

## Know Your Madisonian: Poetry is Fabu Phillis Carter's means to help alleviate children's suffering

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After four years as Madison's poet laureate, Fabu Phillis Carter, 55, is moving on to a new chapter in her fight for black voices to be heard and for the accomplishments of black people to be remembered and acknowledged in places ranging from classrooms to the state Capitol.

She will mark the end of her term with a poetry reading at 6 p.m. Friday, followed by a book signing at 7 p.m., on the Rotunda Stage of the Overture Center.

### Q: How did you find your way to Madison?

A: I actually was born in Como, Miss., but my father was career Army, so I never lived there. I came here because I wanted to learn the origins of African-America literature and the only place to come to study for a Ph.D. in African languages and literature was Madison. I got a master's in 1980 in African language and literature, and I got a second master's in '81 in Afro-American studies. I've actually lived in Madison longer than any other place in the world so it definitely is home now.



### Q: What does it mean to be Madison's poet laureate?

A: The idea of having a city poet laureate is that you would represent poetry for the city of Madison. I get asked by the mayor's office to write poems for specific city events. I became the Madison poet laureate based on the fact I really respect and care for children. My whole career has been based in working very hard with children and poetry so they can use poetry as a healing tool and as a way to express themselves — their joys, their sorrows, their concerns. Unfortunately life is becoming more difficult for children, so poetry is a way to alleviate some of that suffering and to give voice to how they think and feel and do.

### Q: What were your experiences growing up?

A: Because my father was career Army, we lived in almost in every state of the South. I went to kindergarten and first grade in France at an Air Force base. When I was 11, my father was being sent to Vietnam and he wanted my mother to be near her people. We arrived in Memphis in 1968, just in time to see the sanitation strike and to see my mother marching in the streets for the freedom of black people. I was so confused I started writing. I was trying to make sense of what was happening in my world. The whole city was in arms, and that's the first time any white person ever looked at me with hatred. I asked my mother, can I march with her? She said, "It's my time to fight for freedom. You'll have your time later." A lot of my poetry is about that time as a child, seeing what I saw.

### Q: What would you like to be your greatest legacy?

A: That the work I've done here is not obscured, forgotten or erased.