



# The Downtowner

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Tish Easterlin –

## Teaching English as a Tool to Engage the World

*Leading Voices – This interview with Tish Easterlin is the third in a series featuring public figures in Louisville and Jefferson County whose careers, day in and day out, shape the life of our Community.*

Q: Last month on a visit to Athens, I sat down for a cup of coffee with Cervantes Lewis, a former student of yours. As you know, Cervantes worked for us in the Gallery last summer before matriculating at UGA, helping to acclimate our new Gallery intern, Dan Rekshan, to Jefferson County. I found Cervantes to be a splendid young man, a fine writer for his age, and a solid young thinker. When we spoke in Athens, I asked Cervantes which teachers at Jefferson County High School had most influenced him. Without hesitation he responded, "Mrs. Easterlin." When I asked him why, he gave what to me was a remarkable answer. He said, "Because when I began in her class I didn't know how to write, but Mrs. Easterlin taught me that writing is logical, and that made sense to me. She taught me how to write." Tell us what it means to you to teach a young person to write.

A: First, let me agree with you. Cervantes is a remarkable young man – and such a great literary name! But to your question, I have found over 20 years of teaching that students rarely lack ideas. What they lack is the knowledge of how to express those ideas clearly and precisely. All too frequently their ideas are a shapeless cloud of thought that lacks power because it lacks definition and structure. Showing students how to write is literally giving them voice, allowing them to be heard, and empowering them. I don't think it



gets much more exciting than that. Think how much our society recognizes and admires our great writers and orators: everyone from Franklin and Lincoln to Hemingway and Twain. I always share this quote with my students. "The limits of my language," wrote the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, "are the limits of my mind. All I know is what I have words for. . . of what we cannot speak, we must be silent." Teaching students to write, to articulate their thoughts is to expand their ability to engage the world.

Q: How did you decide to become a teacher?

A: By default, really. When Bill and I decided to move back to Jefferson County from Houston, Texas, I was in the middle of a doctoral program at Rice University in cognitive

psychology. From Jefferson County, I was able to turn my existing research into a Master's thesis. However, there was not a great deal of work for a research psychologist here in JC. I gave a lot of thought to how I could use the knowledge I'd gained in graduate school here in Jefferson County and two things struck me. First, the study of psychology is the study of human behavior – and so is literature. Their methods are different; the approach is different, but at the heart of both is the human experience in all its wonderful, terrifying complexity. Second, cognitive psychology is the study of human cognition or thinking and I'd learned a great deal about how the human mind acquires information – certainly the concern of educators. So, entering the teaching profession in the area of literature and language seemed a natural fit. And it has been. I love teaching language and literature to young adults who are right on the cusp of adulthood.

Q: I understand that though you have been a teacher in Jefferson County most of your adult life, you actually grew up, as I did, in the suburbs of Washington, DC. Tell us a little about your transition from youth in the suburbs of a major metropolitan area to adult life as a teacher of English in rural Jefferson

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## *The Downtowner's Images of the Month*



"I practice the Art of Thinking at The Fire House Gallery."

Shivering for the camera, Art of Thinking participants Savannah Hiebert, Shelby Stevens, Kayleigh Tremble, Elisa Freeman, Viktor Hill, and Kelvin Harmon try hard to evoke fall while modeling their new Gallery hoodies on a hot October afternoon. More on page 5.

“Students need to understand there are no new emotions, no new feelings.”

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County.

