

# Poetry with a punch

## From martial arts to verse

By Glenna Holloway  
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

**J**ames Langlas faces Glen Brown as Brown executes a swift kick and a hand strike that Langlas blocks. Langlas counterattacks with a front snap kick followed by a back kick. The people watching gasp. But not in fear of mayhem. The fighters are friends.

Langlas is Brown's tae kwon do instructor. They're demonstrating a controlled, difficult series at Langlas' Tae Kwon Do, a school of martial arts in Winfield. When it's over, they bow to each other.

Neither man is the type you would expect to throw punches and break boards with his feet. When not wearing the traditional *dobok*, the two-piece white cotton uniform tied with a belt in a color representing a status they've achieved, they are high school English teachers. And both are serious, nationally published poets.

"We met through poetry," said Brown, who lives in Glen Ellyn. "In 1990, Dr. Langlas had a poem in Poetry magazine called 'Waiting to Adopt a Child.' I liked it. It was a poignant poem, and I empathized with it because there was a time when my wife and I thought we weren't going to have children. When I found out Dr. Langlas lived in Wheaton, I decided to call him. After that, we met at a poetry reading in Chicago. Two years later, when my son Geoffrey got interested in tae kwon do through a park district self-defense program, I learned by accident about the Langlas tae kwon



Tribune photo by George Thompson

English teachers Glen Brown (left) and Jim Langlas have formed a friendship based on the unlikely combination of tae kwon do and poetry.

do school nearby."

That's when Brown and his son began taking lessons from Langlas. Brown, 43, who just earned his 1st degree black belt, calls Langlas his mentor. And he still calls him Dr. Langlas, or *sabum nim* (Korean for instructor), when they're in the *dojang*, the training hall where the exercises and sparring take place.

Langlas, 43, holds a 5th degree black

belt in tae kwon do. His doctorate is in English, his heart is in teaching, and his poetry is in such important magazines and journals as *American Scholar* and *Kansas Quarterly*.

He has taught English since 1974, first at Wheaton-Warrenville High School, then at Wheaton North where he is the English Department chairman. He opened his first tae kwon do academy in 1980 in West Chicago and

taught the art at Wheaton-Warrenville as an extracurricular course.

Attila Weninger, the principal at Wheaton North, calls Langlas the complete professional: "He's extremely competent, creative and ethical. I consider him a leader. He involves the total student. It's not just a matter of instructional delivery. Jim's manner is

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Lucia Getsi,  
literature professor

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# Poets

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very quiet, but he excites the intellect. He knows his material, and he awakens the students' own unique talents. He has a gift for drawing out kids with his questioning techniques, getting them into critical thinking."

"Jim's a born educator," said his wife, Michelle, who met him on a blind date in college. They've been married 20 years and have two children, Jack, 11, and Chelsea, 7. "He enjoys it, really enjoys helping kids," she said. "After they graduate, they keep in touch. And everywhere we go, even as far away as Montana, we bump into his former students. They're always telling me, 'Your husband is the best teacher I ever had.'"

Glen Brown's wife, Marilyn, hears the same thing about her husband. "He gets visits, phone calls and letters from old students: 'Dear Mr. Brown, I learned more from you than in my college classes.' Sometimes they just say thank you. It's Glen's greatest reward," Marilyn said. "And it makes me very proud of him."

The Browns have been married 13 years. Besides Geoffrey, 9, they have a daughter, Suzanne, 5.

Marilyn says she was happy when Glen began writing again "because he wrote some poetry 20 years ago, then stopped. Now his work goes in a different, more personal direction. It's like coming full circle. I'm not Glen's best critic, but I'm his greatest fan. Sometimes I don't think he realizes how far he's come in such a short time."

Michelle Langlas likes her husband's poetry, too, even if he does call her his worst critic. But he admits her comments are good for him.

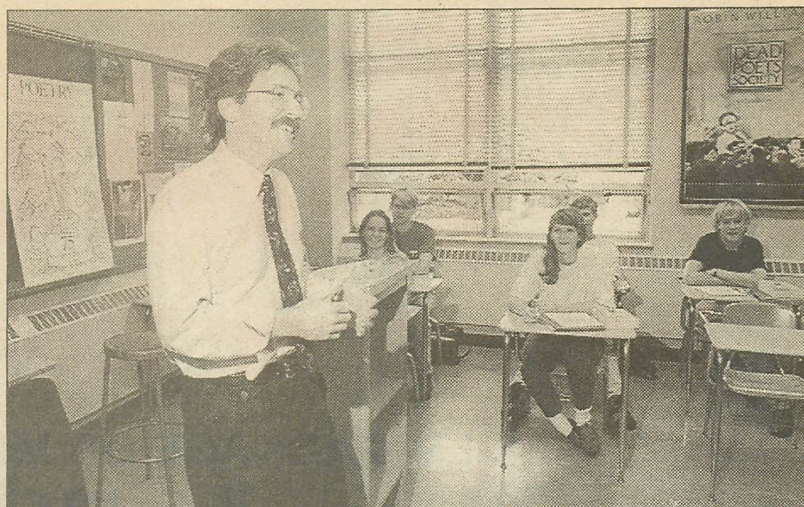
Both Brown and Langlas write modern free verse requiring something akin to martial arts discipline. Brown says he gets an idea and lets it incubate. "I don't think I decide the time to write it. It's more like the moment chooses me. I get an image, maybe one line or a phrase. For some reason, my best writing time is in November and March. Weather and being indoors make me introspective."

