

Rajni Eddins affirms our common humanity through poetry

Burlington poet offering free event tonight

By Neil Allen
Standard Staff

This week spoken word poet and teaching artist Rajni Eddins is returning to Woodstock to share his poetry, the art of writing poetry and history — both his own and that of Black people — with the students at Woodstock Union High School and Woodstock Elementary School on May 13 and 14.

Eddins will also be at the North Chapel in Woodstock for a free gathering open to the community tonight, May 13, at 5:30 p.m. on the back lawn of the church. He'll offer a poetry reading and interactive discussion about white supremacy, inequality and the power of empathy and humanity.

Eddins, who hails from Seattle, Wash. but has lived in Burlington for the last decade, has been expressing his truth and history through poetry since he was a child. He began sharing his words when he was 11 years old with the Afrikan American Writers Alliance, which was founded by his mother and is the first Black American writers group in the Northwest.

"It inspired me and empowered me and really brought home for me that my voice mattered. A vital component in the community is having adults and elders listen to and affirm and respect what I was sharing," he said.

When he was 9 years old, his family opened their home to foster children. Over the next 11 years, more than 70 foster children passed through their home, and it had a lasting impact on Eddins.

"I was the older brother. I think that experience, formatively for me, spoke really practically about our connection as a human family. My relationship to communicating with children is from that experience. It was a source of community and an oasis, a safe haven for people in need," he said.

"Children, as all people, need to know that they're valued and that they're valuable. One thing my mother often said was that children are treasure. Hearing her say that and witnessing her practice that really fulfills it for me and probably the crucial reason I am able to do the work that I do now because I witnessed that sincere practice. I felt like I was treasured and valued, and I saw that we all were. I feel like my role as an artist and a human being is to engage with people, particularly with children, of all kinds of backgrounds."

Eddins feels that children are more than just our future. "They are our present, too," he said. "They have a dynamic and vital role in being the next torch carriers in what human beings will be in the future. Our respectful engagement with them leaves space for them to communicate and express themselves and to share honestly what they think and feel is vital to the health and well-being of the community now and in the future."

"Whether or not adults respect that fact, they are a part of it and



Rajni Eddins, left, reads from his book of poems, "Their Names are Mine," during the pandemic. He will have a residency at Woodstock Union High School and Woodstock Elementary School on May 13 and 14. Eddins will also be offering a poetry reading at North Chapel in Woodstock on May 13, at 5:30 p.m.

Photo Provided

a vital one at that, so the more we do as community members to speak to them candidly and with respect for the young beings that they are, with their personalities and their unique expressions and experiences, the better off we'll be with demonstrating that type of holistic community that says every member is valuable," Eddins continued.

While he is in Woodstock, Eddins hopes to move people with a greater understanding of poetry. "I hope to impart my love for poetry and the power of words and language to inspire, empower and affirm people in their own identity and their own story. Also to communicate that their thoughts, ideas, opinions and expressions have value and have a vital and meaningful importance, not only to their own communities but to the world at large."

"I hope there is a positive experience in the potential of expressing yourself courageously, being vulnerable and authentic, and how that can have an impact and influence on people, and that they'll see more possibilities in being able to express themselves and also be honest about the world we live in and be open to communicate what they see and feel and believe," Eddins continued.

He said that poetry is different

than prose or fiction. "Poetry has a lot more freedom, you don't have to be called to do a certain thing. You can put your own paintbrush to it. My mother told me when I was younger that it is the short-

made aware that they have that freedom to do so, they're well suited to that pursuit because they're so fresh, not having socialized to have certain restrictions or restraints. They haven't been brow-

beaten by society and influenced that you can only do it this way or that way is wrong. I feel the earlier you encourage, nurture and nourish that love for freedom of expression in people, that can really go a long way for positive transformation and self actualization of their own purpose and appreciation for their unique being."

Eddins will be sharing works from his book, "Their Names Are Mine," which is a compilation of his work over a 20 year span.

"It mainly deals with the need to confront white supremacy and to affirm our common humanity. I feel like we live in a time now that it is becoming more and more widely

apparent with the aftermath of global demonstrations in response to the killing of George Floyd and so many other Black people unjustly. There is a dire need to address this in America and the world over," he said. "Human beings having a holistic appreciation from Africa to the present, that we all have mutual value and when we don't speak to this with sincerity it allows people to be disparaged and harmed and brutalized with impunity."

"I typically engage in dialogue and interactive communication

with youth around my pieces by sharing the origin story of each poem. I go individually into each piece and speak about the circumstances around each poem and what inspired the creation and being able to share it. I hold time at the end to check in and do more interactive Q & A dialogue so they can feel open to express what resonates and what they have curiosity about."