A: If either my high school or college friends had gone looking for “The Most Likely to Live in Rural or Small Town America,” I’d have been on the bottom of the list. I am a true suburban girl having grown up in the suburbs and malls of Philly, Wilmington, Delaware, and then, for the majority of my childhood, Washington, D. C. Though my family traveled very little and vacations were few and far between, my parents made sure we took advantage of every nearby opportunity: museums, monuments, art galleries, good restaurants, picnics at nearby national parks, fairs, festivals, farmers’ markets, you name it. I loved it. My mother had a knack for finding great things to do that didn’t cost a lot of money. There were, after all, seven of us, 5 children and my parents. Atlanta, where I attended college was more of the same: my friends and I finding wonderful things to do that didn’t cost a lot of money! And it wasn’t difficult to do in a major metropolitan center. Then I met Bill in Atlanta, we married and moved to Houston. Again, not a lot of money, but we found lots to do. Then we moved to Louisville, and I have to admit, I felt a bit like a fish out of water. I had to learn to see with new eyes and find what Jefferson County had to offer. It took me a while, but Bill and his family, in fact almost everyone I met, were so enthusiastic about life in Jefferson County that I couldn’t help but catch the fever. I still miss the “trappings” of city life, but other things are more important to me now: having everyone in town know and look out for my children, the mix of ages and occupations in social groups, the proximity of everything you could ever really need, the importance of storytelling and family history, the close connection between the people and the land and water. One of my fondest early memories of life in Jefferson County is riding around the county with Bill (when we weren’t quite so worried about the cost of gas) while he quizzed me on crops. Is that wheat, rye, or oats? Is that new plant cotton or soy beans? Lovely memory!

Q: I have always admired the talent that good English teachers have for weaving the complex traditions of English literature into the life and work of young students, who must find that tradition, with all its conventions and formality, very foreign. How do you to bring English classics to life in the classroom?

A: Students need to understand that there are no new emotions, no new feelings. Humans in the 21<sup>st</sup> century share the same motivations and emotional life of people represented in the works of Chaucer, Shakespeare, the English balladeers, Hardy, Austen, Hawthorne, Dunbar, Twain, Hemingway, Faulkner, Morrison, every writer whose works capture some aspect of the human experience. What’s new about love, envy, greed, self-fulfillment, pride, sacrifice, integrity, anger, confusion, betrayal, spirituality? And aren’t we all motivated by the same physical, emotional, psychological and social needs? That is what students need to see – and when they see that, they are more open to trying to understand the work despite apparent difficulties of language or structure. The other thing to help students see is that the formality and traditions of literature are not much different from those in a great game of chess or football. Students understand that games have rules and performing at a high level while following those rules is the challenge. If I write a sonnet, I have to express a strong emotion in 14 lines, 10 syllables per line. If I give a speech, I need to use the strategies available to me; I need to know my audience, and get the point across before I lose their attention. Lincoln knew it. Look at *The Gettysburg Address*. The trick, of course, is in understanding that you can’t really appreciate the game unless you know what is going on as they play. Help students understand those two things and they can be drawn into the conversation the same way they can be drawn into a conversation about a beautifully played piece of music or an exceptional athletic performance.

Q: What are the texts you most enjoy presenting to your students, and what are the texts they find most challenging?

A: Perennial favorites would have to

include Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*. He was a master of characterization, of satire, of irony. He could say so much in such little space – and he could be quite bawdy. He’s really quite fun to read and students come to see some fairly familiar faces in those *Canterbury pilgrims*. I really enjoy presenting the short fiction of James Joyce, Tillie Olsen, Flannery O’Connor, Kate Chopin, Alice Walker. Their stories deal with themes quite accessible to my students. I love the poetry of John Donne who could be both wickedly witty and spiritually moving, but students find his poetry fairly tough going. The lovely thing about teaching survey courses is that there is something for everyone. Right now, we’re reading a stunning little novel by the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* – the title of which comes from a line in Yeats’ (the Irish poet) poem *The Second Coming*. I do enjoy presenting texts that push them a bit and give them things to think about that perhaps they haven’t been asked to think about yet, at least not formally.

Q: It seems to me that in the rural setting – particularly in the South, where conservative social and fundamentalist religious values often prevail – it must be something of a challenge to open young minds to a literary tradition at odds with the values taught in their homes and churches. How does this tension shape your approach to teaching?

