Poet Frances Richey to present words of war at Clackamas Community College

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Five years ago, poet Frances Richey sat down to write a poem to honor members of the Oregon National Guard as they returned from the largest overseas deployment since World War II. She had agreed to write the poem to support the Military Family Scholarship Endowment at Clackamas Community College.

As she transcribed the words of the Guard members interviewed for the poem, Richey realized that a single poem could not capture the deep experiences shared by the service members and their families. With permission from the interviewees, the words were compiled and edited into the chapbook “Voices of the Guard.”

As Clackamas Community College approaches its 50th anniversary this year, Richey will return to share “Voices of the Guard” in a series of readings in the Portland metro area. Following the readings, “Voices of the Guard” will be available for download through the CCC Foundation website, give.clackamas.edu.

“This amazing poetry, which shares what are really universal experiences of soldiers and their families, would not have been possible without the strong partnership between Clackamas Community College, the Oregon National Guard, and our community that serves veterans,” said Shelly Parini, vice president of marketing and community relations at the college.

Through congressional support, CCC opened the Veterans Education and Training Center in 2009. The college is recognized nationally for its model of serving veteran students, and this year was named the best veteran school in the western United States by Military Times.

Richey will read before an Oregon Humanities Conversation Project “Life After War” on Thursday, Feb. 4, at Camp Withycombe in Clackamas County. Her reading will begin at 5:30 p.m., followed at 6 p.m. by the “Life After War” presentation by Jim Lommasson, a freelance photographer and writer who shares the stories of returning soldiers.

While working on “Voices of the Guard,” Richey interviewed members of the Guard and their families. Their memories and words form the poetry, which includes 10 sections with titles such as “Iraq,” “Talismans” and “Irretrievable Losses.” The speakers of the words are not individually identified.

“These are the unvarnished, vulnerable accounts by truly wonderful men and women who went to war for the right reasons,” Richey said. “It's lucky it happened the way it did. If I told them I was going to use their words, they might not have talked to me.”

Richey contacted each of the people interviewed and secured their permission to use their words in the chapbook.

“There is a truly universal aspect to the stories shared in ‘Voices of the Guard.’ I think there is the opportunity for this poetry to do good in the world by connecting others to these shared experiences,” she said.