



By Jonathan Gramling

Part 1 of 2

It's hard to believe that Fabu will be giving her last presentation as Madison's poet laureate on December 2 at the Overture Center's Rotunda Stage before her tenure ends in January 2012. In some ways, the time has passed quickly and yet it feels as if she has always been Madison's poet laureate. It's been a lot of hard work and long hours for Fabu, most of it unpaid. And she has had to keep her "day job" working in Mentoring Connections for Madison-area Urban Ministry. Yet it has been a wonderful experience for her to serve.

"It was extremely demanding," Fabu recalled over coffee and soup at Cargo Coffee. "I remember Denise Sweet, who was the Wisconsin poet laureate a few years ago, saying, 'Please open your mouth and say no. No I can't do this. No I can't go there.' But you never want to say no. I can count on one hand the number of times I said no and still have several fingers left. How

many hours per week? Sometimes 10, sometimes more, but at least 10 hours because if I don't write poetry, I don't feel good. So I have to keep writing. And then if I'm not doing poetry — because it sharpens you to be amongst people and other poets — I don't feel good. You always want to be honing your craft."

Fabu had a mission as poet laureate to, as she put it, to place poetry in "unusual places and spaces," and she has made the most of being the third poet laureate for Madison.

"I have a poem in The Villager Mall," Fabu said. "I have a poem pressed into the sidewalk on Willy Street in front of the Weary Traveler. And I am lobbying the library system to commission a poem for the reopening of the library located on the south side. I really had a dream of having poetic words written up on the wall in the library because it was a poem about welcoming people to the library. And I have really loved that library because it has been such a real connection in the community. And now with the loss of other space like Harambee, there is no place for people to gather on the south side except the library. So I had a dream of putting my poem up there on the walls. However, I've been informed that that would require them to repaint too often. Therefore, they want to stick it in a frame. And everyone knows that poetry should be free and expressive."

While Fabu has been known for years as a poet in the African American community, being poet laureate has given her exposure and opportunities in mainstream circles.

"I've also had the opportunity, which I have really enjoyed, of going all over Madison and Wisconsin," Fabu said. "I went to the Kickapoo Valley and read poetry last week. I was at a church and just sitting and reading poetry to a group of women at a women's meeting. I've gone into prisons, both women's prisons. I've been to Oakhill. So I've been to prisons and schools. I've been to festivals. I've been to celebrations. I've been to elder housing. I've been to hospitals. So I really can't think of one good place that I haven't been." One of the special places that Fabu's poetry has taken her is into many of Madison's public schools.

"My special love has been children and youth and growing up a new crop of poets, especially African American children who will consider this as a professional field," Fabu said. "I have spent more time in schools and with students. I actually love the fact that some teachers would call me and tell me that they have a really gifted poet. And I would just go and work with that poet. I really love that. I love doing poetry-in-residence. I'm going to do a lot more. My last one was at Midvale Elementary School. It was really exquisite doing poetry around their garden doing all kinds of wonderful poems about gardening. I once had a little boy who wrote an I Hate Poetry poem. And I told him that as long as he was making a poem, it was all right with me what he wrote about. It wasn't a good poem, but at least he had the freedom to express himself."

During her tenure, Fabu has published three books including one by the University of Nairobi, which is located in Kenya and where Fabu received her graduate degree.

"There were poems about my grandmother and mother and about language and the courage of women as freedom fighters and liberators and the civil rights movement," Fabu said about the book they published. "The fact that it was published by the University of Nairobi Press — these are poems that I started when I was a graduate student there — made me very proud. It was published and then it was being taught in their literature department there about the African American experience. That makes me happy and I can't wait to get over there and videotape a class because it takes your work to another level where people are using it as a part of their curriculum. One of the questions that the chairman of the literature department asked me was why I decided to make it multigenerational. It is a grandmother, a mother and myself and the different languages that we have spoken. I loved that question because that means we are now taking the poetry to a scholastic level. They are now asking me as a scholar how I created this, what I was thinking of and why I chose a particular poem and write it in this way. I really enjoyed that."

The last book of Fabu's poetry, published by Parallel Press, explores the routes that African Americans took to get to Madison, routes as varied as there are African Americans.

"It's Journey to Wisconsin: African American Life in Haiku," Fabu said. "It includes Mrs. Edith Hilliard's family here in Madison. It retraces



*Fabu, who has been Madison's poet laureate for the past four years, will be stepping down in January 2012.*

back seven generations to Baraboo, Wisconsin. Journey to Wisconsin is very special to me because it is about Wisconsin history and is trying to undo the misinformation and ignorance about people here who think African Americans come from Chicago. That is all I heard when I came here. 'Are you from Chicago' when Black people have been living in this place since the 1700s and have an extensive history. This is one family's story. It's about haiku that goes from Africa all the way to Madison. But the sections that begin each one are about Ms. Edith's family and about how they came from Africa to Louisiana to Baraboo, Wisconsin."

During her tenure, Fabu was a key figure in putting on Madison's Mary Lou Williams Centennial Celebration in 2010. During that year, Fabu performed her poetry about Mary Lou Williams in many Madison public schools accompanied by pianist Jane Reynolds. And she has received a fellowship from the Mary Lou Williams centennial group to further study Mary Lou Williams' life and music.

"My studies of Mary Lou Williams are going to take me to Kansas City, Pittsburgh and New York," Fabu said. "I'm going to get to travel to places. I'm going to see where she is from and mostly talk to some people she knew and read her papers. I really like Mary Lou because I can so identify with her for being a woman of faith, being an artist and also understanding that she had to really fight hard to be recognized. I can clearly see, just by being Madison poet laureate that it has made me one of the most well-known African American artists certainly in Madison. I really identify with her struggle to be at the top of her career as a personal artist and keep changing and working and growing and at the same time, receive the recognition that she was due."