

NO: R217

COUNCIL DATE: October 23, 2017

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## REGULAR COUNCIL

TO: **Mayor & Council**

DATE: **October 23, 2017**

FROM: **Chief Librarian**

FILE: **8145-20**

SUBJECT: **Surrey Poet Laureate – Program Highlights & the Legacy Project**

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## RECOMMENDATION

Surrey Libraries recommends that Council receive this report as information.

## INTENT

The purpose of this report is to provide Council with highlights of the Surrey Poet Laureate program and provide information on the Legacy Project.

## BACKGROUND

The Surrey Poet Laureate Program was created to champion literary arts, and raise the profile and image of Surrey. The idea was initiated by the City's Cultural Development Advisory Committee (CDAC) and the program is funded through a Council Initiative Grant for a 3-year term, starting in October 2015. Surrey Libraries formed a planning committee comprised of members from CDAC, Surrey Arts Centre, Surrey International Writers Conference, Arts Council of Surrey, Simon Fraser University, Kwantlen Polytechnic University, Surrey Muse, and Semiahmoo Arts Council to develop the program and select the Poet Laureate.

Renée Sarojini Saklikar was selected as Surrey's inaugural Poet Laureate amongst many talented applicants. As a literary ambassador for the City of Surrey, Renée engages with residents through participation in civic events, festivals, programs, and other initiatives. Passionate about connecting people through poetry, Renée has been working to create a legacy program of poetry outreach that is multi-lingual and inter-cultural, in partnership with local organizations. This report highlights the past two years of the Surrey Poet Laureate program including Renée's legacy project.

## DISCUSSION

### Writing Consultations

One of the most valued aspects of Renée's term has been her role as coach, mentor, and teacher. Renée has offered monthly writing consultations since November 2015, mentoring over 100 local writers on their poetry, prose, and non-fiction writing. Renée has met with aspiring writers throughout Surrey—from City Centre Library to Newton Library to the South Surrey Recreation

Centre. One local writer was homeless, living on the streets near City Centre Library. In May 2016, library staff helped him to type up his writing and he met with Renée for feedback.

Renée also offered blue pencil writing consultations at the Surrey International Writers' Conference in 2015 and 2016 and the Write Here, Read Now event at City Centre Library in 2016. She has met with the local writing group, the Cedar Bark Poets, to offer writing advice and she contributed a writing workshop during the creation of the 'We Are Newton' anthology to members of the Friends of the Grove, the Newton Seniors Centre Writers' Group and a local post-secondary student.

In December 2016, all of the participants in the Poet Laureate writing consults were invited to an Open Mic night. Over 35 people braved the snow and cold to attend, because they've made such strong connections with Renée. Participants shared their writing in short two minute timeslots, mingled, and ate. One attendee nicknamed Renée CEO, aka Chief Encourager of Others and wrote: "Inclusivity!! Support!! Community!! Just so happy with this program!"

Please see Appendix "I" for participant feedback on the Surrey Poet Laureate writing consults.

### **Youth Writing Workshops**

Renée has led writing workshops for youth at schools and libraries throughout Surrey including Semiahmoo Secondary School, L.A. Matheson Secondary School, Elgin Park Secondary School, Earl Marriott Secondary School, IQRA School, and five Surrey Libraries locations. Renée ensures the needs and interests of the youth are met in her workshops, designing activities that help young writers hone their literary skills. Her focus as a poet is on making rather than on meaning, as indicated in a Cloverdale Reporter article from July 18, 2017: "Surrey poet laureate hosts teen workshops." Renée encourages young people to play with language as a material that they can shape and build into poems and stories. She creates activities that help welcome young people from diverse backgrounds: for example, opening workshops with "word portrait" writing prompts that help youth "tell the story of their name." This activity helps to build trust and interest in each writer: everyone has a story about how they got their name and what it means to them.

Springing from her workshops at L.A. Matheson High School and her experience working with Turning Point Ensemble to produce the November 2015 opera, *Air India Redacted*, Renée has been working with L.A. Matheson students and teachers on a poetry and arts collaboration that is set to debut in Surrey in October 2017. This event will feature L.A. Matheson high school students performing their own artistic works before an audience at City Centre Library.

In partnership with the youth services staff at Newton Library and teachers from the Surrey School District, Renée led a series of workshops for 10-year old kids in the PAWS (Promoting Achievement Within Schools) program in 2016 and teens in the TREES (Teen Recreation and Educational Enhancement Services) program in 2017, working through writing prompts and playing with words to help children and youth facing unique challenges engage with the written word in a fun, inspiring environment.

Renée has also helped to support the Young Adult Writing Contest through her participation in the Teen Writers' Camps at Surrey Libraries. Each year, winning entries for the contest are celebrated and shared at an Awards Gala held in the Council Chambers in October, which Renée attended as a guest speaker in 2016. She will be offering the closing remarks at the 2017 gala.

Please see Appendix "I" for comments from youth participants.

### **Legacy Project**

From September 2016 through April 2017, Renée worked closely with Surrey Libraries staff and partners from Progressive Intercultural Community Services (PICS) Seniors' Centre and Historic Stewart Farm to complete her legacy project: *Surrey Stories Connect: Teens & Seniors Write Surrey*. This project aimed to capture the experiences of Surrey residents by creating opportunities to share inter-generational and multicultural stories. The book of stories was officially launched in May 2017 at a celebratory event attended by 80 people including local writers. Copies are available for free online and at local libraries. An audiobook version is being created by staff at UBC's Crane Library to be made available on National Network for Equitable Library Service (NNELS) for patrons with print disabilities.

