

Madison Arts Commission
P.O. Box 2985
Madison WI 53701-2985

To Whom It May Concern,

Opal moved the conversation from the transactional to the transformational at the 2019 City of Madison's Women's Leadership Series with her emotionally intelligent, socially conscious and riveting spoken word. Please accept our Poet Laureate nomination of Opal Ellyse (MNIO) Tomashevskia on behalf of all the attendees of the 2019 City of Madison Women's Leadership Series, for her deep commitment to her community, and her intentional exploration of racial equity and social justice through her multi-faceted artistry.

Background

Opal is a native of Madison, growing up in the Wexford Apartments on Madison's West side. She leveraged poetry both as a form of art therapy to deal with the harm racism, sexism, and poverty has caused and as a way to share the joy, triumph and gratitude in resilience. Her poetry explores these concepts using words that have double and triple meanings, and quick wordplay, as a hip-hop emcee:

*"The slaves dreamed that one day their children would be free
and that impossible dream is realized in me
so how much more impossible should my impossible dreams be
oh, the limitless potential when a soul is born free
So, don't say woe is me and don't say woe is we
Bless the child who can see beyond the slave owner's FREE" – Opal Tomashevskia*

Spoken word has helped Opal grow in her career. Opal has been performing hip-hop and poetry since her college days at UW–Parkside, but she had kept academic and artistic pursuits separate until graduate school at Edgewood College, where she ended up using the latter for a final project. That is when Opal realized there could be a broader audience for her particular talent.

For the past 5 years Opal has worked as a Senior Level Multicultural Business Strategy Manager with CUNA Mutual Group. Opal is dedicated to advancing the efforts of the Multicultural Center of Expertise through gaining a deeper understanding of underserved consumers; creating intentional partnerships to develop new strategies and products to serve consumer needs; and building coalitions that support similar efforts outside of CUNA Mutual Group. Combining a MS in Organizational Development, a BS in Psychology, 17 years of business experience and her artistic talent has allowed Opal to taken her impact to another level.

Community Connections

Madison Network of Black Professionals
Urban Community Arts Network
Lussier Community Education Center
African American Credit Union Coalition
YWCA

Spoken Word

Opal is a well-known local spoken word and hip-hop artist that has gained widespread recognition. Locally Opal has performed at the following:

- Listen To Your Mother show
- Madison Chamber of Commerce
- 100 Black Men of Madison annual Scholarship Gala
- YWCA Racial Justice Summit
- United Way Kickoff Celebration
- Madison City Channel
- Care Wisconsin What's Next Conference
- Wisconsin Leadership Summit

Opal has also performed nationally at:

- CUNA Mutual Group's National Sales Conference at the Omni CNN Center in Atlanta, GA
- AACUC 20th Annual Conference in Atlanta and in Charlotte, NC

However, Opal's art has an even wider-spread influence with her Spoken Word Full length Album (https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL_1WNq6OO0jYM5bFT6SNjwOF9lcctvVbN):

- **Intro**
(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=coEHG1ZR2IM&list=PL_1WNq6OO0jYM5bFT6SNjwOF9lcctvVbN&index=7)
- **Reclaiming My Time**
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Be8qIDYC3Ec>)
- **Hunger Games**
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fTwFcsZOMlg>)
- **High Fashion**
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XddlfDxmL8>)
- **My Reaction (Tribute to Tony Robinson)**
(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WOHBe7LDA&list=PL_1WNq6OO0jYM5bFT6SNjwOF9lcctvVbN&index=5&t=0s)
- **I Dream in Color**
(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BMbOYEMeN_s&list=PL_1WNq6OO0jYM5bFT6SNjwOF9lcctvVbN&index=5)
- **Boa Constrictor**
(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1_5nqE6lx14&list=PL_1WNq6OO0jYM5bFT6SNjwOF9lcctvVbN&index=6)
- **I Look Better Naked**
(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pq3y15iM64E&list=PL_1WNq6OO0jYM5bFT6SNjwOF9lcctvVbN&index=8)
- **Violets**
(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6EISFwQ80Ok&list=PL_1WNq6OO0jYM5bFT6SNjwOF9lcctvVbN&index=9)
- **The Love**
(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IEPwAfHDF-A&list=PL_1WNq6OO0jYM5bFT6SNjwOF9lcctvVbN&index=10)

Residency

████████████████████
Madison, WI 53719

Nomination submitted by

Carla Garces
Alia Stevenson

Madison Arts Commission
P.O. Box 2985
Madison WI 53701-2985

To Whom It May Concern,

I am writing today to formally state my intent to accept the nomination for Madison Poet Laureate and affirm that I plan to reside in Madison for the two-year term.