A: I’m not sure what you mean by “a literary tradition at odds” but I do believe that literature, especially that which has stood the test of time and changing cultural expectations, demands a response from readers, and in responding, the reader may find himself questioning or at least articulating what he believes to be true and good and moral and aesthetic. But some people find that a bit scary. My role as the teacher is not, of course, to tell them what to think or believe. My role is to help them find meaning in the text, so that they, my students, can evaluate it for themselves. They should be able to say, “Okay, I hear what he’s saying, but I just don’t buy it. I don’t agree with the values this story or novel or poem or essay

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“The mission of public education is a great and noble endeavor.”

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seems to endorse.” So, students need to read both Rupert Brooke’s “The Soldier” and Wilfred Owens’ “Dulce et Decorum Est,” one that glorifies dying for one’s country, the other that challenges it as “that old lie.” Having said that, I am careful in my text selection. I never want my students to feel I have selected texts because I have an agenda beyond that stipulated by the State of Georgia or The College Board (who approves my Advanced Placement courses), and so I strive for balance. That’s not terribly difficult to do – and still be able to present a full, rich exposure to English literature.

Q: I understand that you are a Roman Catholic. I have the utmost respect for that faith, not least because of its commitment to orthodoxy, which I understand to be the disciplined application of the teachings of the church fathers to everyday modern life. This seems a fitting frame of reference for a teacher of English literature. Do you feel your faith serves to animate your professional mission?

A: Certainly it does. The mission of public education is a great and noble endeavor: to provide all our youth with the opportunity for a free and appropriate education that prepares them to participate fully in our democratic republic. I find that my Catholic beliefs and traditions, everything from social justice to Christian charity, strengthen my ability to uphold that mission.

Q: As a businessperson frequently disappointed by the often abject writing skills of new college graduates, I’m curious to know your thoughts about the connection between the study of literature and the development of competent writing skills.

A: People developing new skills of any sort need models. Literature provides those models. When we read, just as when we listen, we pattern our own writing, our own speech, after those we read or hear. I think there is a huge connection between reading and written expression. The developing writer should study – and admire – beautifully crafted sentences. I’m reading this great book, *Reading Like a Writer* by Francine

Prose (no kidding!). In it, she writes, “Like most – maybe all – writers, I learned to write by writing and, by example, by reading books.” She adds that learning to write this way “involves a kind of osmosis.” I agree; I don’t think one needs to be even terribly conscious of it.

Q: Ten years ago, before email and instant messaging stole the communication show, we heard much lament about television and telephone luring our children and youth away from the written word. Nowadays a fair amount of criticism is leveled at email and instant messaging for undermining grammar and diction. How do you see these communication media impacting your students?

A: You know, I have always approached the teaching – and learning – of English from a multilingual perspective. We all speak various forms of English. Mothers speak one version with their infants and small children; we speak one form of our language to our business partners and another to our loved ones. My children speak one way to me and another to their friends. Midwesterners speak one way; Southerners another. Vocabulary and intonation shifts; sentence structure alters. But ANY language we speak or want to speak takes practice. If the only thing I practice is the shorthand of text messaging or emailing, I will lose my ability to communicate in Standard American English, which it is my job to teach. I teach the conventions, what is acceptable and frankly, understood, in the vast majority of our social, economic, and political institutions and networks. That’s what we practice in the classroom. I can’t change the direction that technology is taking the language, but I can help make sure that students practice and master conventional English so that they have that tool when they need it. James Baldwin believes that to speak is to reveal your identity. He’s right, of course, but how wonderful – and how useful – it is to have a range of languages at your command!

Q: In business, we have a rather pat saying -- “If you can’t measure it, you can’t manage it.” I know that for the past two presidential terms, teachers and

students in America have labored under the mandates of the “No School Left Behind” program. Tell us something about the impact of “No School Left Behind” on your work.

