

Laurel Peterson confirmed as city's first Poet Laureate

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HOUR STAFF WRITER

NORWALK — During her yearlong tenure as Norwalk's first poet laureate, Laurel Peterson will work to disseminate poetry in Norwalk's public sphere. Her first project, a selection of poems to be displayed on Norwalk busses, will go on display this month.

"My goal—as may be evidenced by the busses—is to make poetry public; and by that I mean I want to find ways for people to stumble across it," said Peterson, who was confirmed as poet laureate Friday in a crowning ceremony at Norwalk Library.

The bus poems will comprise 30 snippets of verse selected by Peterson from the works of classic and contemporary poets.

"I've written one, and then I collected 29 others from people that you will recognize, like Edgar Allan Poe, and from people that I know," including local poets like Stamford-based Ralph Nazareth.

As poet laureate, Peterson hopes to complement her own vision with input from the peo-



Hour photo/Alex von Kleydorff

Laurel Peterson accepts a bouquet as she is presented as Norwalk's Poet Laureate during a program at the Norwalk Public Library on Friday.

ple of Norwalk.

"(The position) is new, and I have a particular vision, but that doesn't mean that there isn't room for participation and for other ideas," Peterson said. "I hope the people in Norwalk will feel free to get in touch with me and ... really make this into a townwide conversation. That would be nice."

Among other ideas for the

coming year, Peterson imagines a townwide poetry contest with Norwalkers responding to local landmarks.

"At the end of the year, we have a big poetry reading, and maybe we can publish a little book and celebrate all the wonderful voices that we have in our town," Peterson told The Hour.

A poet and novelist whose

work often has a narrative bent, Peterson counts among her influences American modernists like Mark Doty, Sharon Olds and Anne Sexton.

"I consider myself a lyric poet and a narrative poet. I really like to tell stories," said Peterson, whose novel, "Shadow Notes," will be published in May. "That impulse to tell stories is something that appears in my poems as well."

Peterson is a professor at Norwalk Community College teaching various creative composition courses; this work affects her poetry, she said.

"I think what teaching does is that it continually reminds me of all the tools I have at hand as a writer," Peterson told The Hour. "Having the opportunity to talk about (line breaks, stanzas, rhythms or metaphor) for my students, and talk about the kinds of effects that they create, helps to keep my own work fresh, I think."

"At readings, I like to say it's dangerous to be my student because every once in a while I steal things from you!" Peterson said.

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In spare time, Peterson and husband Van Hartmann—also a poet—are

patrons of the arts and enjoy visiting museums, watching plays and frequenting Garden Cinemas.

"We love that little theater on Isaac Street where my students claim only old people go," Peterson said with a laugh.

By making poetry accessible for more people, Peterson hopes to offer Norwalkers new viewpoints through art.

"Art of any kind makes our lives, hopefully, bigger," Peterson told The Hour. "It offers us a broader perspective.

More opportunities that we have to engage with that broader perspective: I think that's a positive thing for us."