Eddins said it is through speaking the words from his poems that he is able to connect with people.

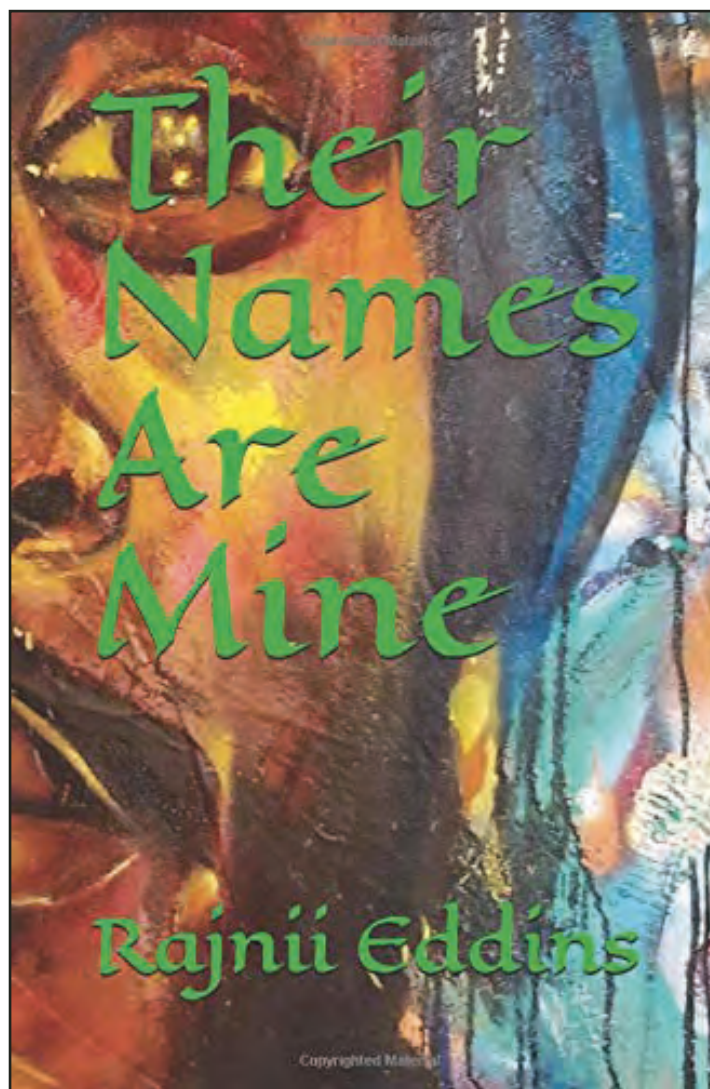
"I think because for me, personally, poetry is meant to be spoken. It is kind of like food is to be eaten. The proof is in the pudding. You hear something and you hear it in the voice, the chef is given appreciation for the ingredients that tell a part of their story. It changes the way you are able to take it in," Eddins explained. "I bring the wealth of my experiences to bear in all of my poetry and I speak from an emotionally vulnerable place because it means something to me and my story. When I serve it straight from my own plate for you to take in and nourish and receive nutrients from, that's a whole entire different exchange and you draw something deeper from it."

"I think when people hear me share the words directly and they receive them in a way that has more potency and spiritual vitality. I'm expressing something from a real place in myself that bears meaning and merit to me that I feel very passionately about and that passion is translated," he continued. "My intention is to have a sincere impact and influence, and hold space for that dynamic in every exchange so that people receive something they can't necessarily discount or look away from."

"A lot of my work speaks to the harsher realities of what Black people have faced in this country from its inception. It's different than reading it in a history book or learning about different statistics about what different people face or seeing a hashtag with somebody's name when you have a real live human being feeling. When we witness someone feeling, we have a parasymphathetic response that 'oh my goodness, this person is in tears, that's moving me' or 'this person is enraged, I can feel this energy' or 'this person is joyful' — we're human beings and we're connected and I like to shed light on that connection through my vulnerability and self expression."

Eddins spoke of his being part of a minority in Vermont. "Being the only one is a part of my story and our story collectively. When I think about diversity, I think that's just a natural way of the universe. There's a diverse array of all things and all beings. In the universe, you don't have one type of flower, one type of anything really, so that's that natural state. So it is not necessarily natural [being the one], like Vermont is an example of this, as is America."

See RAJNII EDDINS - Page 4D



Plant potatoes when the dandelions bloom!

