

Fowler native Juan Felipe Herrera named U.S. Poet Laureate

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[Juan Felipe Herrera](#), a Fowler native and former Fresno State professor, has been named Poet Laureate of the United States.

The news came late Tuesday night when the Library of Congress released its announcement at midnight Eastern time.

Remarkably, Herrera is the first Valley native to receive the honor but not the first with Fresno State ties. The late Philip Levine was U.S. Poet Laureate from 2011-12.

Now Herrera, 66, will become the nation's 21st [Poet Laureate](#), succeeding Charles Wright.

Wednesday afternoon, he talked to The Bee's Donald Munro about how when he came to Fresno State in 1990, he was immediately reminded of the university's poetry pedigree.

"When I first got here, on Day 1, I entered the Chicano Studies department, and Philip Levine was waiting for me to greet me and welcome me to the campus. I found that to be incredible."

I think Fresno may be the new capital of poetry in California. But I say that with a lot of joy and fun, and all poets will understand when I say that about our cities. We're all capitals of poetry.

U.S. Poet Laureate Juan Felipe Herrera

Herrera was California Poet Laureate from 2012-14. He is the author of 28 books and recently retired as chairman of the creative writing department at the University of California at Riverside. Previously, he taught at Fresno State from 1990 to 2004. He was chairman of the Chicano and Latin American Studies Department.

Herrera is the son of migrant workers from Mexico and the first Hispanic to be named U.S. Poet Laureate. He has received numerous national and international awards for his work documenting his experience as a Hispanic in the U.S. He also has won the National Book Critics Circle Award in Poetry.

His author's list numbers 28 books of poetry, novels for young adults and collections for children, most recently "Portraits of Hispanic American Heroes" (2014), a picture book showcasing inspirational Hispanic and Latino Americans. His most recent book of poems is "Senegal Taxi" (2013).

Librarian of Congress James H. Billington announced the appointment, officially the Library's 21st Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry, for 2015-2016. Herrera will take up his duties in the fall.

"I see in Herrera's poems the work of an American original — work that takes the sublimity and largesse of "Leaves of Grass" and expands upon it," Billington says in a release. "His poems engage in a serious sense of play — in language and in image — that I feel gives them enduring power. I see how they champion voices, traditions and histories, as well as a cultural perspective, which is a vital part of our larger American identity."

Herrera says in the release, "This is a mega-honor for me, for my family and my parents who came up north before and after the Mexican Revolution of 1910 — the honor is bigger than me. I want to take everything I have in me, weave it, merge it with the beauty that is in the Library of Congress, all the resources, the guidance of the staff and departments, and launch it with the heart-shaped dreams of the people. It is a miracle of many of us coming together."

At a Fresno State gathering soon after he was named California's poet laureate, Herrera called the central San Joaquin Valley special "because they are the ones who inspired me, and inspiration is the key to this whole thing to creativity."

At the same event, Herrera got the audience to read along on his poem "Don't Ban Our Books Cuz I'll Ban Your Tomatoes."

Check back Wednesday evening for more with Juan Felipe Herrera by Bee arts reporter Donald Munro and videographer Silvia Flores