U.S. Poet Laureate Juan Felipe Herrera honors his third-grade teacher at first official reading

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WASHINGTON

Juan Felipe Herrera marked his first official reading as the U.S. poet laureate with a strong message of justice and human rights – and a nod to his third-grade teacher in Fresno – Tuesday night at the Library of Congress.

Herrera, the son of migrant farmworkers who was born in Fowler and lives in Fresno, is the nation’s first Latino poet laureate.

It was an emotional night for the audience of more than 300. They listened to Herrera’s expressive poetry readings about exiles, civil rights, immigration and unity.

Herrera spoke humbly of his career and new role, giving credit for his success to his third-grade teacherat Lowell Elementary School, Lucille Sampson, who first told him he had a beautiful voice.

“It was your words that made it all happen for me,” Herrera told his teacher, who was in the audience.

He urged everyone to find their voice, something that is essential to his official laureateship project, La Casa de Colores or The House of Colors, which will launch in the next few days on the [Library of Congress’ poetry webpage](http://www.loc.gov/poetry/). The project calls on people nationwide to contribute to an “epic poem” about the American experience.

“When we say poetry, it’s really the vision of all voices,” Herrera said. “It’s freedom. … When you use your own voice, freely, then we’re all united.”

Monthly, Herrera will unveil part of the poem, titled “La Familia,” each part focused on different themes of American life, values or culture.

Recalling his life’s path, struggling with English as a third-grader to making it to the Library of Congress to read his poems, Herrera urged the audience in his last poem to “imagine what you could do.”

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