Seed potatoes are in! And the dandelions are blooming.

(Full Disclosure: we're partial to dandelions)

DANDELION ACRES



GARDEN CENTER

I-89, Exit 3, Route 107, Bethel, VT
234-6622 • 888-234-6622

MASKS ARE REQUIRED.

Hummingbirds are back!

These little dynamos are great to watch and an important pollinator. We have flowering plants they like to visit and feeders for a more up close viewing station.



The origin of Eddins' poem 'Middle Passage'

Eddins shared the origin of his poem: "I'd always wanted to write something in particular, even as a younger poet, but it always seemed to be something too big to take on or didn't feel fully equipped to take on. I know many of us have this feeling that we're not as worthy or having the right voice or have the skills or experience to do something justice. I knew that it was really important to talk about the experience of my enslaved African ancestors and seeing them as our collective ancestry, speaking to how we're impacted by those experiences today. I didn't necessarily know if I was the one to do it or if I had the right to do so.

"I was asked by one of my friends to come and present something in honor of our ancestors for

an event for something called the Maafa, a Kiswahili term for calamity or great tragedy. It is a time where people of African descent come together and come together and honor and revere in a humble respect for all of their contributions and sacrifices.

"Many of us are aware of the traumatic experience of being stolen from your home and kidnapped, and then put in the bottom of a ship. That is already more trauma than most can fathom. Then coming to a completely different continent and being treated as less than a human being or an animal and being labelled that in language and mocked in your captivity. The people who withstood this, because many people died under that brutal imposition, but the people who withstood that are

the people who gave birth to my great, great, great and great grandmother and grandfather. My mother says we are the survivors of the survivors.

"This piece came about because

of the call to share and it was a divine omen that I wouldn't be asked to write it if I wasn't the right person. It gave me some deeper insight to say, 'well, what right have I not to speak these

words?' That's actually included in the piece. I owe them a debt of gratitude and I wouldn't be here without them so I should honor them with my life and those to come just like they did."

RAJNII EDDINS From Page 1D

"This was intentionally constructed, it didn't happen by accident to be a majority of European descent people. There's a history and a story to it that mine and yours story is a part of that," he continued. "My feeling about being the only person is connected to why that even came to be and that's what my art expresses. It draws attention to the fact that this is the outcome of colonization and conquest and genocide has never been reckoned with.

"Though we still have growth and development to do as human

beings in terms of learning how to atone and restore these things so we can create a world that allows for, encourages and affirms all human beings from Africa to the present sincerely, without agenda and to not appear racist or be as racist as our forebears and keep the same structure in place but to really transform the dynamic and allow terms like this to be used instead of speaking to the recognition that there's a common humanity with us all. We all have something vital to offer and to learn from our ancestors collectively."

Middle Passage

(Sung) There should be oceans of tears (x2)

This ink is not my blood
What right have I to speak

What right have I to speak

Think my words the salty oblivion
To swallow this globe

Submerging continents

Mother's one perfect tear
For her children

There were children
In that dark cramped space

Giving birth
In fetal position
To stillborn cosmos
Tiny infinities with mayhem as midwife

Below deck

Below death

Below breath was hope
Hidden in heartbeat rhythm

And now I see
Sometimes our children are
Below deck

Crammed into
Dark cramped space

But the wooden planks
Are blocks
And stoops
And streets

Still, our heart-beating hope tells me
We don't have to live that metaphor
For we are descendants of Stars and Suns
Look at the sky and see your reflection

Forgetfulness would have us think
The oceans dreamt them

But galaxies do litter the sea-floor
No one can ever take away
Our before

They sunk
So that we soar

They hung
So that we soar

They sunk and sung with tears in their lungs
So that we soar
This is not a metaphor
This is not a metaphor
This ain't no metaphor
MIDDLE PASSAGE

Everyone is stuck at home.

Everyone has a smartphone or camera.

Take a picture to let us know how you're doing!

Participate in our "Pictures in the Pandemic" photo competition. Share your observations and feelings during the crisis and win \$100.

The Standard wants to document how the coronavirus pandemic is being experienced by people in our own audience, in our own communities. Through their own lenses.

Use your camera or smartphone (and your creativity of course) to snap and upload a photo that depicts how it's going for you right now and/or what gives you hope as you cope with the effects of the pandemic.

You can ENTER this week's competition that starts today and runs until Wednesday. You can also VOTE now for last week's entries (two will win \$100)!

Visit www.thevermontstandard.com/photo-contest/ for full details.

**TWO \$100
PRIZES
EACH
WEEK**

VERMONT STANDARD Since 1853

