

# Galway Kinnell '44W

## Memoriam for a Poet, Pulitzer Prize Winner, Activist and Teacher

**THIS PAST OCTOBER**, Wilbraham alumnus and celebrated poet Galway Kinnell '44W died from leukemia at his farmhouse in the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont. He was 87 years old.

Without doubt, Galway was one of the great literary voices of our age, and his range was impressive. He was a poet of both the city and country. He wrote great visionary national poems that are epic in scope, such as “The Avenue Bearing the Initial of Christ into the New World” and “When the Towers Fell”—two powerful and ambitious New York poems that address the landscape of the city at very different times and in very different terms. He also wrote about Vermont and the woods; he was quintessentially New England. And he also wrote very intimate poems about love, death, family and fatherhood.

During his long and productive career, he published a dozen books of poetry, translated such greats as Francois Villon and Rainer Maria Rilke, edited “The Essential Whitman,” was awarded a MacArthur Foundation grant (the so-called “genius” grant), received a Pulitzer Prize and won a National Book Award. He has been published in “Poetry,” “The Paris Review” and the “New Yorker” among others.

He was a graduate of Princeton University (after a stint in the U.S. Navy) where he was a good friend of poet W.S. Merwin. He also earned a graduate degree from Rochester.

Reflecting his connection to the great state of Vermont, he was named Poet Laureate of Vermont, a title held previously only by Robert Frost. Galway was very proud of this distinction and apparently took this position and role very seriously and not just as an honorary position. He took it upon himself to advocate for poetry, spreading the idea of poetry and access to it in school visits and readings throughout the state.

But his literary CV, as impressive as it is, does not really do justice to the person Galway was. He was a political activist who was personally involved in the Civil Rights Movement and the protests against the Vietnam War and the Iraq War.

He was also a teacher—he was the co-founder of the New York University writing program in the early 1980s and, after teaching at a number of universities, returned to NYU in 1991 as the Erich Maria Remarque Professor of Creative Writing until he retired in 2005.

But before all of that, he was a student at Wilbraham Academy. And what does future greatness look like in high school? It turns out it looks like many of our students, both current and past.

Galway was at the Academy for two years. He went to school meetings, waited on tables in the dining hall when it was his turn, lived in Rich Hall, walked up the Hill for classes, and then walked down the Hill for sports. He was Art Editor of the 1944 edition of “Del Todo” (the yearbook) and he was a member of the student council. He wrote a column for “Atlas,” the student newspaper. And he was Vice President of his class. His senior superlative was “best bluffer.”

In 2011, I was invited up to the old farmhouse

where Galway lived with his wife Bobbie Bristol in Sheffield, Vt. to interview him in his “office” in the back of a shed with a wood stove, his dogs and a big window facing the Connecticut River Valley and the White Mountains of New Hampshire. We talked about a lot of things—certainly poetry and literature—but mostly we talked about the Academy and what that experience was like. We both had Roger Lincoln as our senior English teacher in the basement of Old Academy and we both had played football and baseball on Corbin Field.

One of the things Galway was most proud of was his ability to hit a baseball. Apparently, as baseball scouts would say, he had a lot of “pop” in his bat. In fact, he was known as “Casey” during his years as a student at the Academy (from one of the best known poems in American literature, “Casey at the Bat”).

Galway never forgot Wilbraham Academy. It was the place that launched him into the life he lived, that allowed him to become the person

▼ **TOP LEFT** Young “Casey” Kinnell in his senior year at the Academy, along with some of his teammates, wielding a first baseman’s mitt.



*“I cannot imagine a time when Galway’s poetry won’t be a part of the Academy English curriculum.”*

—TIM HARRINGTON '73

he became. He felt blessed to have been plucked from the mills and factories of Pawtucket, R.I. by Charles Greenhalgh, then a trustee of the Academy, and given the opportunity to attend Wilbraham on scholarship. The course of his life changed and he was very grateful. He repaid the debt over and over again. He returned in the early 1980s when his critically acclaimed “Selected Poems” was about to be published to reunite with his high school mentor Mr. Lincoln and give a reading of his work—he read “The Bear” and “Fergus Falling” (about his son) among other poems. The book that won the Pulitzer and the National Book Award is dedicated to Mr. Lincoln (a fact I remind my English students whenever I get the chance).

He returned again about ten years ago shortly after his “New Selected Poems” was published to give another reading and to meet with students and talk about poetry.

I cannot imagine a time when Galway’s poetry won’t be a part of the Academy English curriculum. I remember reading his poetry in the 1970s and I have taught several of his poems in my English class, most notably “The Bear” and “Blackberry Eating”—two of his most visceral poems that are, therefore, very accessible to high school students.

The day his death was announced in the papers, I received a series of texts and emails from friends and colleagues. He had made a big impression at this school over the years and the sense of loss was palpable. To say the least, “there was no joy in Mudville.” The next day in school meeting, students read three poems about time and memory: “Promissory Note,” “Memories of My Father” and “The Man Splitting Wood in the Daybreak.” We talked about connections, particularly to place.



▲ Galway Kinnell '44W at his home in Vermont.

The last time Galway returned to the Academy was in 2011 as the commencement speaker. In the great tradition of commencement speeches, he offered several pieces of sage advice to the Class of 2011; among the nuggets were: **1.** “Don’t waste time (except when it is exquisitely pleasurable to do so).” **2.** “Have great ambitions, but don’t ever think that success justifies everything.” **3.** “Be aware of the suffering of others, as well as your own, and learn all you can from it.”—all great words by which to live.

But he said something that particularly struck home for me. He said: “If you are ever able to give help to someone in a way that might transform his or her life, as Charles Greenhalgh did for me, understand that you may never know how it all turned out, and you may never be thanked, but you must do it if you possibly can.” This speaks to the calling of every teacher and educator. And as long as there is an Academy in Wilbraham, it speaks to the mission of this school. ■