

Standing before a packed dorm lounge, the student moderator made an announcement:

Ezra Pound`s daughter, Princess Mary deRachewiltz, sends her greetings.

Turns out she telephoned from her castle in the Italian Alps that morning - on the eve of her late poet-father`s 102nd birthday.

Things like that happen here.

St. Andrews Presbyterian College is a school where dozens of students, teachers and community members assemble weekly to hear poetry and fiction - whether read by a Pulitzer Prize winner or local convenience store clerk.

Where the alumni director, public information director, even the president write poetry - and students regularly submit works to the student newspaper`s poetry section.

Where an 18-year-old college press flourishes, even though it has been headquartered until recently in a storage closet.

At this liberal arts college, writing is embraced like a true love.

``For me, at least, it`s the most attractive and exciting aspect of life here,`` St. Andrews Dean Tom Benson says.

Poet, teacher and former Village Voice columnist Joel Oppenheimer of New Hampshire agrees.

``I have always been astounded at the kind of energy that gets generated there,`` says Oppenheimer, who has read and taught at the campus and been published by the press.

He says he finds at St. Andrews ``people who care passionately about literature as something alive, not something nailed down in a book.``

An Unlikely Place

St. Andrews might seem an unlikely place for a creative writing hotbed - in Scotland County, flat cotton-growing territory about 100 miles east of

Charlotte, where one in three county residents is functionally illiterate.

Laurinburg, the county seat, has 12,000 people and one movie theater. The nearest shopping mall is 40 minutes away in Fayetteville.

On Thursday nights, the St. Andrews writers' forum is the hottest entertainment in town.

At a recent forum, about 70 people crowded into a dorm lounge, sitting on chairs, the floor and a pool table as Charleston writer Charleen Swansea prepared to read a short story.

She praised St. Andrews, recalling a time in the '60s when the school allowed her to perform "women's guerrilla theater," which consisted, in part, of Swansea and other women rolling around on the floor.

"I've found if I had an idea, St. Andrews is a good place to have it, a good place to test it. It's a safe place," she said.

That same evening, an 18-year-old convenience-store clerk gave her first public reading of two poems written on notebook paper. And Laurinburg police Lt. Robert Malloy's deep voice boomed out poetry he'd composed about Martin Luther King and Vietnam. Audience members applauded enthusiastically for everyone.

Scotland Arts Council Director Martha Gibson says St. Andrews exhibits an egalitarian enthusiasm that often spills into the community.

The school holds an annual writers' forum for community readers, for example. "That night has always been a moving, touching night, because in some instances it's the first time a person has read in public," she says.

"The door is open. Someone just has to be willing to walk through it."

Malloy is one person who did. He first read at St. Andrews last year during an "open mike" night - when readings from students and community members are encouraged. A warm reception prompted him to publish and write more.

"They make you feel at home. They're courteous," Malloy says. "They're just super people, and that's no tale." Malloy used to visit public schools to give safety talks. Now he reads poetry, too.

A Reputation Is Born

Many people date the birth of St. Andrews' literary reputation to the day

writer-in-residence Ron Bayes rolled into town.

The 55-year-old Oregon native arrived from a teaching stint at East Oregon State College in 1968. St. Andrews had opened only seven years earlier - the result of the merger of Flora Macdonald College and Presbyterian Junior College.

Bayes hadn't planned to stay long. Laurinburg wasn't exactly the center of the literary world.

(Bayes was crestfallen when he learned the street he lived on - Homer Street - was associated not with the Greek poet but with a home run from a nearby ballpark.)

Despite such minor setbacks, he found in North Carolina a welcoming writing community and a young college that encouraged his efforts.

Soon he had established the weekly writers' forum, the St. Andrews Press and the school's literary magazine, the St. Andrews Review.

Capitalizing on wide-ranging literary friendships, he brought to campus and to the pages of the St. Andrews Press an eclectic mix of poets and writers:

Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Carolyn Kizer, poet Gwendolyn Brooks, New Directions publisher James Laughlin, the late Japanese poet Yukio Mishima.

Through his friendship with Ezra Pound's daughter, deRachewiltz, St.

Andrews organized a program that lets students study at her castle in the Italian Alps.

Energized Atmosphere

Despite Scotland County's isolation, prominent writers and poets visit regularly, often for minimal remuneration.

Like Swansea, they like the intellectual climate. "The atmosphere down there is energized," says N.C. writer Clyde Edgerton, who has taught at St.

Andrews since 1985.

"Faculty members tend to be open, playing with ideas," he says. "I think it's something that dribbles down through the school."

Says junior Todd Tyner from Winston-Salem: A lot of people just seem to write as a pastime - closet poets, if you will. There's something about the

atmosphere here that just draws it out of people.``

St. Andrews, though, is not so much a writers` training ground as a place that trains students to love writing.

``One thing we stress here is America`s not very open to creative writing, so they had better plan on getting another job,`` Bayes says. ``That accepted, we`ve got a lot of happy people banging on their typewriters.``

With a faculty of 57 and a little more than 800 students, St. Andrews employs four full-time English professors.

One is Edgerton, who landed there after his first novel, ``Raney,`` about the marriage of a Freewill Baptist and an Episcopalian, received a chilly reception from his previous employer, Baptist-affiliated Campbell University in Buies Creek.

But others also teach writing and literature courses, such as Joseph

Bathanti, director of corporate and foundation affairs. Yes, he`s a poet, too. St. Andrews` reputation as a place that encourages academic freedom and

supports writers attracted Bathanti. ``And it`s also neat to have people passing poems around,`` he says.

Creative writing isn`t a course requirement, but places in creative writing classes taught by Bayes, Edgerton and others are coveted. Bayes estimates 20

percent to 40 percent of St. Andrews students graduate having taken at least one course.

This fall, 50 students filled two beginning classes meant to hold 40.

Nineteen others were on a waiting list.

``We never keep to our limits when people get tearful,`` Bayes says.

Publishing Success Stories

Perhaps St. Andrews` most ambitious venture is its press and the St.

Andrews Review, its literary magazine.

Presses are usually associated with universities - not colleges. And small literary magazines usually have short lives.

David Rigsbee, the press`s new director, believes St. Andrews Press is the nation`s only ongoing college press - and at the very least the college press with the largest publishing program.

Generally, the college has published on a shoestring. Until a friend of the college gave money recently to

establish press offices, headquarters consisted of a large storage closet.

But hand-to-mouth financing didn't stop them.

St. Andrews has published 48 books and 33 review issues since its first

works rolled off the presses. Besides publishing nationally known writers, the press has introduced new talents, many from North Carolina, to the literary

world.

Some of Kizer's earliest works appeared in the review, long before she won

the 1985 Pulitzer Prize for poetry.

Raleigh writer Kaye Gibbons, author of the highly praised novel "Ellen

Foster," published her first short story in the review. N.C. native Jill

McCorkle, whose latest book recently rated a front-page review in The New York Times Review of Books, has a short story in the latest review.

But the reputation of the press and review, until now, has been more

regional than national.

Rigsbee and Susan Ketchin, the review's new editor, aim to change that.

They've begun a publicity campaign, sending ads soliciting submissions to

such publications as The Paris Review, Poetry and The New York Review of

Books. They've also hired a national distributor.

"What we want to have is basically an almost-commercial-quality press

housed at a small liberal arts college," Rigsbee said. His sights are set

high: "We'd like to win a Pulitzer Prize or National Book Award."

The dean enthusiastically backs their efforts.

"I see the future of St. Andrews, frankly, as intimately connected with

that program," Benson says. "I really believe that the support of art and

the experience of art - those things are vital to the civilization, as vital

as scientific research