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April 3, 1998

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

POETRY READING TO HELP EIU STUDENTS COPE WITH LOVED ONES' LOSS

CHARLESTON -- Students and faculty at Eastern Illinois University will turn to language next week to help them cope with feelings of grief caused by the death of loved ones.

The Andrea Will Memorial Poetry Reading, scheduled for 7 p.m. Tuesday, April 7, at Eastern's Table Arts Center, will feature students and faculty reading original writings, as well as previously published works by renowned authors. The event is free and open to the general public.

Will, an 18-year-old freshman from Batavia, died Feb. 3 from strangulation. Her estranged boyfriend has been charged in the murder.

Debra Valentino, an instructor in Eastern's English department, spearheaded the event based on the reaction of her students following Will's death.

"The community was in shock, and my students were visibly upset; some were

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distraught," Valentino said. "Students who were Andrea's friends and sorority sisters were listless and couldn't concentrate; some were openly weeping in class. It was obvious that her death was something they needed to talk about."

After direct discussion, Valentino turned to literature, finding parallels in the conflicts and characters the class was studying. In addition, she assigned a writing project geared at getting the students to examine their own feelings through writing. Specifically, she asked them to focus on ways in which they could do something positive at some level of society, whether it be in the community, at the university, in their majors, or in their relationships.

"When the papers came back, I discovered that about 80 percent of the students expressed a desire to do something in memory of Andrea Will. Some wanted to make a class contribution to her scholarship fund; others wanted to plant a tree on campus or erect a memorial," their instructor recalled.

That's when Valentino's idea for a poetry reading took root, and the suggestion was immediately met with enthusiasm. Under her guidance, the students have planned the event which will include eight student and 10 faculty readers.

Will is one of several Eastern students and recent EIU graduates who have died during the 1997-98 school year. Among those are Susan Stephens, a 23-year-old senior from Paris (Nov. 9); Matthew Franks, a 21-year-old junior from Deerfield (Nov. 10); and Melissa "Missy" Pendency, a 19-year-old freshman from Bartlett (Jan. 2). In addition to Will, the reading will honor and give cause to remember all these individuals, plus others,

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POETRY READING

Valentino noted.

“To many college freshmen, death is unimaginable,” she said. “They’re not old enough to have had much experience with it, especially when the deceased is nearly their own age. The purpose of the poetry reading is to accomplish some of the same things writing does -- to provide an opportunity to give form to a senseless thing, and to help channel dark feelings into something positive.”