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The laureate next door

Madison's new poetry ambassador writes of politics and place

BY LINDA FALKENSTEIN

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NICOLE TAYLOR

The occasion is the 35th annual Madison and Dane County Martin Luther King Jr. holiday observance at the Overture Center's Capitol Theater. The ornate, double-decker room is full; onstage the Martin Luther King Jr. Community Choir sings freedom songs, ushering in the formal presentation with the black national anthem, "Lift Every Voice and Sing."

Another voice takes to the stage. Angela Trudell Vasquez, Madison's new poet laureate, speaks with the gravitas that the occasion and the position demands.

"This poem is called 'Everybody is Somebody's Child,'" Vasquez begins.

She writes of women's lives, their sacrifices for their families — the small, everyday acts that nourish amid the world's violence; the brave steps taken to resist that violence. It is a poem about hardship and joy, danger and protection, immigration and home:

The woman who rides the waves

and prays the rickety boat will reach



Lesbos' shores, and on the other side waits:

warm bread, lentil soup, tea with honey,

coffee, a bed to sleep, people

who will throw open their doors

and let them in, let them in...



JONATHAN GRAMLING/THE CAPITAL CI

Angela Trudell Vasquez opens the Madison and Dane County Martin Luther King Jr. observance with a poem.

Vasquez is introduced as a “longtime social justice activist and poet of witness.” But she is also a poet of play and of place. Her wider concerns are balanced with enthusiasm for simple joys — swinging at the playground, or sledding down the big hill at Hiestand Park, for instance, near her home on Madison’s east side. A photo of the park’s playground graces the cover of her most recent collection, *In Light, Always Light*, published last year as part of Finishing Line Press’s New Women’s Voices series.

It was important to Vasquez to have the photo of the park on the cover of her collection. It’s where she sometimes goes to revise her work and to read her poems aloud to herself. It’s a part of her neighborhood, where some of her poems, like “Wheel Kids,” are set.

“To me, poetry is accessible to anybody,” says Vasquez. “We can break down barriers with poetry, and create empathy and understanding and healing.”

Wheel Kids



Chocolate children

race down the cul-de-sac

tight curls bounce

jeans t-shirts rise with air

clenched fists, taped bars,

tennis shoe brakes, no breaks

a shout they cruise

out of sight of the window

bikes, scooters shake quake

skinny kid arms, legs, torsos

skin flattens —

neighbors straight arrows

shooting stars flesh flies

bodies grow wings.

" ~~ROBBIE~~ < FNK >

In January, Vasquez became the seventh poet to hold the volunteer position of poet laureate of Madison.

Four times a year, the poet laureate opens a Common Council meeting with a poem.



“The act reinforces a mood of civility in discourse,” reads the city’s description of the program. “Reading a poem prior to the meeting acknowledges and reminds us of the complexities of experience, language and truth, heightening everyone’s consciousness of the potency of their words.”

“I’ve had council members tell me that sometimes, the poem is the best part of the meeting,” says Oscar Mireles, who just stepped down from his stint as poet laureate.

Vasquez read her poem “Swan Lake” at the Jan. 7 council meeting, at which she was officially appointed.

“Swan Lake” is characteristic of Vasquez in her careful consideration of a moment that might otherwise be overlooked. A group of young ballerinas dance “before/ they are conscious/of limitations,” she writes. Imagination is important, and belief, as they leap across the stage thinking “this must be how it is/to press against the sky and fly.”

The poet laureate also oversees events for National Poetry Month in April and chooses verse for the [Madison Metro Bus Lines Poetry Project](#), which places poems penned by city residents in city buses.

Vasquez will offer workshops in writing poetry, too, held at branches of the Madison Public Library. But first on her agenda is to establish a youth poet laureate, choosing one school-age poet who will be a poetry ambassador to Madison kids and whom Vasquez would mentor. “Children are hungry for poetry,” she says.

Vasquez likes to start writing the same way she encourages her students to, by getting ideas down on the page. “First thought, best thought” is one of her mottos, something she tells students: “They get too caught up thinking it has to be perfect — just get it on the page.” Vasquez is a firm believer in telling your own story. To help kids share their work, she shares hers.

