

**Kim Stafford**  
Poet  
Oregon, USA



**Kim Stafford is a poet and Emeritus professor at Lewis and Clark College in Oregon. He was named Oregon's Poet Laureate from 2018 to 2020. He received his bachelors, masters, and PhD degrees in English Literature and writing from the University of Oregon. He is the director and founder of the Northwest writing institute at Lewis and Clark College. He has published many books on poetry and prose. Some of his works are *Singer Come from Afar*, *Wild Honey*, *Tough Salt*, *Having Everything Right: Essays of Place*. He has taught writing in various communities, extending to Scotland, Italy, Mexico, and Bhutan. In addition to writing and teaching, he travels to raise the human spirit through poetry.**

*1. Please share with us your life trajectory and how you came to be a poet and teacher.*

My parents were both teachers, and in our house, books and ideas were our modest wealth. My father, the poet William Stafford, published many books of his own poetry, and traveled to Japan to share his writing and his witness for peace at the invitation of his friend, the poet Yorifumi Yaguchi, in Sapporo. But it was really my high school English teacher, a kind of teaching saint named Scholastica Murty, who nudged me into keeping a journal, and using writing first to understand my own life, and then to share with others the stories, dreams, fears, regrets, discoveries, and songs that came to me.

*2. What are your thoughts on GLH and its message and aim to spread peace through plants?*

I personally find the story of GLH inspiring, and when I tell others, I see how the story inspires them, too. A plant is not encumbered by politics, doesn't take sides, has no prejudice, and only wants to grow, to be loyal to its place of origin, to preside in grace. In many moments of tragedy, confusion, conflict, terror, or destruction, we turn to each other and say, "What can we do?" We can always plant trees.

*3. In your opinion, why do you think the survivor plants have been strong ambassadors for peace and have resonated and connected*

*with so many people around the world?*

I have read about the living witnesses to the tragic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the hibakusha, who have the courage to tell the story of their experience as survivors. And I have read about how some of these witnesses have chosen a denshoshu, a younger person to continue to tell the story after the original witness can no longer tell it. I tell my writing students, "You must be the denshoshu for the essential stories, the hard stories, that others can no longer tell." For me, each survivor plant is a hibakusha, and each seedling grown from that plant is a denshoshu carrying the story far and long.



**4. You have published several works inspired by the Covid-19 pandemic. How important is poetry during times of trial like that and how impactful has it been? Are there any parallels you see with the power of plants as well? What can GLH do to emphasize the message more strongly?**

In the pandemic, I started a custom of each day writing a poem and posting it on Instagram ([www.instagram.com/kimstaffordpoetry](http://www.instagram.com/kimstaffordpoetry)) as a way of offering thought, solidarity, hope, humor, and other responses to our shared struggle. I wanted to be like a tree opening leaf after leaf in spite of hardship. Many of my students and fellow writers told me they were paralyzed by what was happening, but my feeling was the opposite: at a time of trouble, the writer must rise up and find ways to sing in spite of all. (I call this “tropism toward the difficult”—the way a leaf turns toward light, a writer must turn toward what is hard to understand, and find words to help others get through it.) As Shakespeare says at a dark moment in *Macbeth*, “Give sorrow words; the grief that does not speak knits up the o-er wrought heart and bids it break.”

In this, I have been inspired by the actions of Yoshito Matsushige, the survivor of the Hiroshima bombing who went forth with his camera to record what he saw, even as his tears clouded

the viewfinder on his camera. “I had to press the shutter,” he said, “so I harden my heart.”

In the face of danger and destruction, plants can be our greatest teachers. A weed that rises from a crack in pavement, a seedling that rises after a forest burns, a tree that survives a bombing—these living witnesses tell us to keep going, to keep growing as our answer to destruction. To emphasize the message of the survivor plants.

**5. How important are initiatives like GLH for the youth and how do you see it expanding beyond just GLH?**

When I was young, our Boy Scout troop went to the ravaged lands of the Tillamook Burn to plant seedlings. We felt we were part of healing, making a better future. And when I was in high school, my older brother organized hundreds of students to plant a row of cherry trees along the road leading to our school (along Country Club Road in Lake Oswego). That was in 1965, and each spring those trees still bloom. I can imagine a project to gather young people to learn about the peace trees, and then to go forth to plant trees in their community. Perhaps working with Friends of Trees, such groups could visit a peace tree to learn the story, then set out to plant their own generation of young trees. By such an experience, each

might feel not only life in the present, but participation in a better future. As the writer Dennis Lee has said, “Work as if in the early days of a better nation.”



Poet Kim Stafford at an Oregon city peace tree dedication.

*Feature edited by Saeeda Razick of GLH*