

**UNSUNG HEROES**  
of Hispanic Heritage

# JUAN FELIPE HERRERA

FROM MIGRANT TO POET LAUREATE





2001 SW 31st Avenue  
Hallandale, FL 33009  
[www.mitchelllane.com](http://www.mitchelllane.com)

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## CHAPTER ONE

# POETRY IN MOTION



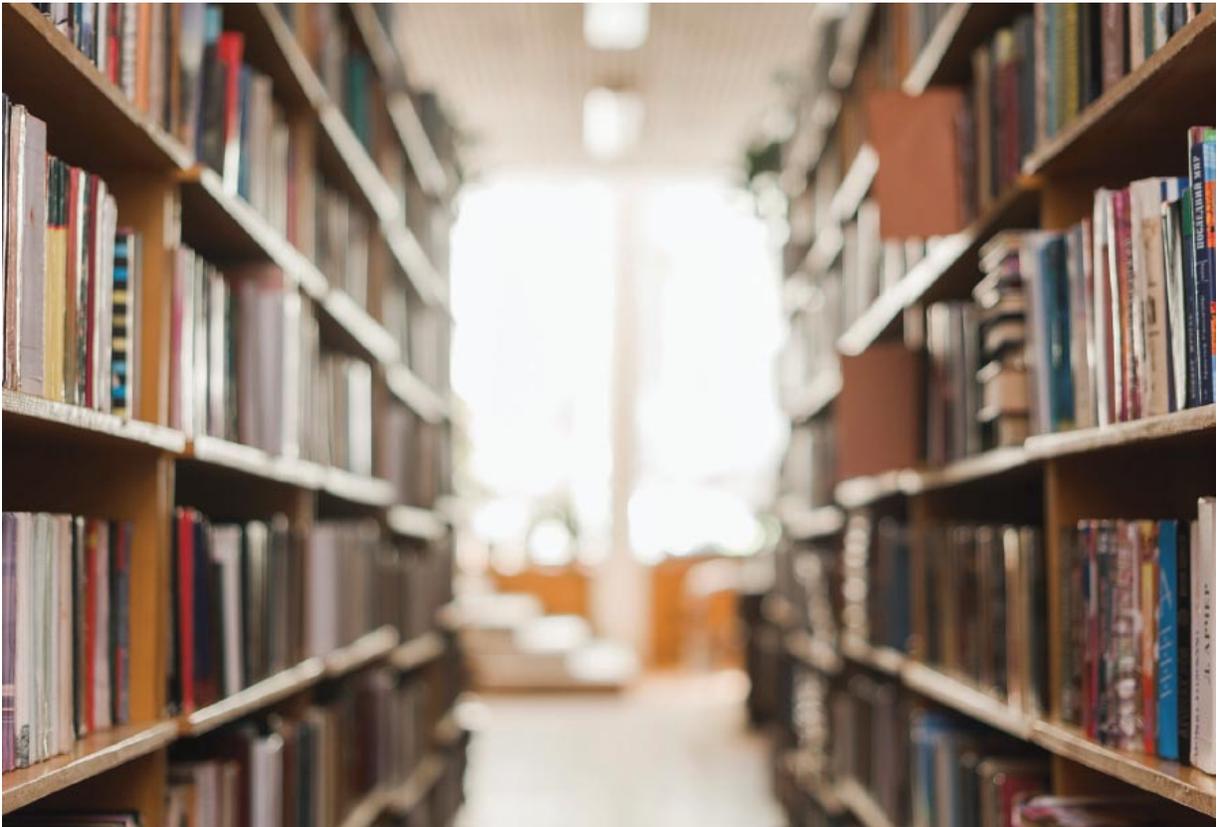
**The evening was about halfway through when the host skipped back to the stage.** He didn't need to make any fancy introductions. The people had come to listen to the poetry. "Alrighty," he said as he looked down at his clipboard. "We have . . . Daniel on deck." That meant that it would be Daniel's turn next. "But now, please welcome Patricia. She will be sharing her new original poem." The crowd clapped enthusiastically.

Daniel stood quietly to the side of the stage as his friend made her way to the tiny spotlight. She wasn't even nervous. It also wasn't her first time reading in front of everyone. The two friends had been coming to the open-

mic night every Tuesday for months. But tonight was the first time Daniel had mustered up the courage to read aloud.

He loved listening to Patricia read her work. She wasn't just a talented poet. She was also a wonderful performer. Daniel wasn't ready to read his own work yet, though. Instead, he planned to read a poem by his favorite poet, Juan Felipe Herrera. It was called "Every Day We Get More Illegal." It was about people who come from Mexico to live and work in the United States.

Daniel discovered Herrera's work in his English literature class. The teacher sent the students to the library to find poetry that spoke to them. Back then Daniel didn't even know what that meant. But when he found a book of Herrera's poems, he learned. The Mexican American poet wrote about what it was like to be a person of Mexican heritage. Daniel could relate to his words. Both he and Herrera were born in California. But their families had come to the United States from Mexico.



**Libraries are great places to find works by poets from all cultural backgrounds.**

Daniel watched Patricia. But all he could hear was the voice inside his head as he prepared. He was nervous. But he wasn't worried about forgetting the words. He knew Herrera's poems by heart. They inspired Daniel to write down his own feelings about growing up as the child of immigrants. Some of his fellow Americans did not treat him well. Writing helped him work through his feelings.

He hoped to study literature and poetry when he went to college. Maybe he could even make a living with his writing like Herrera had. Daniel knew poetry was so much more than words. Sure, it could be beautiful. But it could also make people feel less alone. It could even raise awareness about social justice issues. Daniel, too, wanted to make that kind of difference in the lives of other Latino people.

Before he knew it, the host was calling Daniel's name. "This one is for you, Juan," he whispered to himself as he headed to the stage. He hoped the audience would love the poem even half as much as he did.



## **THE FIRST LATINO POET LAUREATE**

The Library of Congress appointed Juan Felipe Herrera the 21st U.S. Poet Laureate in 2015. He was the first Latino to hold this position. It is considered one of the highest honors a poet can achieve. Poet laureates spend time traveling around the country sharing their work and promoting the art of poetry.

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