



Q&A

Q&A: Oscar Mireles is a poet laureate for 'the new Madison'



by **LINDSAY CHRISTIANS** Feb 7, 2016



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Oscar Mireles is Madison's new poet laureate, a position he will hold for two years. His most recent anthology is "I Didn't Know There Were Latinos in Wisconsin: Three Decades of Hispanic Writing" (Cowfeather Press, 2015).



“Nutcracker Suite” by Verona Youth Ballet

Saturday, Dec. 12, 4 p.m.

Verona Area Performing Arts Center in Verona High School, 300 Richard St.

\$15 adults, \$10 children younger than 12

veronayouthballet.org/nutcracker-2015.php

Oscar Mireles is many things: a father, a [school administrator](#), a former wrestling coach, an enthusiastic zumba dancer and a community activist.

He’s also Madison’s new poet laureate, a position he will hold for the next two years. He’s one of several high profile Latino poet laureates, including U.S. laureate [Juan Felipe Herrera](#), Los Angeles laureate [Luis J. Rodriguez](#) and former Milwaukee laureate [Brenda Cárdenas](#).

Locally, Mireles’ appointment by Mayor Paul Soglin has come with a [flurry of media attention](#), as Mireles juggles [interviews](#) and appearances on [television](#). The city of [Appleton](#) recently chose the third volume of his poetry anthology “[I Didn’t Know There Were Latinos in Wisconsin](#)” (Cowfeather Press, 2015) for a citywide reading program.

Born in Racine as the eighth of 12 children and a resident of Madison for more than 20 years, Mireles, 60, leads the Omega School for adults trying to complete high school equivalency diplomas.

He plans to use his newly heightened platform to not only share his own perspective, but to help other people share theirs.

“If we don’t share our stories, if we don’t write them down, soon enough we’re going to forget,” Mireles said. “Part of this is encouraging more people to be writers, sharing the stories and their unique perspective.

“We’re at that point where we almost have too much media, too much connection,” he added. “You think that would mean we’re communicating more but we’re actually communicating less.”

Mireles talked with the Cap Times about writing autobiographical

poetry in the early morning, growing up in a Mexican-American family but not speaking Spanish himself, and finding his voice as a poet.

With poems like “Thanks To The Twelve People Who Showed Up At A Poetry Reading With the Wind Chill at Fifty-Five Below Zero” and “My mother is a social worker who works in a hospital,” it looks like you draw extensively from life. How much of your poetry is autobiographical?

More than there should be. I write about my experiences; I write about other people’s experiences. It’s a journey to look inward to reflect on who I am, and what’s my role as a father, a community leader, a school administrator, a wrestling coach.

I’m an early morning person, so I tend to write in the morning. I do write a lot of things that don’t get published. What I try to do is write for myself, write as if there’s not an editor, an audience, watching: ‘Change this work, edit this, cut this out.’ I just write for myself.

Your poems are often about things you've observed or felt. Is there a part of you that hangs back, looking for inspiration for poems? Are you composing poetry in your head in your day-to-day life?

The people who know me would say I’m quick-witted, almost too engaged. I try to live in the moment. They would say, ‘When do you have time to reflect?’ But I think by being so engaged and living in the now, it’s so vivid, I have no choice but to be a part of it. I’m kind of part of it and observing it at the same time.

You’ve been a poet since college. How has your work changed over the years?

The biggest thing is I tend to overwrite more. The tension between, how do you say it and how do you avoid over-

explaining it? There's a tension there.

There's nothing I can't write about. And I think in my writing you hear my voice. I've written enough that my voice come out. I'm not searching for a voice, which I did when I was younger.

Is it true that there's nothing you can't write about? Aren't there things your family would object to?

I share with people who are close to me, that whatever I write they're welcome to read, things I've written and am in the process of doing.

I could write about something that happened 30 years ago today. I could write about something that happened five years ago, and it'll seem like it happened today. It'll be so fresh and vivid. But if I write about someone, it doesn't mean I was with her last night.

Would you say that, to be a successful poet in the way that you are, you have to be vulnerable?

If you play it safe all the time, you'll have a safe life. To observe you have to open yourself up. You can try to observe by staying back, and you can still see and most of it's back ... but when you (move forward), it's a whole different perspective. Distance, there's a safety to it.

You've edited a series of poetry by Latino authors living in Wisconsin. How did you put together your most recent anthology?

It's 40 poems, close to 200 pages. Everybody got at least one poem and then we organized it among different themes—themes of identity, our love for our mothers and fathers, speaking Spanish or not speaking Spanish, and a sense of longing.

A lot of people come here from other countries, their bodies and

minds are here but the heart's back home. Just adjusting to the climate here in Wisconsin, both the weather and how people feel comfortable and adapt here.

Whoever submits, we get at least one piece from everybody.

When you organize them in a section, some of the other poems fill in the gap. So the poem might not be as strong, but when it's paired with other poems ... it makes it fit.

It's mostly in English, right?

Yes. It's primarily in English, some in Spanglish and some just in Spanish.

Growing up, I heard Spanish, so I had an ear for it and a mind for it, but I couldn't speak it. The more you don't speak it, the harder it becomes. But it's all so hardwired in there. When I got past the shame and the guilt of not speaking, when I travel, it comes out pretty easily.

I interviewed Mark Fraire, from Dane Arts, and we talked about "Latino" versus "Hispanic," and he joked, "We like to avoid anything with the word 'panic' in it." In the title of your anthology, you use both ("20 Hispanic writers"). Do you have thoughts on this?

Even in my own family, there's a self-identification that people have. Some people in my family, if you ask them what they are, they'd say they're American. Some people would say they're Mexican American. Some people in my family would say, Chicano. Some would say they're Mexican.

My children, their mother's Colombian. For me, they're half Chicano and half Colombian, so they're 'Chilombians.' When I talk about the larger community, I think the term is more encompassing, more welcoming. Hispanic is a government kind of term.

Previous poet laureates have been very active in the community, and you told one journalist recently that you've been getting dozens of calls about appearances. How do you want to use the spotlight?

Like with Fabu, we were both doing a lot of stuff before. We were a known commodity. So now, it's kind of taking it to the next level. I'm extremely proud of my culture, my culture's a big part of who I am.

I want to bring the whole community together. And then, building bridges to be here for the long haul — I think sometimes it's easy to get short-sighted. Misunderstanding in statements ... that's gotten people sidetracked and off-course.

Everyone likes the nice poems, (but) I've written some pieces on immigration. I'll continue to write them, with the right opportunities and the right audience. I just think sometimes you have to be careful; if things are too polarized people stop listening. The whole focus of poetry is to have that voice and the space to listen.

And now, a whole city could be listening.

We had a reception last Sunday ... and it was a different crowd, in a sense that it was people who aren't normally in the same room, a lot of community activists, a lot of poetry people. We had the four former poet laureates there.

It was a very diverse crowd, with African Americans, Latinos ... to me it reflected the new Madison. It wasn't just the poetry people. It wasn't just Latinos.

I think what's been the most exciting for me is the excitement I see in other people, that they know the poet laureate. They're

excited for me and excited for themselves.



Lindsay Christians | The Capital Times

Since 2008, Lindsay Christians has been writing about fine arts and food for The Capital Times. She loves eating at the bar, going to the theater, fine wine and good stories. She lives on the east side with her husband, two cats and too many cookbooks.



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