Jeffery Warmack, a senior, is in Brown's creative writing class at Lyons Township High School in LaGrange. Under Brown's tutelage, he has won several poetry awards, including the 1st-place cash prize in this year's annual student contest sponsored by Poets & Patrons Inc. of Chicago.

Warmack said of Brown's poetry and teaching: "He takes twigs of language and helps readers see the trees of everyday life. And he's really helped me develop my own voice."

Brown also has other budding poets in a creative writing class he has taught for 15 years at College of DuPage in Glen Ellyn.

At Lyons Township High School, Brown's classroom walls bear quotes, cartoons and posters ranging from Socrates to Robin Williams in "The Dead Poets Society." Students sit on either side facing the middle and one another with Brown roaming the space between. His approach is low key as he encourages individual responses to a reading assignment. From an African story about supernatural beings who control nature and require human sacrifice, Brown



Tribune photo by John Dziekan

Glen Brown, who just earned his 1st degree black belt in tae kwon do, teaches creative writing at Lyons Township High School.

evokes a lively discussion, leading it into the current arena of political problems and values. He makes his students feel their opinions are important even if he doesn't agree with them.

Brown's excerpted poem "Keeping a Net Beneath Them" captures the perennial high school scene from the wry personal view of a veteran teacher of teenagers: *I open the book and pump four poems into their heads, push a paper ladder against their brains and beg them to climb out of their mind-set of sex, rock 'n' roll and alcohol ... But I discover their fear of heights. And the closing stanza: Still I can't help but love their vertigo, the heavy tug of ignorance lifting slowly from their faces against the sinking of gravity, just after they chance upon that first rung and ascend with no sense of balance.*

In the last two years, Brown has had 28 students who have won 86 poetry awards and recognitions at local, state and national levels. Among them: Kate Wolicki, newly enrolled in college, who won a Gwendolyn Brooks Illinois Poet Laureate Award, honorable mention in the New York-based Scholastic Writing Awards, and first place in the 1994 National Federation of State Poetry Societies competition. The second-place award went to Michelle Mangialardi, also one of Brown's students.

Several of Brown's young bards also have been published in the national magazine *Poet*, the local *Prairie Light Review*, and *American Goat*.

Brown's first collection of poems, "Don't Ask Why," was published this year by Thorntree Press of Winnetka. His second book, "Yes, No, Maybe," will be published in 1995 by Lakeshore Publishing of Deerfield. Besides *Poetry* magazine, his work has appeared in *South Coast Poetry Journal*, *Negative Capability* and *The Spoon River Poetry Review*, among others.

Both Brown and Langlas are late bloomers despite their creative writing backgrounds. Brown began writing and submitting poetry in 1989, Langlas around '83 or '84 when he "got bitten by the bug and found the right voice." He hasn't put together a book but he plans to give it some thought.

Langlas describes himself as a streak writer, belying contemporary wisdom that advises poets to

practice their craft daily. On school days, he's at the *dojo* from 4 to 7 p.m. and on Saturdays from 7 to 11 a.m. Sometimes he grabs scraps of paper when he gets an idea. But the chances to develop a poem may be weeks apart.

Like Brown, Langlas often writes in an autobiographical vein. His poem "Crossing" was written for his father. It appeared with "Another Birthday," in last June's issue of *Poetry*.

Joseph Parisi, the editor of *Poetry*, said, "I've seen Jim Langlas in classroom action. He's the kind of teacher one wishes one had had back in high school."

Lucia Getsi, professor of comparative literature at Illinois State University at Normal, has seen the results of their teaching and she calls them master teachers. Getsi is also the editor of *The Spoon River Poetry Review*, which has included work by both poets.

"In 1990, I published Jim Langlas as a featured Illinois poet," Getsi said. "I think it's the largest body of his work to appear anywhere. I don't know how he's going to find time for a book, but I hope he does it soon. Jim is a very careful writer, one with exquisite control. I love his subtlety. His poems are clean, true to the speaker and to the subject. His images are extraordinarily sharp, existing in the space where he's taking you. And there's always a surprise."

Getsi, who was just named Author of the Year by the Illinois Association of Teachers of English, calls Langlas and Brown "poets of the real. And they're both very Midwestern. Beyond that, there's no convenient genre marker for Glen Brown. He's a narrative poet who flirts with the boundaries of all genres. And he has a mischievous sense of humor, which sometimes comes out effectively in a serious poem. He draws a large range of emotional response from readers."

The tradition of the softspoken taskmaster, and particularly the warrior-poet, is ancient, but rare in modern Western society. Poetry itself is not widely appreciated. Maybe these two will change that.

Excerpt from "Another Birthday" by James Langlas, written for a neighbor:

*We're getting there, both of us,  
all of us, aren't we, taking  
those long walks now  
but feeling as though we've  
never left the yard, the muddy  
boots  
by the door reminding us of where  
we've been?*