I understand this position serves to celebrate and recognize the role of poetry and the arts in City culture, and what poetry contributes to the vitality of the City's culture. I understand my nomination formally honors my civic contribution to Madison through public participation in Madison's literary community; and that if chosen I would serve as a representative and advocate for diverse populations that exist within our City, and thereby give voice and a public face to the importance of poetry.

I understand the Madison Poet Laureate commitment includes:

- Giving a reading at a special event at the beginning of the two-year term.
- Attending city, library and school functions as needed.
- Sharing a poem that will be published on the MAC website.
- Attending a MAC meeting every January to update the commissioners on progress and programs.
- Participating in City of Madison initiatives related to promoting poetry, including:
 - Serving as an advisor to the Metro Transit Bus Lines program.
 - Scheduling quarterly poetry readings before the Common Council meetings.
 - Organizing the annual poetry reading at the Madison Public Library in conjunction with other partnering organizations.
- Summarizing her/his impressions and experiences during their term as Poet Laureate (including workshops, readings, judging of competitions, publication, etc.) to help MAC improve, adjust or adapt the parameters of the post and/or the appointment process.
- Creating an "occasional poem" (i.e., a poem written in honor of a special occasion) or performing a reading, upon request, from the City or other Madison organizations.
- Working to ensure that a qualified poet is appointed as her/his successor.
- Mentoring an Emerging Poet Laureate (in a new pilot program) and assisting them in running the Bus Lines program.

Sincerely,



Opal Ellyse Tomashevsk

Alia,

Thank you so much for the opportunity to submit a recommendation for Opal Tomashevskaya to be the City of Madison Poet Laureate. I HIGHLY recommend Opal to serve as the Poet Laureate for the City of Madison.

It's been said that creativity is the natural order of life. And yet, every day our lives become blocked – blocked in a way that our creativity is locked, and we collectively are unable to bring the truest and best version of ourselves to our families, places of work and to our communities. Without the ability to show up and be the truest and best version of ourselves, how can we expect to change and improve the narrative of our community? Art transforms trauma into healing; unblocks the blocked; and serves as a vehicle for individual, organizational, and community transformation.

It is in knowing the power of art that I highly recommend Opal Tomashevskaya to be the Poet Laureate for the City of Madison. Opal's work via poetry has quite literally transformed CUNA Mutual Group and has been a foundational element on our Diversity, Equity and Inclusion journey. There are many key moments when Opal's poetry has been pivotal for our organization. Here are two examples of many:

1. **African American Employee Resource Group** – CUNA Mutual began the African American Employee Resource Group in 2015. At the end of the first African American Employee Resource Group meeting, someone mentioned that Opal was a spoken word artist. We asked Opal to share one of her pieces. Right on the spot she shared her spoken word piece that she wrote regarding the Tony Robinson shooting. It is an understatement to say that this was a cathartic moment for this group. For many in the room, it was the first time that they met any other black person at the organization. AND, for all in the room it was the first time that they/we talked about the shooting of unarmed black men while at work. This was my first-time hearing Opal's spoken word – and my life has never been the same. Here's a link to her [Tribute to Tony Robinson](#).
2. **Diversity, Equity and Inclusion** – In the fall of 2015, all the Vice Presidents of CUNA Mutual met for an entire day to discuss Diversity, Equity and Inclusion. The first half of the day was dedicated to learning about changing demographics and better understanding multicultural consumers. The second half of the day was focused on inclusive leadership. To end the day, Opal performed an original spoken word piece on the concepts of our changing consumer base and the importance of workforce diversity and inclusion. At the end of her performance, ALL of the VPs, unprompted, gave Opal a standing ovation – many had tears in their eyes. For most of the audience, this was their very first time ever hearing spoken word and it had a tremendous impact. After this performance, Opal was asked to write original pieces for several different parts of the organization. Opal is not only seen as a key leader in our organization, she is also someone that knows how to use art to transform and engage the heart of CUNA Mutual Group.

