

# Angela Trudell Vasquez seeks to further inspire youth and communities of color during second term as Madison Poet Laureate

By Rodlyn-mae Banting - Feb 14, 2022

Last year, an 11-year-old girl was announced as the winner of a poetry contest hosted by the Wormfarm Institute in Sauk County. Her entire family traveled to see and take pictures of her poem, which was printed on a billboard in town. This kind of celebration of youth's talent is at the heart of Angela 'Angie' Trudell Vasquez's work as the Madison Poet Laureate, who also judged that particular contest. Having developed a love for writing at a young age herself, Trudell Vasquez looks forward to encouraging more young creatives to fall in love with the written word as she enters her second term in this position.



Despite the challenges and limitations that the pandemic posed, Trudell Vasquez held a successful first term as Madison Poet Laureate, and as the first Latina to hold the position. Over the course of two years, Trudell Vasquez continued the long-held tradition of [Bus Line Poetry](#) in partnership with Edgewood College, collaborated with the Milwaukee Muslim Women's Coalition on a biographical poem entitled, "[Faith Sisters,](#)" and managed to gather an online audience of 168 people spanning four continents for an evening of [Indigenous poetics](#) for the 2020 Wisconsin Book Festival.

Upon Mayor Satya Rhodes-Conway's request, Trudell Vasquez also penned a poem entitled "[Dispatches from Radar Hill,](#)" which commemorates the 500,000 lost to the COVID-19 pandemic. She read the piece at the City Council meeting on March 1 of last year, which Dane County had newly deemed the Day of Remembrance and Recovery.

That day, it became even clearer to Trudell Vasquez how powerful words can be. "[People always say], 'Well, I don't really get it, y'know.' But when I would ask them, 'What's your favorite poem?' ... they usually had a favorite poem," she said. "So I consider my role as the Madison Poet Laureate [as being] to bring poetry to the people. [...] I think that people are hungry for some kind of connection and I think poetry is one of those things that can bridge it. We've gone through so much in this country that sometimes a poem can deliver something in a way that a long speech wouldn't."

Poetry has long been the key to Trudell Vasquez understanding the world around her, especially as a young girl living in Iowa. As a second and third-generation Mexican American, Trudell Vasquez could always sense the ways her family differed from their neighbors. “I was aware of socioeconomic levels and class and race and ethnicity from a very young age,” she said. “Defining myself was what I did on the page. Because we grew up in a suburb, [which] was about 98% white. So finding myself on the page was very important. [I found out] who I was through writing and reading.”

Even though she has always been a prolific writer, it wasn’t until later in life that Trudell Vasquez decided to pursue a master’s degree in fine arts (MFA) degree. “I got a job, I got a 401K, made my parents proud, paid my bills. I was a very good immigrant in that way. I needed some stability,” she explained. “But I just thought, ‘I’ve gotten as far as I can, what don’t I know, what am I doing wrong, how can I be better, how can I be a better editor? I wanted to learn.” Trudell Vasquez relocated to Santa Fe, N.M. in 2015 to immerse herself in indigenous poetics through a low residency program at the Institution of American Indian Arts, where she had the opportunity to learn from and alongside renowned writers like Joy Harjo, Sherman Alexie, and Natalie Diaz.

Today, Trudell Vasquez juggles her laureateship with her position as the vice-chair of the Wisconsin Poet Laureate Commission and her full-time job at End Domestic Abuse Wisconsin. Her strong civic engagement, which fuels much of her writing, stems from a family history of activism. “When my dad went to the University of Iowa, we were part of Chicano House and we would participate in protests and boycotts. One of my first memories was being at Chicano House and going to this grocery store and picketing outside in solidarity with the lettuce workers,” she recalled. “The activism feeds the writing and the writing feeds the activism. I don’t know any other way to be.”

As Trudell Vasquez heads into her third year as the poet laureate, she hopes to finally be able to appoint a youth poet laureate to the city of Madison, a project that she has been working on since her very first day on the job in 2020. “That’s my gift to Madison,” she explained. “Something for young people to aspire to. If we’re getting our emotions out through art, we’re not going to take them out on each other.”

Even as she continues to be nationally recognized for her work, Trudell Vasquez remains rooted in the community work that being poet laureate allows her to do. “When we’re in community and we’re sharing our stories and we’re reading our poems, there’s no time to hate. Because I think the more you know about people the less you can ‘other’ them,” she said. “And I think the healing has to come from the arts. I don’t think it’s going to be mandated from above. I think it has to come from the community.”

When asked if she has any advice for young writers of color, Trudell Vasquez urges them to look to each other for courage and inspiration. “You are not alone. [There] is a resurgence of poetry and marginalized voices coming to the forefront. You can see that through who’s getting awards and who’s being published,” she said. “There is no shortage of poems from writers of color, from all genders, from all ethnicities, from all backgrounds. We’re all trying to save this earth. [...] We’re all here trying to keep us going as a people.”

*Trudell Vasquez’s newest poetry collection, “My People Redux,” came out earlier this month with Finishing Line Press. You can purchase a copy [here](#).*