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State of poetry in the county

By Aileen Cassinetta

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It isn't that April is "the cruelest month." It's what it breeds in abundance, such as waste and war in a season of hope and harvest. Between these are the spaces where we attempt to carve out a future we can live with. When I was appointed county poet laureate by the San Mateo County Board of Supervisors in 2019, my mandate was to celebrate poetry and make it more accessible to everyone. I interpreted it as looking at our many communities and identifying where poetry can be most helpful. And because I believe that poetry is for everybody, I tried to reach everyone I could think of — youth, older adults, librarians, teachers, parents, grandparents, politicians, inmates, engineers, custodians, health care workers, lawyers, journalists, nonprofits, government agencies, other artists, even my tax preparer.

The result is a number of community poems, one of which, "Love in the Time of Covid-19," not only raised funds for the San Mateo County Health Foundation's Covid-19 fund, but was also used as a resource by organizations in Connecticut, Minnesota, Texas and Hawaii. Aside from poetry being a healing and transformative tool, it is also in the business of possibilities. Poets, after all, are the original

makers, with the ability to look at complex systems, understand the linking parts and envision future outcomes.

One of my major projects centers ecopoetry. With a grant from the Academy of American Poets and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, I engaged with youth to try and see how poetry can help them process the layered connections between nature and culture, sustainability, and human ecology. One of our group poems, “Breathe,” appeared in *Nature & Culture*, published by Red Press Kulturhuset Islands Brygge in Copenhagen. Another poem, “decompose,” by high school junior Eva Chen, is being adapted into a short film by Soumyaa Behrens and team at the Documentary Film Institute in San Francisco.



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In 2021, 11 days before the presidential inauguration and with support from the San Mateo County Arts Commission, my co-editor Jim Ward and I released the book, “I Have a Dream: Inaugural Poems for a New Generation,” the first anthology of its kind. The purpose was to amplify youth voices and acknowledge that they are co-authors of our national and community narrative. Copies were sent to libraries, schools, the Library of Congress and the White House (with President Biden even sending a note of thanks). My most recent project, the Makerspace Poetry Lab, hopes to integrate poetry-making into a makerspace program to foster divergent thinking. A pilot program is set to be launched by the Redwood City Public Library and the San Mateo County Libraries in April.

April is National Poetry Month. To raise awareness of the many roles poetry plays in our daily life, I've launched a campaign in January petitioning our county and cities here to issue an official proclamation in support of National Poetry Month. As of this writing, the San Mateo County Board of Supervisors, and the mayors of Belmont, Brisbane, Burlingame, Daly City, Half Moon Bay, Menlo Park, Pacifica, Redwood City, San Mateo and San Bruno as well as the Midcoast Community Council, have all agreed to issue a proclamation. Also in April, I am launching the web archive, "Speak Poetry in San Mateo County," as part of my community project. Themed around belonging, the archive features more than 100 poets in San Mateo County, most of whom have been doing the heavy lifting for decades, bridging the gap between communities, and shaping our world into something that is more equitable and sustainable.

What is not being mentioned here is the power that poetry can wield. That because poetry is a way to make, it is also a way to witness; that because it is a way to advocate, it is also a way to resist; that poetry is a way to tell our story and to write ourselves into the future that we want to see. It's our way of saying we are here, with the power to bend language, to call forth action, to be unbreakable, and always, to be true.

Aileen Cassinetto is an Academy of American Poets Laureate Fellow and the Poet Laureate of San Mateo County. The author of two poetry collections, she received a Special Congressional Recognition and was appointed Commissioner on the San Mateo County Commission on the Status of Women in 2021. Her community project, "Speak Poetry in San Mateo County" (speakpoetry.org) includes a web archive featuring poets in San Mateo County as well as work by youth on ecopoetry, identity and social justice.

