

Edith Bowen Laboratory School Students Visit the English Department

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On September 19, 2025, two first grade classes from the Edith Bowen Laboratory School (EBLS) visited Ray B. West to learn about poetry and the life of May Swenson. Teachers Shannon Rhodes and Shannin Kishbaugh wanted to provide students the opportunity to see the impact of words in communities.

Department Head Brian McCuskey says, “The English Department is absolutely delighted to welcome Edith Bowen students and their teachers to our building, where we can celebrate the wonderful poetry of May Swenson all together.”

Last year, Shannon brought her students to Ray B. West just to take a quick look at the May Swenson room. There, they ran into Brian, who spoke briefly about May Swenson’s life and the power of poetry and writing. The two decided to do it again this year but to make it more intentional with planned activities. Shannon discussed the idea with Shannin to get both classes to go, and the idea blossomed from there.

“What we’re learning in first grade is community and what community means and how people make our community a better place. Police officers and firemen are the people we always go to, right? But I was thinking, ‘What else could we do?’” Shannon reflects. She wanted to teach her students about different members of communities, and their lessons covered Anne Carroll Moore, an advocate for children’s libraries; Edith Bowen, the school’s namesake; and May Swenson, who Shannon knew about from her time as an English undergraduate at USU.

When the students arrived, Brian and Professor Keri Holt welcomed the students with Aggie Ice Cream followed

by a tour of the artifacts in the May Swenson room. They responded to the imagery in some of May’s poems with sidewalk chalk and enjoyed a performance of “Analysis of a Baseball” by Brian and Keri.

“The kids were like, ‘I love baseball,’ and it sent the message that you don’t have to be an old lady to love poetry and words,” Shannon says. “She has beautiful poems the kids could access and unpack.”

Assistant Professor Travis Franks left poems for the students to take on his office door, which Shannon said was a hit. “They were so excited and looking and comparing them to each other,” she comments. “There was that excitement of words being on a page and mattering.”

Following their visit to Ray B. West, the first-grade classes went to Swenson Park, where they went through rotations of writing poetry about fruit, going on a word scavenger hunt, and making paper airplanes with May’s poetry.

The fruit station was run by USU Elementary Education pre-service teachers Ashlyn Prince and Brecken Foketi. There, the students took inspiration from May’s writing about fruit to come up with powerful and sensory words to describe the sensation of eating fruit while they had a snack. The scavenger hunt consisted of cards hidden around the park. Students were given an English Department notebook and ran around, writing down the poetic words they found. Finally, at the paper airplane station, Shannon read the students “The Universe” poem. In it, Swenson talks about wanting her words to fly, which is where the airplane inspiration originated.

The day ended with a pinwheel peace parade up Old Main Hill and back to EBLS because the field trip landed two days before International Peace Day, which many schools create pinwheels in honor of. “We made poems that mount with the pinwheels,” Shannon comments. Between the writing, the pinwheels, and other elements of writing the students saw throughout the day, she notes the kids observed that “words can be everyone, and you can see text everywhere, and people communicate with words to each other. They were very excited about that, and that was something the teachers didn’t plan.”

Shannon expressed gratitude for her grade-level partner Shannin being willing to participate in the idea: “Her embracing this chance to collaborate with another department we usually don’t collaborate with, and how welcoming they were — we have pinwheels and ice cream and all of that because she gave the idea a chance. It

was a small thing, but now it is this beautiful grade level experience that 48 children were a part of.”

One of the exciting outcomes of the event was students engaging their families in learning about May Swenson. “There is a map that the English Department created that has all of the landmarks of May Swenson, places in Logan and all the way up to Bear Lake,” Shannon explains. “There are families that are going up and doing field trips. I’m excited for the love of poetry to make its way into the families.”

Another powerful moment was the pre-service teachers getting hands-on experience with helping kids on field trips and in engaging with poetry. “They got to witness the idea that you can collaborate with a department in a place that you don’t need a bus to get to. Here on campus, we have all of these interconnected webs of resources,” Shannon reflects. “It was really great to see all of these people come together to make this happen. We can be in our own little silos, but when we break out, not only does it become an incredible opportunity for kids now but also classrooms in the future with my student teachers.”