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'Give poetry a chance,' laureate says

JoAnn Balingit named state's new 'literary ambassador'

By *VICTOR GRETO*
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JoAnn Balingit of Newark was named Delaware's new poet laureate on Wednesday in Dover.
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The News Journal/SUCHAT PEDERSON

A poem can be a lonely, silent thing.

But when it's ready, said JoAnn Balingit, Delaware's 16th and latest poet laureate, "It has to be witnessed, because you want to communicate it."

And if there's one thing a poet laureate wants to do, it's tell anyone within earshot about the power of poetry.

"I want to convince as many people as possible to give poetry a chance," Balingit says. "To see if they're willing to be wooed or not."

Gov. Ruth Ann Minner named Newark resident Balingit, 52, poet laureate for the state of Delaware in a ceremony Wednesday morning at the Tatnall Building in Dover.

Balingit was accompanied by her husband, University of Delaware education professor Fred

Hofstetter, their son Julian and several members of her family.

"I'll be damned," said Fleda Brown, the state's last poet laureate, when she heard the news.

"She is a wonderful poet," Brown said. "She's a great organizer, and is very good at pulling things together and getting people to work together."

When Brown recently left Delaware to live in Michigan, she handed over some of the reins of the Milton Poetry Festival to Balingit, and she did a great job, Brown said.

"The main point of having a poet laureate in Delaware," Brown said, "is to have someone who is a focus figure, whom poets can look to and say, 'Here's someone who can speak for us and pull us together.'"

Minner described the role of the poet laureate as "sort of a literary ambassador." The position carries no salary or stipend.

"But, unlike an ambassador," she said, "the poet laureate stays within the state. She's just ours."

Accepting the title Wednesday, Balingit said she wanted to be a "teacher of teachers about poetry," and that one of her goals is to persuade her new constituency that poetry and other literary pursuits should not be "scary."

"I want them to see if they could give it a try, if they could be as moved by it as I am," she said, noting that, early on, she wanted to be a musician.

Balingit's life includes a varied academic career, with degrees in English, library science and education. Next week, she is defending her doctoral dissertation, "Internet Plagiarism as Flashpoint and Folklore."

Each poet's life, tragic or not, informs his or her work. Balingit's is no different.

When she was 16, her father, a civil engineer and Filipino immigrant, shot her mother to death before killing himself.

Her mother had given birth four days earlier to their 12th child.

The years have inured Balingit to the tragedy, she said.

"It's part of who I am," she said. "It will always be a sorrow. You return to those things when you write poetry. But those things inform your poetry because you understand suffering. It's a wellspring when you're not writing about it."

Balingit, who has taught poetry at the University of South Florida, the University of Kentucky and at UD, was picked from 16 applicants for the honor.

She also participated in the Cape Henlopen Writers' Retreat organized by the Delaware Division of the Arts, which is when she first met Brown.

Her poetry chapbook, "Forage," was a finalist in the 2006 Bright Hill Press Chapbook Contest.

One of her favorite poems, "History Textbook, America," appeared in the national anthology "Best

New Poets 2007."

The sonnet is about her father, who had emigrated from the Philippines in his 20s.

"Because my dad died when he was young, I never knew anything about his family," she said. "We think his family disowned him, but he never shared anything about his personal life."

Although she cannot characterize her poetry -- it can be light and sad, free-form or rhymed -- her method is freewheeling.

"I like to sit down and write and see what happens," she said. "It's not about a certain subject when you start writing. You figure out what your subject is when you get loose and let the language flow. The language reveals what you know already, something you didn't realize you knew."

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[FOR VIDEO]

ABOUT POET LAUREATES

Delaware's poet laureate is an honorary position appointed by and serving at the pleasure of the governor. The first poet laureate of Delaware, Edna Deemer Leach, was appointed in 1947 by Gov. Walter W. Bacon. As the latest poet laureate of Delaware, JoAnn Balingit will serve as an advocate for poetry and for education in the literary arts, and will give readings of her work statewide.

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