

Poet Laureate: Description, Selection, Activities

Project Goals: As the Library engages in its ongoing activity of advancing and celebrating literacy, it celebrates multiple forms of writing and reading. Of all of the literary arts, poetry is particularly mindful of language and the intersection of reading and listening. In cooperation with the Northfield Arts and Culture Commission, the City of Northfield library proposes to sponsor a “Poet Laureate” to provide leadership for a three-year literary arts project that will be part of the ongoing celebration of new and improved Library facilities. In exploring the need for a Poet Laureate, Library and Arts and Culture Commission members met with Winona Poet Laureate Emilio DeGrazia to discuss ways that a Poet Laureate can help to focus and sustain poetic arts activity, in cooperation with co-sponsors and partners. Following Winona’s example, the Library and ACC have envisioned the Poet Laureate as a coordinator and creative leader for poetic and all literary arts rather than as a ceremonial poet. The Poet Laureate will be part of an overall effort to advance the visibility and quality and appreciation of poetic arts in schools, among practicing poets, and for public audiences. The project will build on current efforts to cultivate a poetry-rich community, including the Sidewalk Poetry competition and installation, highlighting of Poetry Month in April, and Poem in Your Pocket Day in downtown Northfield.

Poet Laureate Appointment: The Library and ACC will be the sponsors of the Laureate project. The initial appointment will be for three years. Modest compensation will be provided for the Laureate’s work in schools and other settings. The Library and ACC will seek SEMAC funding (\$10,000) for years two and three of the appointment, providing additional support for the position, amounting to approximately \$4000 per year, along with programming funding and travel expenses.

Selection Criteria:

- A proven history of substantial publication of individual poems and/or books
- An established history of activity in the Northfield literary community, i.e., readings, publications, public presentations, and/or teaching
- Critical acclaim as demonstrated by special honors, awards, or other recognition
- Experience in working with a range of audiences, including elementary school students and senior citizens.
- Experience in leading or conducting workshops for writers.

Responsibilities (several of these as funding allows):

- composition of an original poem for at least one civic event;
- visit to each of the schools, as arranged by the Language Arts programs of each school,

- introduction of visiting writers, as requested, at the Library, Arts Guild, Content Bookstore and other sites;
- honorary chairing of civic poetry events, including Sidewalk Poetry and Poem in Your Pocket;
- chairing of an annual competition in a genre of poetry, e.g., sonnet;
- introduction of and participation in project-sponsored events,
- participation as invited to local poetry events, including those at St. Olaf and Carleton and Content Bookstore;
- conducting of a poetry workshop, as arranged and funded by a co-sponsor.

Laureate Selection Committee:

- St. Olaf Representative
- Carleton Representative
- Library Representative,
- At-large Community Representative
- K-12 Representative

Press Release:

If the Library of Congress can have a Poet Laureate, why not the Northfield Public Library?

As the Library gears up to celebrate its renovation and new spaces, Teresa Jensen, Director of the Northfield Public Library, is looking ahead to using the occasion to inspire interest in reading and literary arts. One of the ways to focus attention on reading and language, she says, will be to appoint a Poet Laureate to serve as a spokesperson for reading and writing: “The Library is already the sponsor of a wide range of reading groups, celebrations, and author readings, including authors of books for children, teens and adults. We are looking forward to getting even more people involved in reading and literature.”

The Poet Laureate competition was announced at the Sidewalk Poetry selection event on April 28, at which this year’s poet’s were announced.

As the City continues to develop its reputation as an Arts Town, the Poet Laureate will assist the Public Library and other organizations in sponsoring workshops and providing leadership of current activities, including Sidewalk Poetry and Poem in Your Pocket Day. The Laureate will also advise on launching an annual poetry-genre competition and compose original poems each year in coordination with public events and workshops.

The qualifications of the Poet Laureate will include a distinguished record of publication and a willingness to help community efforts to enhance the poetic arts. A Poet Laureate application form, selection criteria, job description, and compensation information are available on the Public Library

website. A Laureate selection committee will review applications, and the winner be selected in late July, and the Laureate introduced at the August Sidewalk Poetry Capstone event at Bridge Square.

The initial term of the Laureate will be three years. Funding for the Laureate in carrying out the duties of the position will be sought from the Southeast Minnesota Arts and Culture Fund.

The Northfield Library is partnering with the City of Northfield Arts and Culture Commission to sponsor the Poet Laureate Project, especially as it provides leadership for sustaining current poetic arts activity and generating new activities in poetry. Content Bookstore has also been involved in support of the project, and it has provided space and scheduling for poetry events.

Philip Spensley, chair of the Arts and Culture Commission and the coordinator of the Sidewalk Poetry event, has been an advocate for the Laureate project: “To date, Sidewalk Poetry has selected 47 poems written by Northfield poets, over five competitions, for impression into new sidewalk construction. Northfield is home to a lot of poets!” Spensley—a published and award-winning playwright and poet, has served on the Laureate planning committee. “One weekend each year,” he suggests, “perhaps we can designate the Poet Laureate as the Poet Lauriat?”

Bonnie Jean Flom, retired educator and chair of the ACC, is especially enthused about educational aspects of the project: “I am looking forward to teachers working with the Laureate to inspire language arts creativity.”