



# First Duquesne University / August Wilson House Fellow is Pulitzer Prize Recipient and Former U.S. Poet Laureate

By Tara Bradley-Steck

As the first Duquesne University / August Wilson House Fellow, Natasha Trethewey sets a pretty high bar. A Pulitzer Prize recipient and former United States poet laureate, Trethewey clearly knows her way around the written and spoken word, just like the Pittsburgh-born playwright who inspired her and in whose honor the fellowship was named.

"August Wilson's work has always been very important to me. Long ago it helped me to understand the necessity for writing about my native geography and history," says Trethewey, who is the Board of Trustees Professor of English at Northwestern University. "I am honored to

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Trethewey will come to Duquesne University March 20-22 to launch the fellowship. She'll visit classes, conduct a poetry reading at Duquesne, give a lecture and read her poetry at community events.

Trethewey created a *PBS NewsHour* poetry series, named "Where Poetry Lives," during her second of two terms as the 19th poet laureate. She also has published *Native Guard*, the 2007 Pulitzer Prize winner, and another book called

*Monument: Poems New and Selected*, which was longlisted for the 2018 National Book Award.

Not all subsequent fellows will be of Trethewey's stature. Just the opposite.

"We wanted someone of national stature to kick it off, and Natasha Trethewey is the ideal inaugural recipient," Duquesne President Ken Gormley says. "Going forward, future fellows will likely be earlier in their careers and can use this opportunity as a springboard to gain exposure for their work. We will make it possible for them to stay for longer periods of time interacting with the campus and the community so that they can build upon their work."

Duquesne and the August Wilson House will pilot the fellowship program with two fellows per academic year for three years with the goal of sustaining the program thereafter. Gormley says the goal is to make the fellowship "one of the greatest honors attainable for artists of color in the United States."

The fellowship will "alternate between national and local artists who can inspire the work of others and provide encouragement," says Kathleen Glenister Roberts, director of the University Honors College and an August Wilson House board member. The Honors College has partnered with the Daisy Wilson Artist Community to restore Wilson's childhood home in the Hill District neighborhood of Pittsburgh and turn it into a community arts center that could sponsor roundtables, classes, exhibits and plays.

Wilson's nephew, Paul A. Ellis, Jr., executive director and general counsel of the August Wilson House, says the fellowship aims to identify and nurture emerging artists of color and of limited means who aspire to do the caliber of work his uncle demonstrated throughout his life.

"We're trying to address a void—which is a lack of access to the arts, especially for the underserved," says Ellis. "My uncle spent his entire career—in addition to the body of work he provided that contributed to American literature—single-handedly creating opportunities for hundreds of artists while inspiring thousands of others. So this program is right up his alley."

Fellows will be invited to create work that can be showcased in the August Wilson House and the Hill District community. They will be given access to Duquesne's resources for scholarly research and public programs while making classroom presentations and programs available on campus and off.

Thanks to the partnership with Duquesne, the pool of future candidates for the August Wilson Fellowship can be expanded to include literary, visual and performing artists, says Ellis.

"Our partnership facilitates broadening the type of artists we can work with and gives us greater options," he says. "We would like someone with the capacity to advance their work in the spirit of August Wilson. That means a lot of things. It has to do with the standard of excellence that August Wilson aspired to. It has to do with his principled courage. It has to do with a work ethic."

The fellowship is supported by a grant from the Nancy Jones Beard Foundation. Its namesake founder says she has long been an admirer of the playwright and is excited about supporting artists of color.

"I'm excited about this particular opportunity, and I think it's a good thing for the city of Pittsburgh and Duquesne University. My long-held admiration for August Wilson and his literary works moved me to respond immediately to President Gormley's request for support," says Nancy Jones Beard. Her husband, Gene, who earned his undergraduate business and MBA degrees at Duquesne, was inducted as a charter member of the Century Club of Distinguished Duquesne University Alumni.

The Beard family has a long and distinguished history of support for Duquesne that, among many significant gifts, includes the establishment of the Beard Center for Leadership in Ethics, the Beard Press Box at Rooney Field, the Beard Symposium on Emerging Issues in Ethics and Sustainability, and multiple term funds providing critical support of business school students and faculty. The Nancy Beard Foundation has an extensive commitment to the arts, libraries and health care organizations around the United States. ♦

## Inaugural Fellow Announced at August Wilson House Ground Blessing

Natasha Trethewey was named the first Duquesne University/August Wilson House Fellow at a ground-blessing ceremony at the August Wilson House in Pittsburgh in September. The event celebrated the completion of the first phase of fundraising toward restoration of the childhood home of Wilson. Denzel Washington, who starred in the Broadway revival and movie version of Wilson's "Fences," is a lead fundraiser in the effort and attended the event.

**Below top:** President Gormley with Denzel Washington and August Wilson's nephew Paul Ellis. **Below middle:** Attendees at the blessing ceremony. **Below bottom:** President Gormley; Constanza Romero Wilson, widow of August Wilson; and Paul Ellis, standing in front of August Wilson's birthplace.