Opal's gift of poetry, heart to heal, compassion for humanity, and love for our city is amazing. AND, last but certainly not least, her ability to listen and speak the words that make us all believers can and will transform our community. It is an honor to know and learn from Opal. She will make an outstanding Poet Laureate.

Please let me know if there is anything else that I need to do to support this nomination process.

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Angela R. Russell  
Vice President  
Diversity, Equity and Inclusion  
CUNA Mutual Group  
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September 24, 2019

Ms. Alia Stevenson  
Organizational Development Manager  
City of Madison  
210 Martin Luther King Junior Boulevard  
Madison, WI 53703

Dear Ms. Stevenson:

On behalf of the Board of Directors, Senior Leadership and Members of the African American Credit Union Coalition (AACUC), we enthusiastically submit this letter of recommendation to appoint Ms. Opal Tomashevskas as your Poet Laureate for the City of Madison.

If you have ever met Opal, you are instantly drawn into her unassuming inclusive personality. Her demeanor is similar to the grace of a senior executive or a Queen who believes it is her mission to ensure that her subjects are well taken care of.

Opal has shared her tremendous gift of the spoken word with the AACUC Conference Participants for the last three years (Raleigh, NC (2017), Atlanta, GA (2018) and Charlotte, NC (2019). When planning began for the 2020 Conference, the Chairman has insisted that she open the conference!

Opal has been named the Chair of the AACUC's Young Professional's Summit and continues to support the AACUC in various ways. Her prowess as a Poet and Writer is like none other. The City of Madison would be enhanced by adding Opal as it's Poet Laurette. Her dedication to the community, her educational background and personal accomplishments provide the perfect mix for a progressive city such as Madison.

I am confident that the Selection Committee will also be amazed at Opal's expertise and delivery, just as the AACUC Board of Directors, Senior Leadership and Members are with her. We have posted her contributions on our website, sent out videos of her performing her custom pieces for our conferences and we are excited to hear what she creates for us in 2020 at our 22<sup>nd</sup> Annual Conference. Can you tell we are Opal Fans?

Please consider this letter as our STRONG recommendation that Opal Tomashevskas is named the City of Madison's Poet Laureate.

Sincerely,

Renée Sattiewhite  
President/CEO

September 20, 2019

Madison Arts Commission  
PO Box 2985  
Madison WI 53703  
madisonarts@cityofmadison.com

Dear Poet Laureate Nominating Committee,

I would like to nominate Opal Ellyse (MNIO) Tomashevskya, a Madison native and poet, to be the next Madison Poet Laureate. I write this reference letter with enthusiasm and an open heart.

I had the pleasure of hearing Opal perform at the 2019 City of Madison Women's Leadership Series closing day. She greeted the audience and composed herself to deliver a poem she wrote about Tony Robinson, who was killed in a police-involved shooting in March of 2015. Her piece was titled My Reaction. Her presence and voice filled the room but it was her words, each poignant and thoughtful, that captivated me and other attendees.

Spoken word is a poetic performance art that uses intonation and voice inflections to display the emotions that an artist is conveying. Opal's honesty, raw emotion and ability to share something unimaginably sad in a beautiful way reminds me of the importance of art. Art is an expression of humanity and imagination and Opal allowed us to feel her emotions and imagine a world that could be unfamiliar to some. The connection she made with the audience and her ability to go there and hold the audience with her is why I believe she would be an ideal fit for the title of Poet Laureate for the City of Madison.

As the City of Madison, we envision a Madison that is inclusive, innovative and thriving. Opal's poems and art will complement the vision we have for city and serve as a reminder that a vision should be informed by the reality of our current state. The topics she covers can be tough and uncomfortable but she is calling her audience in by sharing her experience. Opal has my highest recommendation for this title. I have no doubt her art will contribute to the vitality of the City's culture.

Sincerely,



Carla Garces