

Appointment of City of Toronto Poet Laureate

Date: April 6, 2023

To: Economic and Community Development Committee

From: General Manager, Economic Development and Culture

Wards: All

SUMMARY

The purpose of this report is to appoint Lillian Allen as the seventh City of Toronto Poet Laureate.

An advocate for poetry, language and the arts, Toronto's Poet Laureate attends events across the city to promote and attract people to the literary world. The position, which was inaugurated in 2001, honours a Toronto poet whose work displays excellence and who has written on themes relevant to Torontonians. The Poet Laureate's mandate also includes the creation of a legacy project that will be unique to the individual.

Lillian Allen is a professor of creative writing at Ontario College of Art and Design University (OCADU). Two-time JUNO Award winner and trailblazer in the field of spoken word and dub poetry, Allen artistically explores the aesthetics of old and new sounds with her powerful reggae dub poetry/spoken word recordings.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The General Manager, Economic Development and Culture, recommends that:

1. City Council appoint Lillian Allen to the position of City of Toronto Poet Laureate for a term beginning May 10, 2023, until December 31, 2026, or until a successor is appointed.

FINANCIAL IMPACT

The Poet Laureate receives an annual honorarium of \$10,000. Base funding of \$10,000 for the annual honorarium is included in the 2023 Council Approved Operating Budget

for Economic Development and Culture and future year honoraria will be included in future year budget submissions.

The Chief Financial Officer and Treasurer has reviewed this report and agrees with the financial impact information.

DECISION HISTORY

At its meeting, held on July 4, 5 and 6, 2000, Council directed the Commissioner of Economic Development Culture and Tourism to develop a plan, in partnership with the League of Canadian Poets and other community stakeholders, for the selection and appointment of the first Poet Laureate for the City of Toronto in 2001.

At its meeting March 27 and 28, 2019, City Council appointed Al Moritz (A.F. Moritz) to the position of City of Toronto Poet Laureate. Mr. Moritz served on the selection panel that recommended Lillian Allen as the city's seventh Poet Laureate.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2019.EC2.1>

COMMENTS

In keeping with the notion that the position of the Poet Laureate is an honour bestowed rather than a position of employment, poets are not invited to apply for the position. Rather, in January 2023, an expert selection committee was assembled from the local literary community to nominate a candidate. The selection committee included:

- Al Moritz (Toronto Poet Laureate, 2019 - 2023)
- Canisia Lubrin (winner of the 2021 Griffin Poetry Prize for *The Dyzgraphxst*)
- Jeff Kirby (poet/book seller [knife/fork/book])
- Laura O'Brien (Communications Manager, League of Canadian Poets)
- Michael Fraser (poet, recipient of various awards and grants, his latest book is *The Day-Breakers* [Biblioasis, 2022]).

Toronto has a strong and thriving literary tradition. By continuing the honorary position of City of Toronto Poet Laureate, Council reinforces support for this tradition and the city's literary community as a whole. It is the intention that through this confirmation, the City of Toronto can look forward to a dynamic legacy project for the city. Previous Poet Laureates included Dennis Lee (2001-2003), Pier Giorgio Di Cicco (2004-2008), Dionne Brand (2009-2012), George Elliott Clarke (2012-2015), Anne Michaels (2015-2019) and Al Moritz (2019-2023).

Toronto's Poet Laureate program broke new ground in Canada. Since 2001, several other Canadian cities have appointed laureates of their own including Victoria, Vancouver, Edmonton, Calgary, Winnipeg, Montreal, Halifax and St. John's. In 2021, the Province of Ontario introduced its own Poet Laureate program with inaugural appointee, Randell Adjei.

Recommended Appointment of Toronto's Seventh Poet Laureate

Lillian Allen is an acclaimed foremother of Canadian poetry. Poet, writer/performer, and long-time arts activist, Lillian is an international exponent of dub poetry with its politically charged, reggae-infused, aesthetic of resistance and visionary futures. Lillian has also been a successful cultural strategist, playing a key role in transforming the Toronto and Canadian cultural landscapes.

A mentor to the mentors for individuals and groups across many cultures, Lillian brings her critical and effective equity and community-building strategies to institutions such as OCAD University where she initiated and led the development of a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Creative Writing Program. Lillian's forte is community-connected writing, and traditional and new writing forms. Over the decades, she has created opportunities for new generations of artists and initiated and led community-building youth-supporting programs as Fresh Elements and Fresh Arts.

Lillian has received numerous accolades and awards, including being the recipient of an Honourary Doctorate in recognition of outstanding contribution to Canadian Literature (from Wilfrid Laurier University), the Toronto Cultural Champions Award, the Margo Bindhardt Award for significantly impacting the arts in Toronto through both creative work and activism, and the William P. Hubbard Award for Race Relations.

Lillian is the author of *Make the World New – Selected Works, Old & New*, edited by Ronald Cummings, WLU Press 2021. Other books include *Women Do this Every Day*, *Psychic Unrest*, plus books and recordings for children and young people. Also, a globally recognized recording artist, Ms. Allen is a two-time Canadian Juno award winner for her recordings *Conditions Critical*, and *Revolutionary Tea Party*, which was nominated for the prestigious Polaris Heritage Prize in Canada.

CONTACT

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SIGNATURE

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