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Anis Mojgani began his term as Oregon's poet laureate in May 2020.

Tele-poem hotline offers listeners cool escape

By STEVEN TONTHAT
Oregon Public Broadcasting

April is National Poetry Month and those who want to hear some pithy poems won't have to go far. In fact, they are only a phone call away.

Every day for the entire month callers can listen to recordings from Oregon Poet Laureate Anis Mojgani and past laureates Paulann Petersen, Kim Stafford and Elizabeth Woody reciting their favorite poems.

Mojgani created the Daily Tele-Poems Telephone Line to give listeners a space to enjoy a light break from the recent heavy news cycle.

"Right now we are living in a time where we don't have access to the usual things that have comforted us," he said. "Poetry allows us to find some clarity in difficult and challenging times."

Mojgani came up with the idea back in 2020 when he was appointed the state's chief wordsmith. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, he had to navigate bringing the joy of poetry to the public, while also keeping safe.

During one of his evening walks, Mojgani recalled coming across an object on the street that seemed to come from a bygone age.

"I don't know if it was a construction bin or a what, but the thing that entered my head imagewise was the thought of being able to walk up to a phone booth, and pick up the phone, call a number, and hear a poem," he said.

He loved the idea that a simple device like a telephone could evoke nostalgia and connection and that's when his creative sparks started to ignite.

"There's something really interesting and beautiful about a machine that bridges distance," he said. "Particularly in the time

that we live in right now, when we are struggling for human relationships and intimacy, the telephone, strangely enough, can provide that."

The idea lingered in his head for a few years. Then, in 2022, his final year as laureate, he called his friend, musician and artist Oliver Blank, and together, they created the hotline.

'HOPEFULLY IT ALLOWS A CALLER TO TURN DOWN A LITTLE BIT OF THE NOISE THAT IS PLAGUING US RIGHT NOW AND HAVE A QUIET MOMENT OR TWO WITH ONESELF THROUGH THE VOICE OF ANOTHER PERSON. I HOPE THAT IT GIVES CALLERS THAT INITIAL LITTLE SLIVER OF QUIET REFLECTION TO BLOOM.'

Anis Mojgani | Oregon's poet laureate since May 2020

"I decided to reach out to three of the more recent previous laureates, Paulann Petersen, Kim Stafford and Elizabeth Woody," he said. "The current plan right now is to have a week of Paulann's poems, a week of Liz's poems, a week of Kim's poems and a week of my own."

The hotline has only been up for a week, but Mojgani saw a huge response from people both locally and abroad. Around 1,000 calls were made from 12 different states, Mexico and Canada, he said.

"The loving and exciting way in which so many folks have responded, it feels that people are really curious and really excited about this," he said.

Currently, there are no plans to keep the hotline up past April, but Mojgani hopes that at least for the month, callers can have a little space for themselves.

"Hopefully it allows a caller to turn down a little bit of the noise that is plaguing us right now and have a quiet moment or two with oneself through the voice of another person," he said. "I hope that it gives callers that initial little sliver of quiet reflection to bloom."

• For more information, visit Mojgani's Instagram, and to hear some poems, call 503-928-7008. Other events celebrating National Poetry Month around the state can be found on the Oregon Poets Association website.

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