



**COMMUNITY
ARTS & CULTURE**



CHAPEL HILL POET LAUREATE

Program Update

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Chapel Hill Community Arts & Culture

Chapel Hill Poet Laureate

In The Aftermath About CJ Suitt

About The Program

In November of 2019, the Town of Chapel Hill appointed artist, educator, and activist CJ Suitt as the first Poet Laureate of the community. The Poet Laureate program aims to deepen the relationship of the arts and foster connections by being an ambassador for the community. The Poet Laureate engages in activities that enhance the presence of the arts in the social and civic life. A primary duty of this position is to provide space and opportunity for



Meet CJ Suitt, Chapel Hill's First Poet Laureate

December 21, 2020 / Morgan Carter-Watson / Culture

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Photo by Cornell Watson

CJ Suitt first experienced poetry at his family's Southern Presbyterian church as a child. "Watching passionate people not just standing in the pulpit, but taking up space, sharing a 2,000-year-old story, wrapped in metaphor with power and grace, in a way the congregation could apply it to their daily lives," CJ says. "It was amusing." It's also part of why CJ believes poetry should be read aloud. "Humans have been speaking language for thousands of years before we ever wrote anything down, but looking at our world now, you'd think it was the opposite," CJ says.

He believes listening to those charismatic speakers at church, combined with his expressive, musical household, was the first major influence on his creative life. At home, his father frequently sang R&B ballads to CJ and his younger brother, **Josh Suitt**, resulting in a love of music and leading to their own early collaborations. "Josh was the poet then," CJ says. "He wrote these amazing poems, and I would put melodies to them." By middle school, CJ wrote his own R&B songs for girls he had crushes on, and by the time he entered Chapel Hill High School, he wanted to pursue a rap career. "I grew up in the boy band era - NSYNC, O-Town - I thought that was my future, to be a rapper in a band." CJ says.



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News

Chapel Hill poet laureate releases poem as program navigates COVID-19



Photo by Cynthia Liu | The Daily Tar Heel
CJ Suitt, Chapel Hill's first-ever Poet Laureate, poses for a portrait in Chapel Hill on Wednesday, Nov. 4, 2020. "There's a lot of hope and uncertainty right now," Suitt said. [Buy Photos](#)

By Sascha Medina
November 8, 2020 | 6:12pm EST

Chapel Hill Poet Laureate CJ Suitt released a poem on Oct. 27 reminding the community of what it has to look forward to when the pandemic is over.

The poem, titled "In The Aftermath" comes as the Chapel Hill's poet laureate program navigates the impact of COVID-19. The program was created in late November 2019, so it has been grappling with the pandemic since near the beginning of its existence.

For more information about Chapel Hill's poet laureate program, visit the Chapel Hill Community Arts and Culture [website](#).

Suitt said his goal as the poet laureate is to uplift youth voices and highlight the rich history of poets in the community.

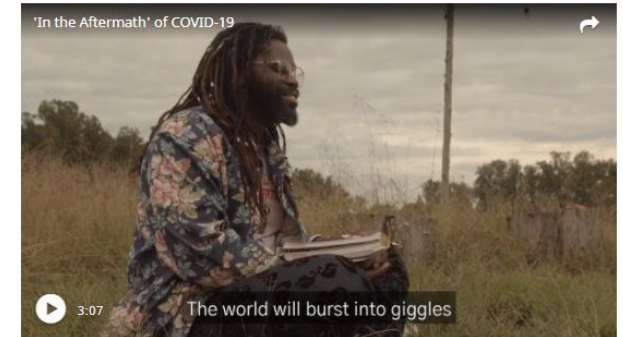
Chapel Hill Town Council member Allen Buansi, who helped

LOCAL

'In the Aftermath' of COVID, Chapel Hill poet laureate finds strength, hope for future

BY TAMMY GRUBB

JANUARY 22, 2021 05:45 AM, UPDATED JANUARY 27, 2021 11:10 AM



Chapel Hill Poet Laureate CJ Suitt talks about his inspiration and his vision, "In the Aftermath," for how the world could look in a post-COVID time when people can be together again. BY TOWN OF CHAPEL HILL

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08:02 Powered by Trinity Audio

CHAPEL HILL

While the world hunkered down at home in April from the COVID-19 pandemic, Chapel Hill Poet Laureate CJ Suitt relished the time to create.

He completed a month-long series of self-portraits and poems. He reflected on his art, and when the Black Lives Matter protests erupted in May and June, he reflected again on being a Black man in America.

He had grown "tired of writing poems about black death and black pain," Suitt said, and he was reminded that "something needs to be put out in the world that reminds us of how far we have come and that there are some things worth holding on to."

WHERE WE STARTED

- In Nov 2019, Council appointed first Poet Laureate
- Appointed for two-year term (Jan 2020 – Dec 2021)
- Awarded a stipend of \$2,000 for two-year term
- Community Arts & Culture identified as Town department to liaise w/Poet Laureate and coordinate program



WHAT WE'VE LEARNED

- Two-year term works well and is common length of service
- Increased stipend would make program more appealing
- Regular meetings with Town staff and Laureate are essential
- Need to balance “official” appearances with other commissions, programs
- COVID limited inaugural Poet Laureate’s ability to fulfill charge and duties



WHAT WE'RE PROPOSING

- Application and selection process
- Two-year appointment with \$1,500 stipend/year (\$3,000 total)
- Jointly design laureate duties
- Monitor official appearance and compensate for other work
- Continue to learn and iterate program tailored to each Laureate



WHAT WE'LL DO NEXT

- Continue to raise profile and impact of CH Poet Laureate
- Formal application/selection process in 2022
- Collaboration with Carrboro, Hillsborough, other NC Poets Laureate
- Develop Youth Poet Laureate program, part of national network



RECOMMENDATION

That Council adopt R-6, which includes proposed guidelines for the Town of Chapel Hill's Poet Laureate program and a one-year extension of current Poet Laureate's term to December 31, 2022.