This book is the culmination of months of work and celebrates the work of local authors in our community. On three separate afternoons in the fall of 2016, Renée worked with teens and seniors at Cloverdale Library, PICS Seniors' Centre, and Historic Stewart Farm on writing workshops that resulted in the beautiful anthology of Surrey stories. Surrey Libraries staff spent several hours translating Punjabi-language interviews and worked with Renée to edit multiple drafts of the anthology. Surrey Libraries Media Team created the beautiful layout and design. The City of Surrey Cultural Grant program provided funding for the writing workshops, the production and publication of the anthology, and the celebration in May. The anthology is the result of bringing people together to share experiences of living in Surrey. The stories serve as an example of Surrey's rich cultural diversity and unique heritage in Canada—celebrating our history, our future, and the brilliant storytellers in our midst. Over 40 local writers opened up their hearts, shared their stories, and responded to each other in these writing workshops—creating a snapshot of a moment in time in Surrey.

### **Partnerships**

Renée has made numerous connections throughout Surrey, collaborating with a wide range of people and organizations to raise the status of the literary arts in the community. Her work has connected her with KPU, the Surrey Art Gallery, Historic Stewart Farm, the Surrey International Children's Festival, the Surrey School District, and Surrey Pretrial Centre. Renée was the emcee of the 2017 Civic Treasures Awards at the annual Business and the Arts Reception and contributed to several events at the Creative City Summit in October 2016.

Since summer 2016, Renée has partnered with Surrey Libraries outreach staff and the Surrey School District at the Surrey Pretrial Centre to judge writing contests and provide feedback to the winning residents in a personal writing consultation. The monthly writing contests have inspired Pretrial inmates to express themselves through writing and the opportunity for professional feedback has been invaluable to them.

### **Touring**

As Surrey Poet Laureate, Renée has taken the position on the road. She served a two-week stint as the Writer in Residence at UBC Okanagan in early 2017, traveled to Port Alberni to perform as Surrey Poet Laureate and lead a writing workshop, and toured Toronto and Hamilton, Ontario in September 2017 presenting on "Remembering Air India: the art of public mourning."

### **SUSTAINABILITY CONSIDERATIONS**

The Poet Laureate Program and Legacy projects support the City's Sustainability Charter under the following themes:

**Inclusion:**

- DO1: Surrey welcomes, includes and embraces and values the diversity of people who live here
- DO2: Surrey is a caring and compassionate city that learns about and supports its residents of all backgrounds, demographics and life experiences
- DO3: Residents have opportunities to build social connections with people from different backgrounds.
- DO20: Surrey residents are proud of their community; and
- DO21: All residents have the opportunities to be meaningfully engaged in civic issues to and to contribute to community life.

**Education and Culture:**

- DO1: Surrey has a culture of learning, with a broad range of diverse learning opportunities available and accessible to meet the needs of all residents.
- DO2: Surrey children and youth have access to a high quality comprehensive and inclusive educational system, and opportunities that include experience in and out of school.
- DO 7: An enviable and vibrant arts and heritage sector contributes to Surrey's citizen engagement, enrichment, economy, community livability and civic pride; and
- DO9: Surrey supports and celebrates its diverse artists, cultures and community heritage through inclusive festivals, programming and events.

**CONCLUSION**

As Surrey's inaugural Poet Laureate, Renée Sarojini Saklikar has excelled at the duties and responsibilities that were initially set out in the Call for Applications. She has been a vocal literary ambassador for Surrey, engaged with the people of Surrey through countless civic events, festivals, and programs, achieved a beautiful legacy project that brought members of the community together to celebrate Surrey stories, and continued to write poetry during her term.

Renée is "so grateful for this amazing opportunity" and she writes: "I realized that what inspires me the most as Surrey's first poet laureate [is] helping everyone who takes part in our activities, regardless of their background, [believe] that they can make poetry, and enjoy playing with words, and learn from language, too."

Thanks to the tremendous support of the partner organizations, community members, CDAC, and City of Surrey for championing the position. Renée looks forward to presenting before Mayor and Council during April 2018 for the Poetry Month Proclamation. Renée's official term will end in October 2018.



Surinder Bhogal  
Chief Librarian



Meghan Savage  
Acting Manager Guildford Library &  
Surrey Poet Laureate Program Coordinator

## APPENDIX “I”

### Feedback on Surrey’s Poet Laureate Writing Consults

*“I treasure your feedback and detailed suggestions about motivational readings. What surprises me the most is to see that such a gifted writer is willing to share her knowledge with the rest of us beginners.”*

*“I’m sending a big thank-you for your encouragement and helpful comments :) My meeting with you has helped me understand better what it is I’m doing, and how I’m doing it, in my stories – and how those stories might fit in to something bigger [...] You’re a fantastic educator. I’m much less overwhelmed now with moving forward.”*

*“I just wanted to thank you implicitly for your words of encouragement today. I cannot [express] enough gratitude for your feedback and kind words. The consult was just what I needed. I am looking forward to checking out the resources you provided me with.”*

Some of the youth who have participated in Renée’s writing workshops made these comments:

*“Today I learned poetry is a language itself. It speaks to you in a different way than any other language could ever.”*

*“I used to think that poetry was not my thing but today I learned many things and I would like to do more poetry in the summer.”*

One of Surrey’s youth librarians made the following comment:

*“Thank you, Renée, for the inspiring poetry workshop you led on Thursday. You drew the teens out of their shells with your warmth and deep love of poetry. As evidenced by their reflections on the poetry workshop, you helped shift their perceptions of how poetry is accessible, fun, and could be a transformative creative force in people’s lives.”*