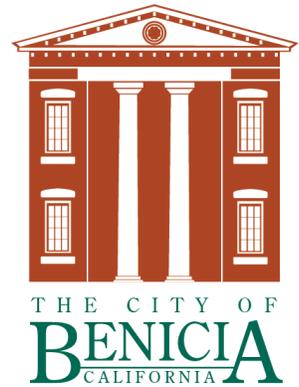


PRESS RELEASE

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Benicia Public Library Announces 2020-2022 Poet Laureate

Benicia, CA (August 26, 2020) – Benicia’s 8th Poet Laureate, Mary Susan Gast, began her two-year tenure following a recent vote by the Benicia Library Board of Trustees. She will succeed 2018-2020 Poet Laureate, Thomas Stanton.

“Benicia’s Poet Laureate program promotes the importance of poetry in daily life in our community, and it has done so successfully for 14 years now,” said City of Benicia’s Director of Library and Cultural Services, David Dodd. “Each Laureate brings particular initiatives forward, so that, over time, you see the variety and depth of how poetry can play a role in Benicia. We’re really looking forward to Mary Susan Gast’s contributions, and we’re very grateful for the work Tom Stanton did in promoting poetry and expanding our notion of the very concept of what poetry is,” he added.

On September 15, Gast will make a brief presentation to the Benicia City Council at their regular meeting, to introduce herself and her poetry to the community.

Gast is a poet, theologian, human rights advocate, and musician who, as she ages, finds it increasingly difficult and immaterial to differentiate among those identities. All are tied together in a concern for the human condition and an urge to look below the surface of events for deeper meaning. Each is rooted in respect for the power of shared stories and images to break down isolation, expand imagination, generate compassion, and connect us one to another.

A resident of Benicia for more than two decades, Gast lived her first 18 years on a small farm outside the tiny town of Baroda, Michigan, then took off on adventures unforeseen by anyone, including herself.

She picked up advanced academic degrees from Michigan State University and the Chicago Theological Seminary. Other sites and circumstances for intense education have been Zambia, Samoa, Russia, China, South Africa, Washington, D.C. and the piney woods of Mississippi. In her many incarnations as assembly line worker, community organizer, pastor, non-profit executive director, and bishop, she has always written. Her social commentaries as well as her poetry and music have appeared regularly in periodicals and randomly in collections.

From her experience, Gast brings to the Poet Laureate position two skills that may prove noteworthy. “The first,” she said, “is fostering a sense of community even among unlikely collections of people. The second is frequently referred to as herding cats. These abilities give rise to the image of a ‘Poet Lariat’—one who rounds up the poets, not to corral them, but to bring them together that all may flourish.”

Gast is the author of the lyrics for “Benicia Our Home,” a new setting for the traditional hymn “Morning Has Broken,” which has been recorded by a number of community groups in a collaborative effort. Here is that poem:

BENICIA OUR HOME

Close by the water,
Up through the hillsides,
Sunshine and fog grace
Abundant green trees;
Flowering plant life,
Shimmering birds’ flight,
Mark our days here in
Benicia our home.

With many traditions,
From many perspectives,
Like reeds in the marshland,
Our roots intertwine;
Growing together,
Building our future,
We are tomorrow,
Benicia our home.

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Attachment:

- Photo: Mary Susan Gast