

OTHERS

It's Great About Ray

The rise, demise and rebirth of a downtown lit mag

BY DAVID CROHN

RAY AND I MADE A DATE TO MEET at a coffee place downtown. He's the guy who runs the literary magazine my dad co-founded in 1969. Ray showed up a few minutes late and out of breath. On him were: a leather satchel filled with his manuscripts and four back issues of *New York Quarterly*; a large post office-issue box of unpublished poetry; a loaded nine-millimeter pistol.

You now know everything I love about Raymond Hammond.

If it's true that everyone is connected to everyone else by six degrees, then Ray and me are old friends. His mentor was William Packard, a deceased NYU professor who also taught my dad, Frank Crohn. Bill and Frank started NYQ as an outgrowth of the poetry workshop in which my dad was a student and Bill was the teacher. It was envisioned—and still is—as a literary magazine for the masses, divorced from any of the political or stylistic associations common to downtown lit mags of the 60s. Its move away from the radical, to celebrate and promote the art of poetry for its own sake—this was “earth-shattering” at the time, Ray, 41, said.

Over the years, as my dad drifted away from the issue-to-issue responsibilities of producing NYQ and became a successful businessman to support three families with three different women, the magazine grew into a mini-institution of the downtown poetry scene. It has published original works by Charles Bukowski, Allen Ginsberg, Galway Kinnell, W.D. Snodgrass, John Ashbery, Anne Sexton—all great, and all very different from the next.

My dad always recalls Bill with such buoyant enthusiasm that before I even heard what an interesting guy Ray is in his own right I was eager to meet him, just as a link to this formative moment and fascinating figure in my dad's history.

Bill Packard was known for a lot of things: his beard, his bohemian, stripped-down style of living (on 14th Street between 7th and 8th Avenues). But most importantly, at least from what I've been able to surmise, there was his teaching style: playful, spry, athletic. If the college professors who led my col-

lege workshops lumbered like elephants or were elusive like butterflies, Packard was a monkey. He handed his students tchotchkes from a grab bag—a paperclip, say, or a rubber ball—and had them compose on-the-spot verse. He would circle the room and suddenly hammer his palm down on the middle of the table. As NYQ's editor and holy spirit, his mock classifieds appeared in the back of the book: poem laxative for sale; support your local “Hysterical Amnesia Chapter.”

Ray and I drank coffee, and as he told me about Packard I sat there wishing I had had a teacher like that. Poetry (said Ezra Pound) is news that stays news, and Packard understood this. He preached the gospel of your gut above all; he never got the memo saying that poetry's business should be stolid or academic.

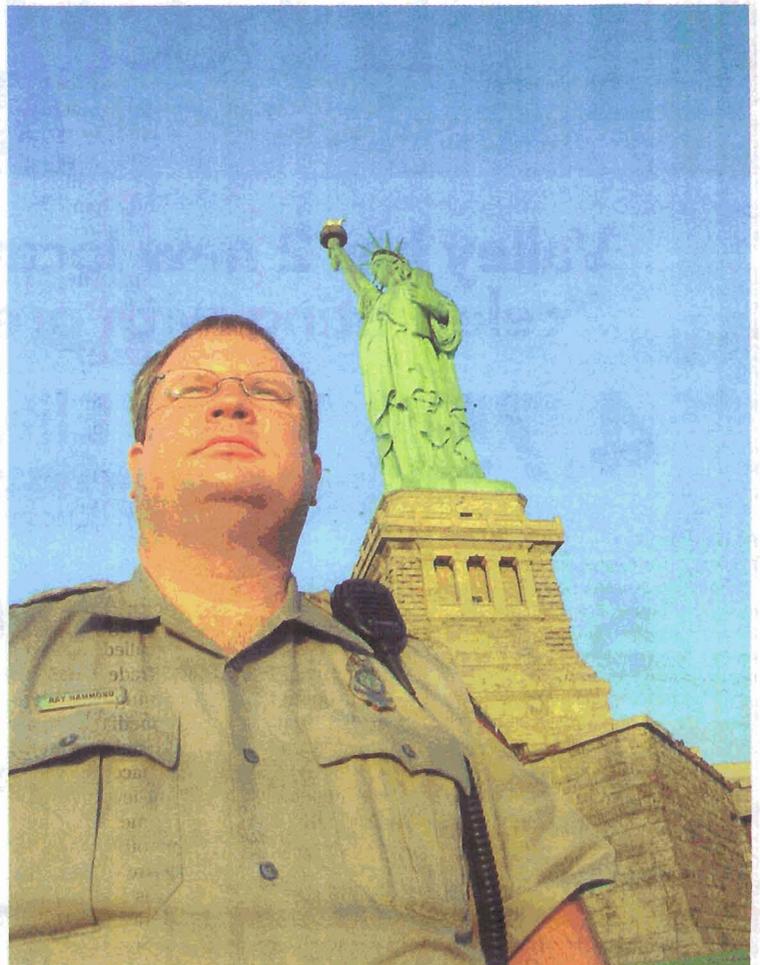
And he picked Ray to be his successor by willing the magazine, along with the rest of his literary estate, to him shortly after Packard's debilitating stroke in 1996. His poor health put the magazine on hiatus until his death in 2002. And while NYQ has not published continuously since Ray relaunched it with a William Packard memorial issue four years ago, it now receives over 50,000 submissions every year.

