

# Marblehead Reporter

## First lady of verse: 90-year-old Marbleheader's love of poetry, life proves contagious

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Charlotte Tannheimer, 90, laughs as she reads 'Love Song: I and Thou' by Alan Dugan at a recent edition of her her monthly poetry night at the Church of St. Andrew. The size of the crowd may vary, but what doesn't is how contagious Tannheimer's love of verse has proven to be.

**By Vicki Staveacre**  
**Marblehead Reporter**

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Marblehead — The starting point, she figures, was listening to her mother singing lullabies when she was a baby. Today, 90 years later, Marblehead resident Charlotte Tannheimer shares her lifelong romance with poetry by hosting a monthly event at St. Andrews Church.

“We have this thing at St. Andrews when, after the gospel about building on talents — you know the one where a father gave his sons talents to go out and make a fortune and the one son buried his, what a disaster!” Tannheimer said. “Anyway, all parishoners get given money but I only got \$5 and could not think of any way to make it grow. Then I remembered I had been to a wonderful poetry reading and social gathering with a chocolate fountain, where everyone made a donation of \$5, and I wondered if that would work for St. Andrew’s.”

Tannheimer talked to the then interim rector of St. Andrew's, Susan Russell, and friend and poet Margaret Eckman about her idea. Armed with their enthusiastic support, she held the first poetry group meeting just over a year ago, when she was just 89 years old.

"The first meeting attracted about 13 or 14 people, and we held it in the parish hall, which is enormous,"

Tannheimer said, "We were buried! Now we meet in the guild room, which is much more intimate, and we all sit round in a circle. It's always wonderful, however many people come. We always have a rich full evening, and every one is different."

Her view is shared by Swampscott resident Eckman, who has been attending St. Andrew's Church for the past 15 years or so.

"We bring poems which we like and which we think others would enjoy," she said.

One couple that has attended on a regular basis since the group started is Marblehead residents Don and Bonnie Howard.

"I have known Charlotte since we both started attending St. Andrew's Church many years ago, and we have travelled to Greece and Israel together," Bonnie Howard explained. "My husband had been given a book of poetry by Mary Oliver, which he was very taken with, so when Charlotte said she was starting her poetry group, he suggested we go along."

It proved transformational for Bonnie Howard, whose mother was an English teacher but whose love of poetry did not rub off on her young daughter. Only now has Bonnie become a convert.

While Tannheimer believes she has been receptive to poetry since hearing her mother sing lullabies, it was at school in her hometown of Ionia, Mich., where she memorized and recited poems in class, that her passion for poetry truly developed. Not surprisingly, she finds it a bit regrettable that by the time her daughter went to school — and indeed had the same English teacher — that students were no longer required to memorize and recite poems.

"The teacher said they have no time for poetry any more, too many other things to teach," she said.

After college at Michigan State, Tannheimer spent a year teaching and then went to New York where she worked at the Ladies Home Journal. She then married and returned to Michigan where she raised five children in Ionia.

Following a divorce, she came East and moved to Marblehead in 1972 after securing a position teaching English literature, poetry and writing at Endicott College, which was then a two-year school for women.

"I thought I had died and gone to heaven," Tannheimer said, "when I was given an office in a manor house with a view over the ocean, and I was getting paid."

She stayed at Endicott for 15 years, until retiring in June 1989.

For some, retirement is a time to slow down, do some gardening or pursue another hobby. For Tannheimer, it presented an opportunity for a new beginning, when she decided she wanted to go to China and teach English. After being told her that she would face a serious handicap trying to go to China at age 68, when most teachers there retired at 50 or faced compulsory retirement at 60, Tannheimer decided she would just organize the trip herself. A visit to the Widener library at Harvard produced a book of all the schools of higher education in China; she picked 25 and wrote to them, asking for a job.

While only two of the schools bothered to respond, one was HoHai University in Jiangsu Province and that was where Tannheimer went in August 1989, two months after leaving Endicott and two months after the Tiananmen Square massacre. She returned to Marblehead in 1990, and then went back to China four years later to teach at HoHai, returning home in 1995.

Throughout her life, Tannheimer says, poetry has been her crutch, and certain poems have been critical to her health and wellbeing. Mary Oliver's poem, "The Journey," was pivotal when she had just moved five children from Ionia, Mich., for example, and her current favorite is a poem about old age called "The Layers" by Pulitzer-Prize-winner Stanley Kunitz, which she recites every morning before she gets out of bed.

"We get told all these things we should do, such as mathematical games and puzzles, to avoid getting Alzheimer's disease," Tannheimer said. "I was never any good at math, so I decided to memorize and recite poetry instead."

The formula seems to be working, as the small, spry 90-year-old exudes a love of life, and is full of energy and enthusiasm.

"Charlotte's amazing," said Eckman, "so full of life at 90. She approaches life with joy, and it is just so contagious."

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