



**MILWAUKEE**  
PUBLIC LIBRARY

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**MILWAUKEE PUBLIC LIBRARY ANNOUNCES 2022-2023 POET LAUREATE**

MILWAUKEE (April 28, 2022) – Milwaukee Public Library Director Joan Johnson has announced the appointment of Mario “The Poet” Willis to serve as the library’s Poet Laureate from 2022 to 2024.

***“MPL has a long history of cultivating and expanding the audience for poetry while lifting up and celebrating poets from our community,”*** said City Librarian Joan Johnson. ***“The Poet Laureate program is one of a number of collaborative projects which have resulted in many readers literally stumbling across poetry in unexpected places –along a path at the Zoo or on a busy downtown streetscape. We look forward to working with Mario ‘The Poet’ Willis to build on these efforts as he forges yet a new path for exploration gaining new readers and seasoned enthusiasts along the way.”***

Mario “The Poet” Willis is a poet, podcaster and spoken word artist. Born and raised in Milwaukee, Mr. Willis has been featured throughout the city and the Midwest as a spoken word artist, writing guide and performance coach. He is a two-time member of Milwaukee's National Poetry Slam Team; a Poetry Unplugged All-Star; a mainstay community member of one of the longest-running open mic venues in the city, Poet’s Monday at Linneman’s Riverwest Inn; and a curator of numerous open mic and writing series, to include “New Word Document” with Riverwest Public House and “PenGame Writing Workshops” with various cafes and venues. Mr. Willis is the co-creator and host of “Pancakes & Poetry” a community celebration during Milwaukee's annual Bronzeville Week Festival.

Having come to poetry later in his life, Mr. Willis does not have a formal education in poetry (rather, he pursued secondary courses in computer science); his understanding of craft and canon are largely autodidactic. For more than 16 years, he has studied regularly and extensively with several nationally recognized spoken word artists and award-winning poets, including the most recent Poet Laureate and current Wisconsin State Poet Laureate Dasha Kelly Hamilton, along with Buddy Wakefield and Patricia Smith.

Mr. Willis has published 3 chapbooks (“Love More Coffee, and Dreams,” “Size Matters,” and “A Limited Engagement”). He has also produced two spoken word CDs (“Forgiveness” and “Don’t Panic, Be Awesome”) and maintains a blog about poetry, performance and personal truth called “Don’t Panic, Be Awesome” ([www.mariothepoet.wordpress.com](http://www.mariothepoet.wordpress.com))

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Mr. Willis is a passionate Milwaukee native and father of three. He's a Brewers' fan, community activist, volunteer with Hunger Task Force, and a member of Autism Speaks (being the father of an autistic child). He ascribes to the philosophy that love is the only thing that can truly save you and forgiveness makes love that much easier. He has found that poetry could be the conduit to both. His motto “Don’t Panic, Be Awesome” has become his life’s work.

Visit [www.mpl.org/poetlaureate](http://www.mpl.org/poetlaureate) for more information about the program. Soon the site will be updated with a complete biography of Mario “The Poet” Willis along with a sample of his published works and a list of his upcoming appearances and photos.

### **About the Milwaukee Poet Laureate Project**

The Milwaukee Poet Laureate project was initiated in February 2000, and is sponsored by the Milwaukee Public Library and supported by the Friends of the Milwaukee Public Library. The Milwaukee Poet Laureate project committee selects a local poet who serves as a leading example locally of the poetic voice of their genre to serve a two-year term.

### **About Milwaukee Public Library**

Milwaukee Public Library is an anchor institution that helps build healthy families and vibrant neighborhoods – the foundation of a strong Milwaukee. Since 1878, Milwaukee Public Library has been a free provider of education and information for residents of Milwaukee and beyond. With 13 locations, and more than three million items in circulation, MPL offers free access to a rich collection of materials both physical and digital, access to technology, classes, exhibitions, programming and more. From toddlers to scholars, MPL serves more than one million patrons who come through its doors annually and many more around the globe who use its resources at [www.mpl.org](http://www.mpl.org). To offer this wide array of free programming, MPL relies on both public and private funding. Learn more about how to support Milwaukee Public Library at [mpl.org/support](http://mpl.org/support).

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