

# LIFE, LOVE, HOPE | THE LANGUAGE OF VENTURA COUNTY POET LAUREATE LUZMARIA ESPINOSA

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**PICTURED:** An artistic rendering of Luzmaria Espinosa by Miguel Rodriguez, community outreach manager for the Port of Hueneme. *Photo submitted*

by Mike Nelson

As Ventura County Poet Laureate, Luzmaria Espinosa hopes to bring a greater awareness of poetry to youth, families and all residents of the region.

But poetry — and an awareness of all things artistic — is but a vehicle toward what this native of Mexico and longtime Santa Paula resident sees as her real mission.

“We have a responsibility to life, to this planet, to all the elements of nature, to be in harmony with each other,” says Espinosa. “And a responsibility to respect others, even those who disagree with you.

“Poetry is the language of life, of hope, of love, of nature, of a higher spirit. And poetry, and arts in general, has always been for me a way to understand myself, humanity, life around me, an instrument through which I can say something about what I see, and what our responsibilities are to one another. That’s what I hope to communicate in my new role.”

Long involved in writing and performing poetry, theater and dance, as well as social activism, Espinosa was recently inaugurated by the Ventura County Arts Council as its third poet laureate, a position previously held by Phil Taggart and Mary Kay Rummel.

As defined by the arts council, the Ventura County Poet Laureate is a county resident and “distinguished poet who advances awareness of and appreciation for literary arts and humanities within the county.” Espinosa will serve a two-year term, during which she will represent and celebrate the diversity and history of Ventura County, promote literary arts, and participate in ceremonial, educational and cultural activities.

Foremost among her goals is bringing the arts to youth. “I want to help young people express themselves,” says Espinosa. “It’s been proven that when children are exposed to the arts, they do better academically. Da Vinci was a great artist, but he was also a great scientist and engineer.”

Espinosa’s own artistic awareness and involvement began as a kindergartner in Mexico, where the curriculum is tied to the arts.



Luzmaria Espinosa at a Cesar Chavez march in Oxnard. *Photo submitted*

“You don’t get out of school not knowing arts and crafts,” she says. “So we had to recite poems, as my mother had done. And that inspired a love of reading that continued when my family moved to Santa Paula. From first grade on, I read everything, from biographies to novels to poetry — even the words on medicine boxes,” she smiles.

She read Arata Osada’s *Children of the A-Bomb: The Testament of the Boys and Girls of Hiroshima*, as well as books about Helen Keller, Anne Frank, Louisa May Alcott and

Susan B. Anthony. “Women were my motivation,” she says. “But I also read Ghandi and Aristotle. I couldn’t get enough.”

While attending Santa Paula High School, Espinosa participated in a student exchange program in Mexico, becoming involved in theater and performance poetry. She was influenced by writers from José Martí to Herman Hesse. She earned bachelor’s degrees in Spanish and sociology from the University of California, Santa Barbara, and a master’s degree from Antioch University. Her travels took her from Latin America to Europe to Africa.

“Travel really opens your eyes and broadens your horizon,” she says. “I speak English and Spanish, but in Germany I realized how hard it is for people not to know those languages, because I didn’t know German. Travel humbles you in a way that’s very positive.”

Through art, Espinosa became an activist for social change, inspired by activist artists José Montoya, Javier Pacheco and John Trudell. In 1979, she became a member of the Royal Chicano Air Force, a Sacramento-based art collective which advanced the cause of the United Farm Workers movement.

She also taught and performed with Danza Azteca on the Central Coast and in theater productions with Los Mascarones of Mexico City, Teatro Gusto in San Francisco, Teatro de la Calle in Sacramento, and Teatro In Lak 'Ech of Oxnard.

California State University, Channel Islands, recently installed her archives, including an extensive collection of rare art. It features original pieces by Chicana/o artists of the 1970s (José Montoya, Gilbert “Magu” Luján, Estebán Villa and more), plus original documentation of the Chicano Teatro movement and her own works of poetry and Danza history.

For Espinosa, art is inseparable from culture and the advancement of civilization.

“Being able to express what you see, to give hope, is essential,” she asserts. “Art always has been at the forefront of change throughout history, because it connects to all of life.”

And through art, Espinosa hopes to bring others, especially youth, not simply a better appreciation of art, but a better understanding of and respect for humanity.

“In this day and age, with so much division and inequality, it’s important for those who are older to pass along to those coming after us not just a skill but an attitude that promotes compassion, love and respect for others,” she says, softly but firmly.

“The beauty of all art is that it crosses all cultures. Woody Guthrie, John Lennon, Bob Marley — they all crossed boundaries of culture to express themselves through art. When you broaden your scope and take off your blinders, you grow as a person.”

*For more information on Luzmaria Espinosa, visit [vcartscouncil.org/programs/poet-laureate](https://vcartscouncil.org/programs/poet-laureate).*