A: Impact? The impact has been huge, largely because we are judged in the media, and thus by the public, by our ability to demonstrate Adequate Yearly Progress, which is ONE measure of our success but far from the entire picture. So, we need to respond to those mandates, and there is some good in them certainly, but there’s nothing we’re doing for children that we were not already working hard to accomplish: high expectations for ALL children, personalized instruction, a rigorous and relevant curriculum, to name a few. NCLB has put the pressure on, no doubt about it, but as an educator, I need to take a larger view, especially given that very few, if any schools, will be making AYP by 2014, the year that 100% of our students are expected to pass our state tests on the first attempt. We need to assess our students’ progress on the standards frequently, but we do not need to limit our concerns to their performance on these tests or test them to death in the name of AYP.

Q: As most of our readers know -- certainly the teachers and students among them -- several years ago an essay writing component was added to the SATs. Do you believe that it is possible -- or desirable -- to try to standardize the assessment of students’ writing skills as part of their college aptitude testing?

A: I read recently that the early analysis of the written portion of the SAT is showing that it is a better predictor of success in the first two years of college than either of the other two portions, the verbal or mathematical. It will be interesting to see if these early results are substantiated. The fact of the matter is colleges and universities really want to know how well students can express their ideas in written format. Unfortunately, grades, even high grades, don’t necessarily reflect that ability, nor do the verbal or mathematical portions of the SAT. And plagiarism and cheating are everywhere. I have read article after

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News from

# The Fire House Gallery



With a Chill in the Air, It Must Be Time for –

## The Annual Fall Exhibit of the Arts Guild

### Annual Fall Exhibit of the Arts Guild

Nov. 19 - 30, 2008

Opening reception, Saturday, Nov. 22, 7-9 pm

What started as a spin-off of the Arts Guild's popular Spring exhibit has become a tradition in its own right, and one of our favorite events here at the Gallery. Once again, this November, the Jefferson County Arts Guild will hold its third annual fall exhibition in The Fire House Gallery. The exhibit will run from November 19 to November 30 with an exciting opening reception Saturday, November 22, from 7 to 9 pm.

The show is a perfect place to take the family during the Thanksgiving holidays. Coordinator Lil Easterlin said, "We created the fall show because many families receive relatives over Thanksgiving, and this gives them a place to go and something to do." Since the intern manager Dan Reksan will be home in Michigan for the holiday, members of the Arts Guild will assume the responsibility for watching the Gallery.

As for content of the show, Arts Guild President Donna Borders anticipates, "It'll be smaller than the April show. We don't have the applications back yet, but

### 2009 Gallery Outreach Update

## Education, Education, Education

When the Gallery opened in April 2005, its management understood that community outreach would be a central element of the Gallery's mission. We carried no preconceived notions, however, as to the focus of the Gallery's outreach efforts, but knew it would be important to leverage existing community successes. With only that compass in hand, and being prone to exploration, we have charted an interesting outreach course that has yielded a coordinated and consistent



Walnut and West Seventh, by Arts Guild member Mary Reynolds

I expect all the regulars to submit work. There'll be 15-20 local artists with up to 4 works each. There'll be more photography because of our newly formed Photography Club." In honor of this new club, the show's publicity materials will feature some photography.

I asked both ladies their favorite aspect of the show. Lil said, "After coordinating the correspondence with the artists and arrival

of the art, I love having all the art come in and then seeing it hung up on the walls properly." Donna said, "I like seeing each artist's new work. I like that the school children can come into the Gallery and see local images by artists they know."

Remember that the Gallery will be closed the Wednesday and Thursday of Thanksgiving week.

emphasis – education. Of all Jefferson County's many remarkable qualities, none surpasses its devotion to what Tish Easterlin, in this month's *Leading Voices* interview, calls "a great and noble endeavor" – public education. Sharing Ms. Easterlin's respect for the power of public education, we have engaged the leadership of the County public schools from the Gallery's earliest days in an effort to lend our support wherever it made sense to do so. Today, the Gallery operates five

educational outreach programs that enhance the exceptional offerings of the Jefferson County Public Schools.

