

POETRY IN MOTION

By Grant Masini
Staff Writer

Celisa Steele didn't arrive in Carrboro expecting to become poet laureate.

She surprised even herself when she was awarded the position after applying three years ago. Since then, she has learned more about who she is and has gotten to know the thriving community of poets in Carrboro and Chapel Hill.

"As I approach the end of my term, I know so much more than when I started," Steele said. "I feel like we have an incredibly rich writing scene — it just takes time to get to know people. And the fact that I still meet new poets and find out about new venues regularly speaks to that richness."

The Carrboro Arts Committee is responsible for selecting the town's poet laureate, a volunteer position. Steele said there are some guidelines that come with the position, but it was designed to be broad and open to interpretation.

"For me, there were three main priorities: being active in Carrboro's West End Poetry Festival, promoting poetry at Carrboro Day and reaching out to younger poets and the next generation that can help poetry grow in Carrboro in the future," Steele said.

Carrboro Mayor Lydia Lavelle said Steele has been excellent during her tenure as poet laureate.

"She's always been available to help us mark occasions, to promote events — even writing poems in order to do so," Lavelle said. "She's also really helped me to be aware of the importance of poetry in our community. I'm also asked to speak a lot and now I try to incorporate poems into my remarks as well. It's a neat way to mark an occasion."

The community of poets Steele has gotten to know came out in full force on April 14 at a poetry reading and open mic event at Flyleaf Books in Chapel Hill. Beth A. Cagle, an award-winning poet and editor who lives in Charlotte, was one of two poets who headlined the event.

"The readings at Flyleaf have always been great," Cagle said. "It appears to me [the area has] a strong writing community, and an abundance of talented writers."

Celisa Steele, poet laureate, helps town get 'Poetry Month'

Cagle said she believes integrating more poetry and art into communities is up to the individual.

"Often you get a wide range of writing ability, and that's OK. Writers who don't give up are practically life-long learners," Cagle said. "You can't write and not learn something — you can't write in a vacuum."

Cagle said for her, the process of writing, sharing and getting critiqued has helped her deal with many challenges she's faced in life, from chronic illness to divorce.

"It's not only helped me to face those challenges and deal with them, but to feel a sense of triumph in getting my sense of joy back in life," Cagle said.

Celisa Steele's term as Carrboro's poet laureate will end in June after three years, but her legacy will remain. Carrboro's mayor designated April as poetry month in Carrboro this year.

"It's really valued by the community," Lavelle said about poetry. The town is accepting applications and nominations for the next poet laureate.

"We have a really bright poetry and spoken word community, and the poet

laureate adds something special to that."

Go!

Celisa Steele said promoting and participating in these annual events were among her main priorities as poet laureate:

Poetry on Your Plate

Friday, April 22

6:30-8:30 p.m.

Carrboro Century Center

Carrboro Day

Sunday, May 1

1-5 p.m.

Carrboro Town Hall

West End Poetry Festival

Friday & Saturday

Oct. 14-15

Downtown Carrboro and Chapel Hill



Jonathan K. Rice, left, is a poet, artist and editor of the annual publication *Kakalak*, which celebrates poetry and art in the Carolinas. He was one of the featured poets at a poetry reading at Flyleaf Books on April 14. "This has been one of the best open mics I've ever heard," Rice said. (Staff photo by Grant Masini)