

# Nils Peterson appointed Silicon Valley's official poet

By Karen D'Souza  
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Video: Nils Peterson

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Nils Peterson has oft been dubbed the unofficial poet laureate of Silicon Valley. Now it's official.

Arts Council Silicon Valley is tapping the venerable Peterson, professor emeritus from San Jose State University and a co-founder of the Poetry Center San Jose, to be the first ever poetry laureate of Santa Clara County.

"He's got the stature we need for the inaugural poet laureate. He's super respected and super active in the community," says Bruce Davis, president of the Arts Council, which joined forces with the county and the county library to launch the project. "He's also got a real sense of this place, having lived here for so long and put down roots here."

A poet who sees the sublime in the ordinary, who captures the vibe of the valley in his verse, the Campbell resident will be charged with raising the profile of the high arts in the land of high-tech.

"I am humbled to be able to give something back to the community that has given me so much," says Peterson, who grew up in Mount Vernon, New York and moved West in the '60s. He intended to stay only a few years, but fell in love with the area.

Warm, funny and unpretentious, the bespectacled 75-year-old has a professorial air honed in 36 years at SJSU. He ran the creative writing department for two decades and he has written on everything from Shakespeare to science fiction to golf. He has published several poetry collections including "The Comedy of Desire," which was edited by the noted poet Robert Bly, and "Here Is No Ordinary Rejoicing." An avid singer with the Symphony Silicon Valley Chorale, he is known for his annual Valentine's Day readings at the Poetry Center and his frequent community workshops .

"Nils is an exceptional fellow with an incredible heart," says Kevin Arnold, president of the board at Poetry Center San Jose. "His impact on the local poetry scene has been astounding."

At a time in life when some folks are hanging up their spurs, Peterson is on a mission. Chosen from almost two dozen applications, he will serve a two-year term starting in April. The post comes with a

\$4,000 stipend plus funding for grass-roots projects. The mandate is to bring poetry to those who don't know Rilke from Rihanna.

"In times of turmoil, people need art, they need something to inspire them," says Supervisor Liz Kniss, who came up with idea to appoint a poet laureate. "What poetry does is give us perspective."

As VIP of verse, Peterson is hoping to urge local scribes to capture their hometown in words.

"I want us to pay attention to what it is like to live in Silicon Valley," he says. "I want us to pay attention to the look of the land, the look of the city, to see the people that live here, the friends and strangers and busboys and entrepreneurs, so that we have a consciousness about this place where we live."

He is planning a poetry contest that would culminate in public readings and perhaps even books. Accessibility is his mantra.

"All of us have something to say about ourselves, about our lives," he says. "We all want some place for our existence to be recorded."

Fans say his gift for demystifying the craft makes him the perfect grand poobah of poetry.

"He can draw poetry out of people who don't think of themselves as poets," says Arnold.

His poetry can be seen as a celebration of the ordinary. In "Where Here is," he listens as the oak trees and grasses whisper the story of this place we call home. In "How Things Happen," he discovers serendipity strolling down the sidewalk. In "A Coffee Shop in late Afternoon," he writes an ode to a culture bursting with cells, laptops and vanilla soy lattes.

He loves to wax poetic, about, well, poetry. "When you write poetry, you see the world differently, you see it more sharply," muses Peterson, who refers to himself as a coffee shop poet. "If you look at things hard enough, they start to look back at you."

The poet hopes that language can help us catch our breath in the world as change comes fast and hard all around us.

"Poetry takes a snapshot of where we are so we can look back," says Peterson. "We are all moving so quickly that we forget, we begin to live in a perpetual present. Poetry helps us remember."

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