“If I am vulnerable, and I go deep and I am open and honest, it’s usually mirrored in the student’s response. I have to create a trusting atmosphere.”

“Young people are doing such good work,” she continues. “They have such fire in their bellies. I think [the youth poet laureateship] will be good for the city.”

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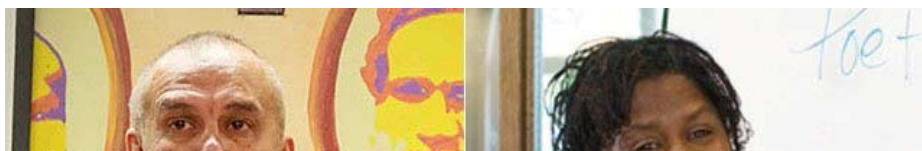
Madison is thought to have one of the oldest city poet laureate programs in the country, says Andrea Musher, Madison’s second poet laureate, who held the position from 2001-2007.

The laureateship — a vague concept, at the time — began in 1977. Paul Soglin, then 32, was mayor. John Tuschen, a street poet more or less in the tradition of the Beats, was a friend.

In an email, Soglin writes that the two met regularly at the Cardinal Bar, where Soglin would customarily drink scotch and Tuschen a Pabst.

“One night we were discussing the fact that there was very little recognition of poets compared to the previous five centuries,” Soglin recalls. “I asked Tuschen what were his thoughts as to why poetry had fallen out of favor in later 20th century society. He said, ‘There are as many poets today and as many people follow them as 200 years ago. They have guitars and we call them rock musicians.’”

Tuschen then planted the seeds for the poet laureateship: “‘If you want to do something to elevate poets without guitars, name me poet laureate for Madison.’ We chatted about whether I had the authority to do that and that’s what happened,” Soglin concludes.





MARTIN JENICH

Previous poets laureate Oscar Mireles (left) and Fabu Carter. “There is no downside to having poetry be part of the fabric of a city,” says Carter.

The ceremony, such as it was, happened at the first birthday party for the fledgling *Isthmus*, which took place at the restaurant La Creperie on State Street, according to an account in the April 14, 1977, issue of the paper: “Tuschen, rising to the challenge, sat up the night before and wrote a sheaf of brand-new poetry, the beginnings of a new collection to replace the originals that were stolen from his car last winter. Shortly after his reading, he was called back to the stage by Hizzoner da Mare...who took the occasion to name him the ‘official poet laureate of Madison.’ In lieu of a key to the city...he presented Tuschen with a key to the freight elevator of the City County Building. Tuschen replied that it must be because he’s ‘so heavy.’”



Tuschen, well known for handing out sheets of poetry on State Street, served as poet laureate from 1977 to the end of 2000, when Musher took over, hand-picked by Tuschen as his successor.

Musher remembers the idea of poet laureate starting more or less as a joke, “but Tuschen took it seriously.” Even so, his reign lasted so long, Musher says, people forgot that it was even a thing.

Mayor Sue Bauman made Musher’s laureateship official and gave her the key to the city — not the freight elevator. Musher set about raising the visibility of the position, which took some “heavy lifting.” She credits mayoral aide Ryan Mulcahy for his support, as well as Karin Wolf, Madison’s arts program administrator.

Musher launched a poetry series, *The Poetry Buzz*, broadcast on WORT-FM that was later put onto CDs; gave readings and workshops; judged contests; and wrote poems to

commemorate events like Madison’s sesquicentennial, as well as John Tuschén’s funeral. She also established the John Tuschén Poet Laureate Memorial Fund with the Madison Community Foundation, that supports the laureate’s public work.

The official proclamation for the honorary position of Madison poet laureate was created when Musher stepped down — penned intentionally to be somewhat flowery, she recalls. Around the same time, the city formalized an application procedure, says Wolf, to make the selection “more equitable.”

The poet laureate now serves for two years and may have two terms. For the latest round there were seven applicants, says Wolf, a number she finds heartening because “it’s an intense volunteer position. There aren’t that many people who are willing to work that hard for free.”

