

City of Alexandria, Virginia

MEMORANDUM

DATE: FEBRUARY 6, 2007

TO: THE HONORABLE MAYOR AND MEMBERS OF CITY COUNCIL

FROM: JAMES K. HARTMANN, CITY MANAGER *J*

SUBJECT: APPOINTMENT OF THE ALEXANDRIA POET LAUREATE

ISSUE: Appointment of the Alexandria Poet Laureate.

RECOMMENDATION: That City Council:

- (1) Appoint Mary McElveen as the City of Alexandria's Poet Laureate based on the recommendation of the Panel of Judges (Attachment 1);
- (2) At the City Council meeting on April 10 during National Poetry Month plan to issue a proclamation;
- (3) Authorize the City Manager to execute a letter of agreement to Mary McElveen to serve as the Alexandria Poet Laureate from March 1, 2007 through March 1, 2010; and
- (4) Express sincere appreciation to the members of the Alexandria Poet Laureate's Panel of Judges and Steering Committee for their efforts and request that the Panel of Judges and Steering Committee remain in place to act as an advisory body for the Alexandria Poet Laureate (Attachment 2).

BACKGROUND: In the fall of 2004, Councilman Ludwig Gaines sent a memorandum to the Mayor, City Council and City Manager proposing the consideration of designating a Poet Laureate for the City of Alexandria. He stated, "...designating an official city Poet Laureate would provide a readily identifiable low to no-cost means of Alexandria to confirm publicly the value of literary arts. Moreover, in the same way that public art and music can enhance quality of life within a community, the enjoyment of poetry and literary arts can do the same. A Poet Laureate would serve as an official resource available to commemorate for present enjoyment, as well as posterity, the city's history and historic events, installations, groundbreaking and public dedications, as well as many of the city's annual celebrations, parades and cultural events. A Poet Laureate would also work to bring poetic art to the City's libraries and schools and serve as a bridge to the city's diverse community that might not otherwise be exposed to it. And in difficult times, a Poet Laureate would be called upon to offer appropriate words of reflection, inspiration and healing."

In response to Council's desire to designate a Poet Laureate for the City, a steering committee of citizens and City staff was established to develop a protocol for selecting a Poet Laureate. Participants of the Committee included Colette Wachtel, Alexandria Commission for the Arts; Jon C. Burton, Northern Virginia Community College; M. Magnus, Poet; Jim MacKay, Office of Historic Alexandria; Mark Schwartz, Alexandria City Public Library System; and Janet Barnett, and Cheryl Anne Colton, Department of Recreation, Parks and Cultural Activities.

On April 25, City Council received the proposal submitted by the Steering Committee and set the item for public hearing. Following the public hearing on May 20, City Council unanimously approved the establishment of the Poet Laureate program and allocated \$3,500 from the contingent reserves to fund the program in the Department of Recreation, Parks and Cultural Activities.

The purposes and duties outlined for the Poet Laureate are: to promote poetry throughout the City of Alexandria, however, to also promote all forms of literature and literacy through poetry; to assist in developing an ongoing poetry and literature program that makes poetry and literature available to the citizens and visitors to the City of Alexandria; to be called upon as an honorary guest and to be asked to read from their body of work or those of other poets at city-wide events such as working with the schools, library system, recreation or senior centers, and appearances at the USA/Alexandria Birthday Celebration or other community festivals; and, to participate as a judge for City poetry competitions.

It is important to note that in 1979, the Alexandria City Council voted to designate the late Jean Elliott, a 78-year-old Alexandria resident, as the City's "Poet in Residence" and placed a plaque on her South Fairfax Street home. Ms. Elliott was the first and only Poet Laureate of record for the City of Alexandria. She died in 1999.

DISCUSSION: The "Call for Nominations" for an Alexandria Poet Laureate was issued in early July with an initial deadline of August 25. Due to the limited amount of nominations received by that date, another deadline of October 2 was established. As a result of both calls, a total of 18 nomination packets were received and reviewed by the panel of judges. The panel of judges included: Wendi Kaplan, Adam Good, Taylor Dohmen, Anne Paul, Donna Fowler, Keith Donaldson, Dianne Daily, Ruth Brannigan, and Susan Maney Lovett (Attachment 2).

On October 27, five finalists were selected. The finalists were chosen based on their written response to what they could bring to the role of the Alexandria Poet Laureate and the assessment of the quality, poetic range and the body of their poetry. These five finalists were invited for a follow-up interview with the panel of judges on December 7 and 8.

On January 4, the panel of judges unanimously selected Mary McElveen as the best candidate. The panel felt that the range of her poetry was both simple and complex, and that her presentation style and reading of her poetry was engaging. The panel noted that Ms. McElveen has a passion

for the music of words, and believes that poetry should be "set loose" in the everyday world for the pleasure of the public. She believes the role of the Poet Laureate should bring poetry wholly into the life of Alexandria, by encouraging the reading and writing of poetry, and by making it part of the fabric of life in our city. She believes the mission extends to children and adults, to schools, businesses and neighborhoods. Her efforts will encourage creative writing and reading of all forms of literature and will promote literacy through poetry.

