

## City's poet hopes to bring verse to the people



By Janice O'Leary  
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Cambridge politicians and school officials are not the only newly elected public faces this month. There's also the city's first poet populist, Peter Payack.

After a public reading of poetry early this month by the Cambridge Arts Council, nearly 1,000 residents cast their votes for one of eight poets. The informal office is a first for Cambridge, an idea launched by City Councilor Brian Murphy to celebrate the city's rich community of writers.

"I'm thrilled," Payack, 57, said in an interview. "It's a very Cambridge thing. I feel like a community guy. I've always been a populist."

And he's been a poet for most of the 35 years he's lived in Cambridge, publishing more than one thousand poems, many of them in prestigious literary journals such as the Paris Review. He's also written more than a dozen chapbooks and five collections of poetry.

Despite that, about town, he's not always known primarily as a poet. Residents who have witnessed him logging some 80,000 or so miles since moving here know him as a runner. His students at the Berklee College of Music know him as a professor. Local readers know him as a sportswriter. At Cambridge Rindge & Latin School, the wrestling team

knows him as their assistant coach. He's been a human rights commissioner for the city and president of the PTA.

In other words, he's been a man of the people.

And he's already tried to bring poetry to the people. Some of his poetry was sandblasted into the floor at the Davis Square MBTA station. When there was a digital sign above the Out of Town News kiosk in Harvard Square, he put poetry up there, too.

One of the reasons he initially moved to Cambridge at age 22, Payack said, was because the city so clearly supported and encouraged an intellectual community. "Bookstores were open all night," he said. "You could go in there and browse at any time. And there were so many. It was exciting. It was a good place for a writer to be. It was our version of Paris.

"At home in New Jersey," he said, "if you got a poem published in the New York Times, all anyone wanted to know was, 'How much did that pay you?' "

Payack's early writing efforts were long, dry, philosophical stories. "I was – am – obsessed with the ancient Greeks and Romans," he said.

As asides to amuse himself, he would write little humorous poems. Then he started sending them out. First the Christian Science Monitor took them, then Rolling Stone, then the Village Voice.

By age 26, he was publishing poetry in some of the most prestigious literary journals.

He never studied poetry, he said.

"That's why my work was successful. I was able to find my own voice at an early age."

His style then, and now, more tightly honed, is to fuse humor with more lofty ideas. "I learned early that you can say anything you want if you say it funny."

As Cambridge's poet populist, Payack has no defined role. But he hopes to "bring poetry out of books and libraries," he said. "I want to change people's traditional perception of poetry."

He intends to work with community groups to brainstorm ways to do that, ways that might be similar to the Phone-A-Poem program that he started in 1976 and that still survives at Emerson College, or the fortune cookies he created with tiny poems inside instead of one-line prophecies.

"The hard thing about this," he said, "is that you only have one year."

Payack was also excited about another win he scored this year: He won the city's annual photography contest, which will mean his photo will grace the 2008 resident parking sticker.

"I was just as happy winning that," he said.

Now if his wrestling team cleans up this year, then it would be the perfect trifecta of success.

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