Being poet laureate of Madison doesn’t mean writing poems *about* Madison, says Wolf; it’s about “being an ambassador of poetry. It’s more important that the person be a public poet than a perfect poet.” The selection committee looks for someone who will be quite active: “It’s more about community organizing and engagement,” says Wolf. “The role has grown.”

Musher was followed by Fabu Phillis Carter, the joint laureates Sarah Busse and Wendy Vardamann, and most recently Mireles, who held the position from 2015-2019.

Madison is “blessed that we have had a poet laureate for close to 50 years,” says Mireles. There is something about having a poet laureate that helps make poetry real to people, he adds: “We have in our mind what a poet looks like. I think a poet looks like all of us, and that’s what we forget. We forget there’s poetry in all of us. We get this message that poetry is other people, or its dead people writing. But it is our stories. It’s really about us.”

Carter, Madison’s third poet laureate, says “there is no downside to having poetry be a part of the fabric of a city.”

“The [laureate] loves poetry and wants to share it,” says Carter. “For me, poetry has not been just a vocation but also a healing tool. I love what poetry can do in people’s lives, especially with children and elders.”

Carter underlines the importance of bringing all voices to the table, as she brought an African American voice to the position. “I know Angie, and she will continue that trajectory of making sure everybody’s voice is heard,” says Carter. “Some voices are more silent than others. Some voices need a poet laureate to open a door for them to be heard.”

Iowa native

Vasquez’s parents are both from Newton, Iowa, about 35 miles east of Des Moines. She grew up primarily in Des Moines and a suburb, Pleasant Hill, a second- and third-generation Mexican American Iowan. Her family originally came from the states of San Luis Potosí and Zacatecas in Mexico, but there’s also some German and French mixed in. Her Mexican forbearers came to the Midwest in the late 1800s to work on the railroads. Her father was the first in the family to go to college.

Some of her Iowa relatives were white, and Vasquez learned early that “poor and white” was easily overlooked in the education system. The grandfather she came to know best was her maternal grandmother’s second husband, who she describes as poor and white, “a wonderful man, much loved by us all.” He “married three times, all to women of color, and treated all 30 of my first cousins like his own kin.” Vasquez memorializes him in the poem “Hamburger Gravy.”

Hamburger Gravy

Wrinkles line his face at eleven,



*a sixth grade education saved
 a hundred men on a Japanese island.
 He knew how to ration outlast famine,
 Iowa child of the depression.
 No shirt, no shoes under his overalls,
 wove newspapers for boots in winter.
 Walked five miles a day,
 a wolf dog mix companion,
 mulberry tree staff.
 One chocolate square per day
 surrounded by enemies, he kept
 his regime. Mind forever poisoned.
 Sure it was "Them Japs" after
 the Oklahoma City bombing;
 but no, a boy, white, gun hungry —
 a veteran who blew up preschool children
 and glass to star dust. Human remains
 floated over the city, sky sucked up
 all those spirits into heaven, if you believe...
 Grandpa made hamburger gravy, fried
 potatoes, brewed beer, guzzled sweet
 black coffee for hours telling stories.
 Voice booms over the blond wood grain
 once the color of his hair,
 "I eat good...knew those chickens were bad,
 farmer made them cannibals...Mary?"
 California bound —
 he rushed out of the bedroom,*

when I visited.

Outlived all three of his wives,

My grandma's dresses doll clothes,

he said, watery blues smiling.

Her eyes at "The Fair," he bespoke

tractors, prize steers, pork

beauty queens, pumpkin eaters.

Saturday nights, before

she lost one leg then another —

standing on his massive feet,

they danced to honky-tonk music

and sang Glen Campbell's "Less of Me"

on the porch, she blind and twirling.

Dandelion wine,

striped overalls, six hands tall,

voice gravel blue jeans.

She also has indigenous heritage, though she does not know the original tribe: "I don't have papers to show I'm part of a tribe. I don't know my original language. I don't know what they spoke before they were colonized by the Spanish." She had been, she says, "chastising herself for not knowing Spanish well," but then realized that "that is also the colonizer's language."

"What was our first language?" she asks in the poem "Fragments in Time." The answer? Appropriately, for a poet, it is "sound."