### Gallery Days

In an effort to make art an everyday part of our children's lives, the Gallery early on established the Gallery Days program in cooperation with Louisville Academy. For every Gallery exhibit occurring during the school year, the Gallery's intern manager cooperates with Louisville Academy staff in planning class visits to the exhibit, including instructional presentations to help the students develop an understanding of

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*More News from*

# The Fire House Gallery



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basic artistic concepts, such as the distinction between representational and abstract art. Through this program, over time the Gallery has become a familiar community point of reference for many children who might not otherwise ever have visited this or any other art gallery as part of their elementary education. Recently, Gallery Days has been expanded to include the Life Program for gifted students countywide, and the Gallery has a goal to reach out to Wrens and Carver Elementary Schools in the coming year.

### *Art of Thinking*

This fall, after careful planning with Louisville Academy principal Hulet Kitterman, the Gallery launched a six-week pilot of our Art of Thinking program. Using artistic expression as a means of teaching basic categorical distinctions, this program provides six Louisville Academy fourth graders with a weekly afternoon of guided observational, discussion, and artistic exercises designed to strengthen their conceptual appetites and abilities. Upon completion of the pilot, Ms. Kitterman and Gallery staff will evaluate the program and make adjustments with the goal of rolling out two additional six-week sessions in spring 2009. We anticipate Art of Thinking will become one of the Gallery's permanent outreach offerings.



Louisville Academy students enjoy the Gallery Days program.

### *AP Art Class Support*

Through its very productive partnership with Jefferson County High School, the Gallery lends valuable support to the JCHS Advanced Placement art program on two fronts. Last spring we hosted our first exhibit of the work of JCHS AP art students – an event that, like *Gallery Days*, enabled the Gallery to draw a broad, new audience. AP art teacher Linda Merritt found the lure of an exhibit in a real art gallery – an opportunity few high schools in the state can offer – to be highly motivational for her students. Based on the success of the event, the Gallery has committed to continue it annually. In addition, we

now have a policy that all professional artists exhibiting in the Gallery must visit the AP art class and give a presentation concerning their work. Our exhibitors welcome this opportunity, which broadens the instructional scope of the class and gives the students a first-hand look at the lives of multiple professional artists working in a variety of media.

### *ASU Art Scholarship for JCHS Students*

This year, the Gallery, with the help of Augusta State University, is excited to announce the establishment of an annual scholarship to be made available each year for a JCHS graduate majoring in art at ASU. The \$2000 scholarship – funded by the Gallery with generous matching funds from ASU – will be awarded to a qualifying JCHS art student heading to ASU to pursue an art-related career.

### *Intern's Intern Position*

Finally, the Gallery has created a paid after-school position for a JCHS student. Dubbed "intern's intern," the selected student assists our intern manager in all aspects of Gallery operations. While providing valuable art-related employment to a JCHS student, this position has the added benefit of strengthening the Gallery's ties to the County's youth and aiding the Gallery intern manager in forming an understanding of the County's culture.



UGA art professor Margot Ecke, left, discusses paper with JCHS AP art students and teacher Linda Merritt.

*More News from*

# The Fire House Gallery



Don't Look Now –

## Shots from the Opening of *Paper World*



Bill Kitterman and Bob Reynolds taking it all in.



Holly Blackmon and Kate Agel in front of a DiCello print.



Lettie Mohammad and Marianne Miller with Margot Ecke's boxes.



Bill and Tish Easterlin talk with Mary Reynolds.



Dwain Little and Claire Booth Taylor living it up.



UGA students reconnect with Shelly DiCello.

## Friends of Historic Downtown Louisville



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“At Twisted Sisters ... we have to make money to ... and that’s quite a challenge too!”

