

# City of Alexandria, Virginia

---

## MEMORANDUM

**DATE:** APRIL 9, 2013

**TO:** THE HONORABLE MAYOR AND MEMBERS OF CITY COUNCIL

**FROM:** RASHAD M. YOUNG, CITY MANAGER /s/

**DOCKET TITLE:**

**..TITLE**

Appointment of the Alexandria Poet Laureate

**..BODY**

---

**ISSUE:** Appointment of the Alexandria Poet Laureate.

**RECOMMENDATION:** That City Council:

- (1) Appoint Tori Lane as the new Poet Laureate for the City of Alexandria, based on the recommendation of the selection committee (Attachment 1);
- (2) Authorize the City Manager to execute a letter of agreement with Tori Lane to serve as Alexandria Poet Laureate from April 15, 2013, through April 15, 2016;
- (3) Express appreciation to the current Poet Laureate, Amy Young, for her three years of service to the City and her contributions in developing a poetry program for the City; and
- (4) Thank the members of the Alexandria Poet Laureate selection committee and request that they remain in place as an advisory body for the Alexandria Poet Laureate (Attachment 2).

**BACKGROUND:** In 2004, then Councilman Ludwig Gaines proposed the designation of a Poet Laureate for the City of Alexandria. In response, a steering committee of citizens and City staff was established to develop a protocol for selecting a Poet Laureate. On April 25, 2006, City Council received the proposal submitted by the steering committee. Following a public hearing on May 20, 2006, City Council unanimously approved the establishment of the Poet Laureate program.

City records show that, in 1979, the Alexandria City Council appointed 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.

The role of the City's Poet Laureate is to promote appreciation of poetry as an art form; to encourage creative writing and reading of all forms of literature; and to promote literacy through poetry. The Poet Laureate serves a three year term.

A Poet Laureate Selection Panel was created. The Panel set out a "call to the community." After the review of the candidates by the Panel and Alexandria Commission for the Arts, Mary McElveen was recommended to serve as the Poet Laureate. On April 10, 2007, to coincide with the National Poetry Month, the City Council proclaimed Mary McElveen as the City's second Poet Laureate. During her tenure, she created and presented poems for official City ceremonies, including the Re-dedication of Freedmen's Cemetery; the annual USA/Alexandria Birthday Celebrations; Rededication of the new T. C. Williams High School; the Alex Arts Awards; the Alexandria Commission on Women's Salute to Women Awards Dinner; and the Dedication of the Charles Houston Recreation Center.

Mary McElveen conducted outreach activities in the Alexandria City Public Schools; led poetry readings at Woodbine Nursing Home; appeared at the Alexandria City Public Libraries Authors Night; and community events. She represented the City at the German Embassy's poetry program; read the former Poet Laureate of Pennsylvania and Virginia's Poet Laureate; and appeared at the National Convention of the League of American Penwomen in Alexandria, VA. She also brought the national "Poem in Your Pocket Day" to Alexandria. Mary McElveen's appointment ran until April 2010.

In the fall of 2009, a new "call to the community" to select a new Poet Laureate was distributed. After deliberations by the Poet Laureate Selection Panel and the Alexandria Commission for the Arts, Amy Young was recommended to City Council to serve as the new Poet Laureate. On April 13, 2010, City Council appointed Amy Young to be the successor to Ms. McElveen as Poet Laureate for the City of Alexandria.

As Poet Laureate, Ms. Young wrote original poems for the following City occasions: Annual USA/Alexandria Birthday Celebrations; Adoption Day; Year of the Dragon and Year of the Snake poems for two Jiangsu Chinese Delegation visits; for Alpha Delta Kappa Convention in Alexandria; and tributes to the 2011 Snow Storm; and the 2012 Newtown, CT school tragedy. Ms. Young worked closely with the Alexandria City Public Schools; served as judge for the Washington Area's Airport Authority Poetry Slam; led a series of "Come Write with Me" workshops; and worked with the Tenants and Workers United to create the Arlandria Young Poets Club – week long bi-lingual poetry writing workshop at Tenants and Workers United. She also held readings at the Arts Picnic, Project Discovery Tea, Alexandria Earth Day, Del Ray Farmers Market, Youth Arts Festival, Alexandria Festival of the Arts, and was a guest reader at a Guest reader at Tribute to Jean Elliott at Old Presbyterian Meeting House (Organized by Mary McElveen).

Ms. Young continued the “Poem in Your Pocket Day” in Alexandria and encouraged residents to conduct poetry readings in the City parks. She held National Poetry Month culminating events at the Athenaeum with readings by Guest Poets including Shelly Bell, local spoken word poets, former poet laureate Mary McElveen, and Town Crier Jonathan Fiore-Walker. Ms. Young introduced Dog Days of August and inspired dog owners to write poems about their dogs. These dog poems were hung in dog parks throughout the City. She brought a Poetry Flash mob at First Thursday with Arlandria Young Poets Club. She also initiated Map Alexandria with Poems and Photography (MAPP) project.

Ms. Young’s term expires in April 2013. She chose not to reapply for this position for personal reasons.

**DISCUSSION:** In the fall, to plan for the selection of Ms. Young’s successor as Poet Laureate, the Alexandria Office of the Arts and the Alexandria Commission for the Arts issued a “call to the community.” A total of fourteen nominations were received and reviewed by the Poet Laureate Selection Panel.

The Panel selected five finalists and interviewed them on January 11, 2013. Each finalist read two poems of their choosing, one for public presentation to children and one to adults. The finalists shared their ideas for carrying out the role of Alexandria's Poet Laureate, talked about their ability to write poems for specific City events, and discussed the time commitment involved in fulfilling Poet Laureate responsibilities. After the interviews, the Poet Laureate Selection Panel recommended that Tori Lane be the City's next Poet Laureate. At the February meeting, the Alexandria Commission for the Arts endorsed the Panel’s recommendation.

Tori Lane is a resident of Alexandria. She received her BA in English and Writing at Christopher Newport University, Newport News, VA. She is a poet, performer and mixed media artist. Some of the projects she has been involved in include: a poetry reading for the Closeline Project and a solo reading “Art is Order;” helped launch the “Fusion Project” which is an exploration of places of collision between artistic disciplines; and she staged “Patterns of Breathing” a full-length performance of original poetry and dance. Ms. Lane was invited to be the opening speaker at a Christopher Newport University’s sexual assault awareness program entitled “Shadow Event.” A collection of her works, “Falling Season” was published in 2012.

The Selection Panel also chose Margaret Ingraham as an alternate, should Ms. Lane be unable to serve the full three-year term. In addition, the committee recommends that it remain in place as an advisory body to the Poet Laureate. The advisory body will work with the Office of the Arts staff to offer guidance to the Alexandria Poet Laureate.

**FISCAL IMPACT:** The Poet Laureate will receive an annual honorarium of \$500. These funds are identified in the Office of the Arts budget. Any additional funds needed for the Poet Laureate program will be raised through private sources.

**ATTACHMENTS:**

- Attachment 1. Letter from Sydney-Chanele Dawkins dated
- Attachment 2. Poet Laureate Selection Committee
- Attachment 3. Resume of Lori Lane

**STAFF:**

Debra Collins, Deputy City Manager

James Spengler, Director, Department of Recreation, Parks and Cultural Activities (RPCA)

Diane Ruggiero, Deputy Director, RPCA/Director, Office of the Arts

Cheryl Anne Colton, Regional Program Director, RPCA/Office of the Arts