Ms. McElveen envisions integrating poetry into Alexandria life through poetry-related activities at the City's cultural heritage celebrations, including the City's birthday celebration, and at schools, recreation centers, coffee shops and libraries.

Ms. McElveen is a resident of Alexandria, has taught high school chemistry, served as a teacher-consultant with the Northern Virginia Writing Project and worked as a corporate trainer. She is not a published poet, but writes for her own enjoyment, and loves to share her work.

The panel of judges recommended Dan Logan as an alternate, should Mary McElveen not be able to serve the full three-year term. If this is the case, the judges will return to City Council with a recommendation for consideration of Mr. Logan.

In addition, the judges recommend that both the Steering Committee and the panel of judges remain in place and act as an advisory body to the selected Poet Laureate. The advisory citizen body will work with the staff at the Department of Recreation, Parks and Cultural Activities and meet as needed, to provide feedback, to review, to implement and to evaluate outreach activities of the Alexandria Poet Laureate program.

FISCAL IMPACT: On May 20, City Council unanimously approved the establishment of the Poet Laureate program and allocated \$3,500 from the contingent reserves for the Recreation, Parks and Cultural Activities' administrative expenses (printing, postage and staff) for the establishment of a Poet Laureate program. The selected Poet Laureate will receive an annual honorarium of \$500, along with pre-approved of out-of-pocket expenses.

ATTACHMENTS:

- Attachment 1. Letter from Jack Sullivan dated January 27, 2007
- Attachment 2. Poet Laureate Steering Committee and Panel of Judges

STAFF:

Kirk Kincannon, Director, Recreation, Parks and Cultural Activities
Janet Barnett, Deputy Director, Recreation, Parks and Cultural Activities
Cheryl Anne Colton, Recreation Supervisor II, Recreation, Parks and Cultural Activities/Alexandria Commission for the Arts

January 27, 2007

The Honorable Mayor William D. Euille
City Hall, Room 2300
301 King Street
Alexandria, VA 22314

Dear Mayor Euille,

On behalf of the panel of judges for the selection of the Alexandria Poet Laureate, I am pleased to let you know that we selected Mary McElveen to serve as the City's Poet Laureate for a three-year term beginning March 1, 2007 through March 1, 2010 and ask that you officially appoint her to this position.

Ms. McElveen was unanimously selected by the judges as the best candidate. The range of her poetry was both simple and complex, and her presentation style and reading of her poetry, was engaging.

Ms. McElveen has a passion for the music of words, and believes that poetry should be "set loose" in the everyday world for the pleasure of the public. She believes the role of the poet laureate should bring poetry wholly into the life of Alexandria, by encouraging the reading and writing of poetry, and by making it part of the fabric of life in our city. She believes the mission extends to children and adults, to schools, businesses and neighborhoods. Her efforts will encourage creative writing and reading of all forms of literature and will promote literacy through poetry.

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It has been my pleasure serving as chair of the Alexandria Poet Laureate Panel of Judges. I want to personally thank the judges for their time and efforts. I am deeply grateful to: Ruth Brannigan, Dianne Daily, Taylor Dohmen, Keith Donaldson, Donna Fowler, Adam Good, Wendi Kaplan, Susan Maney Lovett, and Anne Paul.

With best wishes,

Jack Sullivan
Chair, Poet Laureate Judges Panel

cc: The Honorable Members of City Council
Ruth Brannigan, Mount Vernon Community School
Dianne Daily, Northern Virginia Community College
Taylor Dohmen, Elementary School Poet Laureate, Alexandria City Public Schools
Keith Donaldson, Alexandria Arts Forum
Donna Fowler, Alexandria Commission for the Arts
Adam Good, Poet
Wendi Kaplan, Alexandria Resident
Susan Maney Lovett, Alexandria Chamber of Commerce
Anne Paul, Alexandria City Public Library Board

ALEXANDRIA POET LAUREATE

Panel of Judges:

Jack Sullivan, Chair, Citizen at Large

Wendi Kaplan, Citizen at Large

Adam Good, Published Poet

Taylor Dohmen, Elementary School Poet Laureate, Alexandria City Public Schools

Anne Paul, Alexandria City Public Library Board

Donna Fowler, Alexandria Commission for the Arts

Keith Donaldson, Alexandria Arts Forum

Dianne Daily, Northern Virginia Community College

Ruth Brannigan, Mount Vernon Community School

Susan Maney Lovett, Alexandria Chamber of Commerce

Steering Committee:

Jack Sullivan, Citizen at Large

Colette Wachtel, Alexandria Commission for the Arts

Jon C. Burton, Northern Virginia Community College: Alexandria Campus

M. Magnus, Published Poet, resident of Alexandria

City of Alexandria Staff:

Janet Barnett, Deputy Director, Recreation, Parks and Cultural Activities

Cheryl Anne Colton, Cultural Arts Administrator, Recreation, Parks and Cultural Activities

Jim Mackay, Interim Director, Office of Historic Alexandria

Mark Schwartz, Public Information Officer, Alexandria City Public Library System