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article about students who have never written their own papers. They’ve either had someone else write them or purchased them online or lifted them from another source. Educational institutions are trying to combat that with more in-class compositions and websites like turnitin.com. But to return to your original question, yes, I think it is generally possible to standardize the assessment of student writing. Effective writing has certain clearly identifiable characteristics: precise diction, logical organization, clear focus. But there will always be that subjective aspect that is found in a writer’s voice, creativity, originality. We probably do the most distinctive, original writers a disservice by submitting them to our standardized assessment. But they will rise to the top; it’s hard to keep the innovators down!

Q: To me one of the most impressive things about life in Jefferson County is the extraordinary community commitment to public education. This commitment has recently been highlighted by the selection of JCHS principal Molly Howard as national Principal of the Year. How has the national spotlight on Dr. Howard affected life for teachers and students at JCHS?

A: Oh, well, it’s been exciting – and confirming. As I’ve said before, teachers live a rather isolated existence. Communicating with educators in other schools, in other states, is limited to the infrequent workshop or convention or online listserv. Dr. Howard’s recognition has truly confirmed for us that what we have been doing for the past 13 years at Jefferson County High School is as good as we believed. From the inside, we tend to see the ½ or ¼ of the glass that’s not yet full – because

we want it FULL – but viewers from the outside remind us of the great accomplishment that glass represents, and that we’re headed in the right direction. The students who have always loved and respected Dr. Howard have thoroughly enjoyed this, and this recognition has confirmed for them that we’re not stopping now! So, life goes on, learning goes on, at JCHS. That’s what we’re about.

Q: In addition to your responsibilities as the JCHS Advanced Placement English teacher, you have recently taken on a very exciting avocation as one of the proprietors of Twisted Sisters in downtown Louisville. How does it feel to move from the classroom into the role of merchant?

A: Wow! Talk about radically different experiences. It’s an entirely different set of pressures. I love my job and my students, but teaching is a 5-6 hour command performance, managing the instructional activities of 15-30 students at a time, and the product is learning. At Twisted Sisters the pace is certainly slower, but we have to make money to pay the bills and keep the doors open – and that’s quite a challenge too!

Q: When you get up in the morning, what do you look forward to most about your work?

A: The variation and unpredictability that are a part of every day. Granted, some things happen that I wish would

not, but every day is a great social experiment and no two days are alike. I study the curriculum, collaborate with colleagues, plan instructional activities, and then 20 students or so walk into the room and we try to make it all happen, make the learning happen. Students bring their personal stories with them, struggle, grasp the concepts, see the humor, make personal connections, create, analyze, make mistakes, recover, grow. And 90 minutes later, we do it again, but differently. It’s not dull!

Q: I gather that to some extent you work within a standard literary curriculum. If you had the opportunity alter that curriculum, what would be the first text you would add to the reading list?

A: Definitely Tim O’Brien, *The Things They Carried*.

Q: What is your favorite work of Shakespeare?

A: Truthfully, his sonnets. What incredible expressions of human feeling. Of his plays, I have always loved *Macbeth*; it captured my imagination early – the witches, the riddles, Macduff’s honor, the familial love between fathers and sons, the irony, and Lady Macbeth! What a piece of work. “Screw your courage to the sticking place, and we’ll not be undone.” Ah, words for life.

## November At The Bistro

- Saturday, Nov. 1 – Old time country with Franklin James, 6:30, prime rib dinner
- Saturday, Nov. 8 – Gospel with Jimmy Page Ministries
- Friday, Nov. 14 – Karaoke with Ronnie Mullis
- Saturday, Nov. 15 – Dorsi Wedge, James Barrow’s new band, playing rock hits
- Friday, Nov. 21 – More old time country with Franklin James
- Saturday, Nov. 22 – Hi Lonesome plays Southern Rock

**Unless otherwise noted, all entertainment begins at 7 p.m.**

The Bistro will be closed for Thanksgiving Thursday, Nov. 27 through Monday, Dec. 1