetry course wherein Nikki Giovanni was probably one of a handful of Black poets in the course textbook.

I selected her volume *My House* (1972) to analyze and was encouraged by my professor to write to her. I had no idea what I should have wanted from her and had no idea what to ask her. I naively decided to ask her to explain her entire volume to me - everything about the volume, work that was technically mine to do based on research not necessarily on the poet's telling me about her poetry. Here's that rather 1 July 1980 letter that I sent to her:

*Dear Ms. Giovanni,*  
*I am a senior English major at West Georgia College, Carrollton, Georgia enrolled in Modern Poetry. In the class, each student has been asked to choose a modern, twentieth-century poet or poetess, to investigate. Since some of your works were presented in the textbook The*

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*Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry, and since my sister, a student at Savannah State College, Savannah, finds your work nothing short of delight, I anxiously and excitedly selected your My House volume as my focus of concentration.*

*Hence, I would appreciate any comments that might assist me in interpreting, understanding, and analyzing your poetry. I would especially appreciate any personal comments on tone, language, common themes and their motivation, and poetic techniques which make your poetry "stand out" among other modern poets and poetesses of today. Please Rush!*

I kept what I sent to her because the unopened letters kept coming back "undeliverable." "Famous folks" don't have a single easily accessible address so I have tried as many as I could find from various published library directories. Here's her handwritten notecard response, dated Sept. 19, 1980:

*Dear Neal Lester—Sorry this is so late. My father had a stroke and I've not been in NYC very much. Hope you haven't graduated! Or hope you have which—even is better for you.*

*I've no insight on my poetry. This is a bio list and a few comments by others. Hope you'll forgive me if I've strong you out. Though of course, by the student that you are[,] you came through with flying colors! Right!! Nikki Giovanni.*

To this day, I have no idea which addressed letter actually reached her of the many I sent out. That she responded at all with such genuineness, care, and cheerleading confidence—within three months of my inquiry to her—unknowingly for me then seeded a friendship that would take place over many years of letters, notes, and holiday cards filled with that same compassion, care, wit, and good humor.

That relationship officially began 31 years later, in 2011 when I was Dean of Humanities in the College of Liberal Arts at Sciences at Arizona State University (ASU) helping to co-host Nikki Giovanni for an annual Johnathan and Maxine Marshall Distinguished Lecture keynote. Although I had not been responsible for the campus invitation, she and I seemed to connect then on a level that was not just formal.

When I formally introduced her to the overwhelmingly diverse ASU and community audience, she and I quipped



Dr. Neal Lester and the late poet Nikki Giovanni have been on stage several times for literary events. (ASU Project Humanities)

about my letter to her those many years before, she pledging right then and there that we would become pen pals since she didn't do technology. As anyone who attended her engagingly entertaining, almost stand-up comedy lecture on poetry and compassion, can attest, the Friday night gathering was nothing less than a house party, the good energy of community palpable.

That she had her audience singing Motown tunes acapella following her lead was something I had never experienced in a campus academic setting—and haven't since. She, too, felt and appreciated the party energy, handwriting this quick note to me on Oct. 12, 2011:

*Dear Neal—What a wonderful evening with you, Mrs. Marshall and the ASU family. I'm so pleased to have been invited to the party. --Nikki*

We must have exchanged 25 to 30 such letters and notes since then. In the last couple of years, we were sending quick texts, she often not knowing who was sending the texts until she asked me to clarify my identity. I was not listed her saved contacts. That was Nikki and technology.

I have no recollection of what I initially wrote to her over these years as there was no reason for me to hang on to those. She, however, would reference a book or

an article that I sent with appreciation and end her notes asking about me and my family's safety either in the hot desert sun or the flooding desert. She was caring and she cared.

When she invited me and some students to her teaching university, Virginia Tech, for a celebration of Toni Morrison in 2012, she saw me at the pre-event reception table with Morrison and later commented that Toni enjoyed the presence of "handsome young men."

I was the one awed to be in Morrison's presence. Following that invitation, she invited me to give a lecture at Virginia Tech on my research regarding the race and gender politics of hair. That's when she and her partner Ginney invited me into their homes for an afternoon visit. It was special to be considered one of their trusted visitors.

I saw her first edition book collection, her assortments of hippo figurines and giraffes. I later sent her a couple of small hippos; she wrote back with appreciation.

By the time I invited her back to ASU in 2014, she and I were buddies. Before her community lecture the next day after her arrival at the Mesa Arts Center, we hung out in downtown Tempe, just walking and talking.

Since I was hosting her solo this visit,

she attended with me a Project Humanities memorial tribute to Maya Angelou that I was facilitating at the Helen P. Mason Performing Arts Center, a partnership with the Black Theater Troupe. When I was in her presence, she was not the famous Black Arts "Princess of Black Poetry"; she was "Nikki," never "Dr. or Ms. Giovanni." She insisted on that!

As I continue to reflect on our friendship and to grieve her death, I am still baffled that she invited me into her circle.

I am not a poet. I am not a literary scholar who has written about or even analyzed her poetry—beyond the few selected ones I routinely teach in my undergraduate African American literature survey courses. We never even talked about whether I taught her poetry.

As I think about her life, her death, and her legacy, I see many tributes on social media and in media and realize many times over just how special our relationship was to her and me. I have not heard others talking about notes and letters she wrote to them although I am sure I am not the only faithful pen pal that she had. What I do know, though, in this moment of sadness and loss, is that she gifted me with her friendship and that these letters are forever treasured memories.

In her comments on death and dying, she has left profound personal and poetic commentaries life, Black love, self-love, revolution, Black womanhood, family, happiness, romance, and humanity: "I hope I die warmed by the life I tried to live."

At the same time, she speaks to and embraces a truth about death, dying, and being remembered—or not:

*"I recommend being old. I really do.... There's a time cycle on all of us. So, the clock is ticking. Eventually, the alarm will ring. And that will be the end of that. You will or will not be remembered. That's up to somebody else. It has nothing to do with you because you are now gone. And if you live on, it's because you are remembered. If you don't, you don't know if anyway because you are gone."*

To so many of us, Nikki was and is a gift whose words and memories will keep on giving. ■

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