

CHICAGOANS OF THE YEAR—THE MAGNIFICENT SEVEN  
IS THAT ART? BY TED ALLEN

# Chicago

JANUARY 2003

# SEVEN

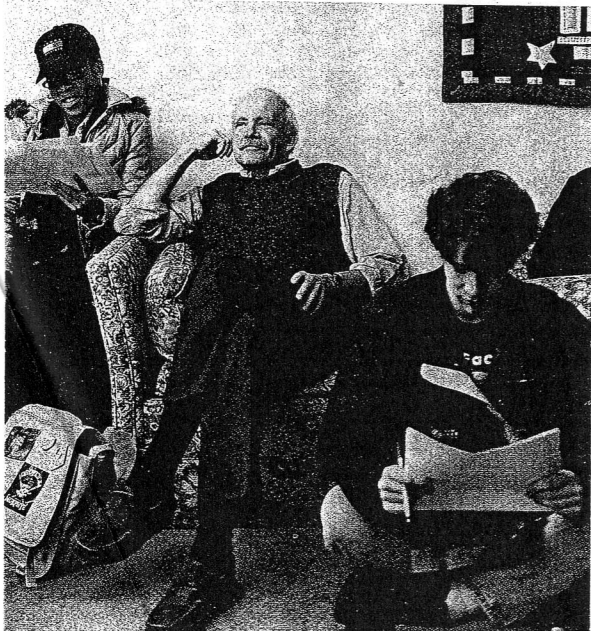
The Magnificent

Chicagoans of the Year 2002



**"There is something wonderfully satisfying about writing a poem."**

ROBERT BOONE



## Write-Minded

ROBERT BOONE \*  
Young Chicago Authors

**O**NE LOOK UP THE CROOKED STAIRCASE and you immediately understand Robert Boone's world. The steps, which lead to the West Wicker Park headquarters of Boone's writing program for teenagers, are steep, a bit harrowing, and shadowed at the top. Nearly 200 high school students, many facing an uncertain future, have ascended those rickety stairs over the past ten years. And eventually they have come back down with sharpened writing skills—and a total of more than \$900,000 in college scholarships.

In 1992, when Boone's mother died, she left him a substantial inheritance in stocks. He had spent the better part of his life in classrooms—from Highland Park to the Cabrini-Green public housing project—urging police officers, basketball players, and especially teenagers to pick up a pen and write. Now he knew immediately what he wanted to do. "I had this idea that I would set up a scholarship program for kids in the city who like to write," says Boone. And so he established Young Chicago Authors, which promises \$2,000 a year for college to high school students who successfully complete the requirements of the three-year program.

Each school year, YCA picks 15 to 20 Chicago high school sophomores from a pool of 100 applicants to add to its program, Saturday Scholars. The classes are filled mostly by minority students, some from public and private schools with inadequate writing curriculums. They gather on Saturday mornings—along with the juniors and seniors who

had been accepted before them—in the scruffy YCA workshop. There Boone and other instructors use a variety of exercises to get the kids to write, to read aloud what they have written, and then to talk about their efforts. It's a straightforward concept, and it works: Surrounded by other young writers, the teenagers start to act like writers themselves. Continued support from local foundations and corporate donors has helped put students through Harvard, Cornell, Northwestern, and other universities.

Boone, who is 61, doesn't get a penny for his work with YCA—he earns a living by running a test prep center in Glencoe—but his time with the kids is payment enough. "They're spontaneous, they're funny, and things are newer to them," he notes. And over the years he has watched YCA expand, with outreach programs in minority schools, poetry slams, photography classes, and job opportunities for scholarship students. The organization publishes a literary magazine, *Say What*, and sponsors a Tuesday open-mic

night at Square One, Cafe on Milwaukee Avenue. All told, YCA serves more than 850 young Chicagoans a year—and it has also added some adult classes. "Even if the kids end up selling insurance," Boone says, "they have discovered that there is something wonderfully, privately satisfying about trying to write a poem."

—JEFF RUBY