

What is a Poet Laureate?

Poet Laureates have a storied tradition that can be traced to Homer and the royal courts of ancient Greece. From the start, they have stood for enlightenment, for literacy, and for the exaltation of language as a means to inform, educate and entertain people.

The word “laureate” comes from “laurel,” a plant sacred to the Greek god Apollo. In ancient times, “laureate letters” were dispatches announcing military victories. In the Middle Ages, the term was associated with degrees awarded by European universities (“baccalaureate” degrees). The “poet laureate” was a royal degree in rhetoric awarded by European universities in the Middle Ages. King James I of England created the first official poet laureate when he appointed Ben Jonson in 1617.

From the “Iliad” and “Odyssey,” to Chaucer and Dante, to W.S. Merwin and Maya Angelou, poets have held a special place in their society. They have addressed secular and spiritual issues, royalty and Everyman.

In the United States, the post was initiated at the state level, with California establishing a poet laureate position in 1915. Congress created a U.S. Poet Laureate position in 1937, naming Joseph Auslander; the current U.S. Poet Laureate is Natasha Trethewey. Over the years, poet laureates have evolved from being entertainers to being educators. Today, the mandate of the U.S. poet laureate is to engender an appreciation of the written and spoken word through poetry. More generally, the goal is to improve literacy.

How many cities and states have a Poet Laureate?

According to the Library of Congress (<http://www.loc.gov/rr/main/poets/faq.html>), 43 states have official state poet laureate positions (two states, Alaska and Idaho, broadened the post to “Writer Laureate”). The District of Columbia and Santa Fe, N.M., appoint city poets laureate.

Why does Boise City need a Poet Laureate?

Poetry has always been an important tool for teaching literacy. Children and adults are naturally drawn to the music of words, which are the building blocks of written and spoken language. Literacy — the ability to read and write — is necessary to succeed in today’s world. Unfortunately, it is a skill that is lacking in a high percentage of our population. According to a recent survey, more than 90 million adults in the U.S. lack the literacy skills needed to have fully productive and secure lives. Therefore, improving literacy in the general population is a priority.

Having a city poet laureate says two things to the world: 1) Our city values a literate population; and 2) Here is a person who will take that message to the people. Boise currently has no programs that focus on poets or poetry, although poets are encouraged to apply for an Arts & History grant to write and present poetry.

How will the Poet Laureate program work?

In brief, the Poet Laureate will develop outreach activities that will bring the power of poetry to Boise, particularly citizens in underserved areas. Those activities would include readings, workshops and other literary events at educational institutions and civic and cultural venues that will reach people. The Poet Laureate also will be called upon to present poems at ceremonial occasions and official city events, i.e. Boise 150 commemoration activities, Mayor’s Arts Awards, State of the City address, etc.

This program will be administered by the Boise City Arts and History Department, the city agency that will be the official sponsor of the Poet Laureate. The Department may partner with other entities regarding the Poet Laureate program.

What are the Boise Poet Laureate Program goals?

- Raise awareness of the power of poetry and the spoken word.
- Enhance the literary arts presence in Boise.
- Celebrate the spirit of the people and special qualities of our city.
- Create a focal point for expressing Boise’s culture through the literary arts.

- Contribute to the continued growth of the individual Poets Laureate.
- Promote interdisciplinary collaboration through the literary arts.
- Build a body of work that commemorates the life of our city.
- Create a unique program that will become a model for other Idaho cities.

Why does a Poet Laureate matter?

In the early days, Poet Laureates were symbols of cultural refinement. Their presence was proof that a regime was civilized and informed. Today, poets are more than symbols. They are teachers who, through poetry, help citizens at all levels of society appreciate and understand the power of language.. Poetry is a wonderful way to teach literacy. It moves people. It reaches people. The growing number of poetry festivals and other poetry events throughout the U.S. is evidence that people want more poetry in their lives.