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Meet Duluth's new poet laureate, Sheila Packa

Sheila Packa's poetry star is rising, alright.

By: [Matthew R. Perrine](#), Budgeteer News

Sheila Packa's poetry star is rising, alright. Back in the old days — pre-April 2010 — it was hard to imagine a discussion about poetry in the Zenith City without at least a mention of the Iron Range native. Nowadays, however, chances are the popular wordsmith will be dominating a majority of said conversations.

Why? Last month Lake Superior Writers selected her as Duluth's latest poet laureate.

This may not mean a lot to those who don't adore the artform, but consider this: She's only the third to hold such a title (following Barton Sutter and Jim Johnson, who was the latest ambassador of all things poetry in the Northland). It's an honor compounded by the fact that Duluth was the first city in the state in modern times to name a poet laureate.

"It's an honor, but it's also an application process," Packa said humbly — as if someone who's been writing poetry for a quarter of a century didn't deserve such high praise.

In her interview with the Budgeteer, Packa described what this LSW designation boils down to for its recipients, who "hold office" for a two-year term.

"The Duluth poet laureate's role is to promote poetry and expand the audience," she said, mentioning that the \$3,000 honorarium she received will go toward organizing five public events to do just that.

One of her first duties as poetry ambassador will be putting together the ambitious Blessings Project.

"One of the things I wanted to do was initiate a community-wide writing project," Packa said.

She will be working with a group of writers who will go out into community groups and help them write blessings for a number of occasions, like marriages, grieving friends and those involved with the military. (Packa has writing exercises that facilitate the process for non-traditional writers.)

"Learning to write a blessing also enhances one's own relationships," she wrote in her proposal for the project. "... The world will be a much better place if we can find a way to bless rather than blame."

Packa's master plan has the Blessings Project pairing with such high-profile community events as Empty Bowl and Thanksgiving at the DECC, where the work would be available for people to read and enjoy.

The poet laureate also wants to turn the best blessings into posters and place them in areas such as detox and the lobby of social services.

"All those places that usually have posters like 'Meth Kills' and 'Just Say No,'" she said dryly. "I wanted something that was more kind.

"I think a lot of people who don't like poetry or don't read poetry would like to be able to write those because you can give them to new parents when they have a baby, and you can use them at weddings and funerals and life transitions, like moving into a new house."

On the subject of poet laureate duties, Packa took a second to highlight some of her predecessor's most effective "campaigns."

"He's done some pretty interesting things," she said of Jim Johnson's term. "One that he did that I really liked was a panel discussion about publishing [and] electronic publishing — that's another area I have used. ... Jim got that conversation going in the writer community."

'Strange Symmetry'

"People think that poetry is kind of an old-fashioned or quaint thing, but actually, in contemporary poetry, all of the major issues are being discussed or examined — it's really quite exciting," Packa said. "It's an interesting field, because it combines so many things: it has the lyric or sound quality; poetry often has memoir or history in it; the language that the poem has usually reflects that background of the poet.

"Like mine has Finnish American sounds in it."

The poet laureate explained that her grandparents were Finnish immigrants and, even though she grew up not understanding the language of their native land, she absorbed the sound of it.

"I definitely have that rhythm," she said.

Perhaps there is a correlation between this and Wildwood River, Packa's collaboration with experimental cellist Kathy McTavish — which has been going on for nearly half a decade.

"She does free improv, so it's very much in the moment," the poet said of her frequent collaborator. "In order for me to approach that, what I do is bring up a manuscript and I choose work on the spot. I don't just create a poem on the spot — that would be too challenging. [Laughs] And sometimes based on what she's playing I will think, Oh, my goodness, that sounds like a train; I think I'll read this poem I have about a train.

"We create sort of a dialogue."

This partnership has been a fruitful one. In addition to numerous live performances, the two have also produced a handful of packaged-with-a-CD chapbooks.

"... She's always looking for found sound, and this time it was a voice she was able to use," Packa said, reflecting on the first time they worked together.