Writing came early. She still has all her journals dating back to age 7.



Deep roots: Angela (clockwise from top left), sister Tricia, father Greg, mother Cherry and sister Sorral in Newton, Iowa, in 1989. The family came to Iowa from Mexico in the late 1800s to work on the railroads. Angie and Tricia Vasquez standing.

Vasquez says her sister doesn't recall her without a pen in her hand.

Her concern for the environment began early as well. "When my sister and I were young, when they were building up around us, we would try to destroy the homes, in an area we called "The Rockies," Vasquez says with a laugh. "Don't take our woods! Don't take our hills!"

In high school she was "an overachiever," liked English, but also was good with numbers, taking trigonometry and calculus. "It's my secret skill," she says impishly. "I don't like to tell people because then they make me be on their finance committee."

She attended Drake University in Des Moines, majoring in English, and left for Seattle in 1997. There she was a member of a literary collective, Los Norteños.

She moved to Milwaukee in 2005, where she worked for 13 years as the office manager for the ACLU, and helped with the group's youth poetry program. She developed a workshop called "Poetry, Politics and Power," which she taught for 15 years; it incorporates civil liberties and the Constitution, and she will probably teach some version of it in Madison, tailoring it to various age groups.

She moved to Madison in 2015 while continuing to commute to Milwaukee, until she started working in Madison for End Domestic Abuse Wisconsin in 2018.

In her late 40s, she felt she had developed as much as she could in poetry on her own and started applying to master's programs in creative writing. She found a good fit with the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, New Mexico, which emphasizes Native American and First Nations heritage and indigenous poetics.

"It was the best thing that ever happened to me," says Vasquez. "It was life-changing." She says she didn't have to explain herself as she would have at a primarily white writing program.

She made trips between Wisconsin and New Mexico several times a year while completing the two-year, low-residency program.

Vasquez notes that too often, when people read poets of color, they focus only on subject matter, while overlooking the craft. "But we know how much we focus on diction, word choice, line breaks, and sound," says Vasquez. "There's a science of poetry that people don't get all the time."

Vasquez's husband, Devin Trudell, grew up in Madison. Her father-in-law is Dennis Trudell, longtime Madison poet, fiction writer and editor, and a retired professor of English at UW-Whitewater. Devin is a cartoonist and graphic novelist who is currently writing a history of propaganda.

"It's nice to be here," says Vasquez. "We lived many places, but we never bought a house until we moved to Madison."

She and Devin are what she calls "ruthless editors for one another. That's what you need, you need to know what you're doing wrong, or what's easy, or when you are being cliched."

Vasquez's influences are wide-ranging. "If there were three poets who birthed me as a young poet, it would be Carolyn Forché, Stanley Kunitz and Allen Ginsberg," Vasquez says. "Now, what would I have in common with Allen Ginsberg, as a Mexican American, heterosexual cisgender female? And it's like, *everything*. When I read *Howl*, it blew me away. When I read Carolyn Forché, it blew me away. And Stanley Kunitz has so much love for everything in his work."

While she's always considered her work political, she says that she's becoming more aware that she is also a poet of place. "So many poems in *In Light, Always Light* are about Madison. Place is important to me; I am a great observer. You have to suss out the world around you. And observing people in the city, on the bus, at the airport, just walking around — these are all fodder for poetry."

There's hard work in writing, Vasquez says. She works on poems before and after her day job, "at least two hours a day, and longer on weekends."

She eases the transition from day job to verse with yoga or cooking. "Or I'll bike to work and have that time to think over lines," she says. "I don't have children — I have cats — so not having those other responsibilities is helpful for me."

Being the first Latina poet laureate of Madison is a big deal for Vasquez. And, she says, she has a lot of love to share. "I've been working my whole life for where I'm at right now," Vasquez says.

And she does not seem to be slowing down.

"Oh *hell* no," she affirms with a grin.

Angela Trudell Vasquez will read Feb. 6 at A Room of One's Own, 315 W. Gorham St., at 6 p.m., and Feb. 22 at the Madison Public Library, 201 W. Mifflin St., at 2 p.m.

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