

**READERS ARE HEEDING THE VOICES OF KENTUCKY WOMEN. THEY HEED THE VOICES OF THE 16-YEAR-OLD AND THE 90-YEAR-OLD; THE VOICES OF THE FEMALE LAWYER, THE THERAPIST, THE TEACHER, THE FARMER, AND THE BAND MEMBER; THE VOICES OF KENTUCKY WOMEN WHO ARE GROWING AND CHANGING AND EXPERIENCING A JOURNEY TOWARD GENDER EQUALITY.**

Elizabeth Oakes and Jane Olmsted are making these voices heard. They are editing the series Kentucky Feminist Writers, which includes the books, *Writing Who We Are: Poems by Kentucky Feminists*; *Telling Stories: Fiction by Kentucky Feminists*; and the forthcoming *I to I: Essays by Kentucky Feminists*. These books are elevating the image of Kentucky women and helping to change stereotypes held by many people.

The idea for *Writing Who We Are: Poems by Kentucky Feminists* started at a local restaurant when Western Kentucky University faculty members, Elizabeth Oakes, an English professor, and Jane Olmsted, Director of the Women's Studies Program and an English professor, began talking about the need to highlight feminist writing by Kentuckians.

With the idea in hand, they spoke to several publishers in Kentucky and were turned away after being told that poetry didn't sell. "We weren't going to give up," Olmsted said. "Somehow we were going to do this."

After a year, they found people who believed in their publishing cause. The Kentucky Foundation for Women and Western Kentucky University gave them grants in order to publish *Writing Who We Are: Poems by Kentucky*

# Heeding Voices of Kentucky Women

BY SHERYL HAGAN-BOOTH



Dr. Jane Olmsted (left) and Dr. Elizabeth Oakes (right)

*Feminists*, which sold 500 copies within two months, necessitating a second printing. They then received a larger grant from the Kentucky Foundation for Women for a second book, and were able to have the fiction volume published with a full-color cover.

Letters were sent to a variety of people, including unpublished writers and award-winning authors. Olmsted and Oakes felt it was important that the books represent a wide range of Kentucky women, from the housewife to the businesswoman, the published to the unpublished. They reviewed the poems and stories and selected only the best.

Poetry and stories from women writers reflected their individual experiences amid Kentucky's beauty and tradition, as well as its poverty and ugliness. Kentucky authors wrote about confronting their past, present, and future, and about changing perceptions of themselves and others.

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"We had no idea how important these books would be," Olmsted said.

Olmsted and Oakes believed it was important to place award-winning authors and unpublished writers side by side for a multi-dimensional collection that could be shared and enjoyed by everyone. For many authors, it was their first time to be published.

Unlike many editors, Olmsted and Oakes keep up with their writers by sending updates on reviews to the contributors to the books. This personal touch helps the writers and editors to understand each other and form an ongoing relationship. "Jane and Libby provided unwavering support and assistance," one writer said, "going far beyond the expectation of most editors, building our confidence as well as providing valuable suggestions for enhancing our work. They gave us wings and let us soar."

The editors have held readings of the two books at local and state venues, such as the Kentucky Women Writers Conference and the 20th Century Literature Conference. Books-a-Million named *Writing Who We Are: Poems by Kentucky Feminists* the second best-selling regional book of 2001. Some teachers have started to use

the books as required texts. Positive reviews and articles have appeared in local and state newspapers such as the *Lexington Herald-Leader* and Louisville's *The Courier-Journal*.

Their third book, *I to I: Essays by Kentucky Feminists*, will be published in 2003. Oakes said she hopes the collection, which is still being planned, will include a few essays by men. In addition to sending letters to high schools and universities, they will send letters to prisons and shelters and other diverse places, encouraging writers everywhere to share their life experiences.

One of the most exciting aspects of the books is the positive impact they have had on awareness about feminism in Kentucky. Just because the writing has a political view does not mean that it's polemical or browbeating. Oakes and Olmsted describe the writing as subtle, inventive, creative, and authentic. From the writing, one gets a sense of political causes through the real life experiences of women. "I was really gratified that what comes through was the strength of the women of Kentucky," Oakes said.

"It has turned out to be more than we had ever envisioned," Oakes said.