Ray was a schoolteacher and a spelunker before becoming a federal enforcement ranger nine years ago. He has worked at the Amistad National Recreation Area in Texas and the FDR home in Hyde Park. He now guards the Statue of Liberty at night. He couldn't tell me the hours or how many coworkers he has because his post is part of an anti-terrorism unit. He transferred there in 1996, as part of a fresh start after a dif-

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ficult divorce and a failed attempt to get into the University of Vermont's MFA writing program.

A Virginia native, Ray majored in biology and psychology at Roanoke; Vermont told him he didn't have enough English credits, and when he took writing workshops there to get the credits, it led nowhere. He was “bumbling around,” he told me. His move to the Statue was twofold: it would give him



Raymond Hammond—teacher, editor, poet, former spelunker and trained hostage negotiator—at his post. We can't show you what's on his belt because Homeland Security would come after us. Seriously.

nights to focus on literature, and when he wasn't working he could go to NYU. He got his MFA in writing from the Gallatin program and quickly progressed as a poet, writer and thinker under Bill's tutelage.

Personally, I was blown away by Ray's sincerity and passion. An autodidact and a poet's poet—not to mention a trained paramedic who tended to the injured on 9/11—he is exactly who you would want at the helm of a scrappy, traditionalist/avant-garde magazine like NYQ. Especially if that magazine is sort of a family heirloom.

The heirloom has barely changed since Ray started it up again. The unusual, poem-specific typefaces are gone, as are Bill's back-of-the-book “classifieds,” but everything else that makes NYQ unique remains. Every issue has an interview with a prominent poet discussing his or her craft. And it's published for the same two reasons it has always been: because readers like it, and to “provide a voice for people who have none,” Ray said. “It's kind of a misfit thing.”

In NYQ's pages you'll find laureates,

businessmen, construction workers and at least one dominatrix and one death row inmate.

Ray, Web-savvy, has also added one 21st century appurtenance, the accompanying Web site www.nyquarterly.com. There's also an ongoing reading series at the Cornelia Street Café, featuring only NYQ-published poets. Ray said he is trying to foster a community—not a clique or a scene, a crucial difference—of poets downtown, where poetry has thrived since the beats invaded in the 60s. The web site PoetsCraft.com provides forums, reading dates and old lectures of Packard's to feed the muse.

The \$5,000 it costs to put out each issue is spent exclusively on printing and mailings. No one except the typesetter is paid for their involvement—none of the editors, and certainly none of the poets. Everyone who composes the 13-member staff does it out of sheer enjoyment; they come during the day to Ray's Bay Ridge apartment and work while he sleeps off his night shift.

As Ray said, the only thing that matters is that the poems are good. “We owe nothing to anybody.”

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