

# Poet Laureate, Ann Browning Masters, April 22, 2025

## Transcript

Narrator:

You tuned into another edition of The Break Room, a weekly conversation about how the city of Saint Augustine works from those who do the work every day, hosted by the City of Saint Augustine's communications director, Melissa Wissel. The Break Room offers a closer look at the different city departments and provides updates on current and upcoming projects and events. And now your host, Melissa Wissel.

Melissa Wissel:

Welcome to The Break Room. Thanks for tuning in. I'm Melissa Wissel, communications director for the City of Saint Augustine. This week, I'd like to introduce for the first time on The Break Room, our sophomore Poet laureate, Doctor Ann Browning Masters. She was selected in January by the City Commission and has been participating in city events as well as community events representing the city. As our poet laureate even made an appearance at the beginning of April on First Coast Connect WJCT radio Ann welcome to The Break Room.

Ann Browning Masters:

Thank you. Glad to be here.

Melissa Wissel:

We're happy to have you so. I'm going to just jump right in and say tell us. What inspired you to become a poet? Because I would say that you would identify yourself as a poet. What? What inspired you or what has led you to be doing poetry all your life?

Ann Browning Masters:

Since about age ten. Not good poetry, though. Not that stuff anyway. I have always been interested in the history of Saint Augustine and the history of my ancestors here. Since I am a native. And in the lives of these folks, I really see it as thread of what I call raw beauty. And it's not that their lives were particularly easy because these were folks. In the case of the Minorcans, who came in 1777 who came from a failed plantation with the rags on their back, and they had to make their way. But I do see that raw beauty, and I think it's important to say that because these are the common folk who will never make it into a history book, and that's what I'm trying to do is to say their story as well as the Floridano story, which are the descendants of the first Spanish settlers.

Melissa Wissel:

So poetry really is your vehicle to tell the story and to share the history that you find fascinating in your way of.

Ann Browning Masters:

Right.

Melissa Wissel:

Immortalizing it, shall we say is, is through poetry. And you said ten. What? What, what? What prompted you at ten? Anything in particular? Just.

Ann Browning Masters:

I I don't know. I just was going through papers and found a childhood thing at age ten where I had done a four-stanza poem, which was really a bad poem, but.

Melissa Wissel:

You're only ten. Give yourself a break.

Ann Browning Masters:

But I wanted to do it and I did and I was just amazed that I still had it. And then I saw other juvenile poetry after that too. But so that's where I was.

Melissa Wissel:

Do you study poetry in school? What did you what was your what? Your? I don't know your formal background training to be honest with you.

Ann Browning Masters:

Well, fortunately I had two high school teachers who were wonderful, one of whom used Beatles lyrics to teach us about poetry, which was wonderful.

Melissa Wissel:

I had an English teacher use ZZ Top.

Ann Browning Masters:

There you go. There you go. You know, there's poetry everywhere. And then in college, I thought I would be an English major, then changed to psychology for my bachelor's and took creative writing and poetry classes as an undergrad and a graduate student. So, I've had, you know, formal coursework and I've workshopped, I've been really fortunate to workshop with some people that whom I really respect as poets and have just kept working on my craft.

Melissa Wissel:

And you're very active in the poetry poet community. Tell us a little bit about some of the things that you're involved with, just your your background resume.

Ann Browning Masters:

Well, we have the poet fest coming up, which bless Chris Bodar 's wonderful heart. He does all the hard work to coordinate that and is to be thanked for that. He also does the program at the waterworks every month and and I've participated in both of these as well as have presented around the state and schools, museums, historical societies.

Melissa Wissel:

Right readings, readings, poetries. And you've, I know one time you and I were talking about something and you you had said to me, I'm working on this. I think it might have been for Arbor Day. And you said I'm going to my my group and I'm going to have them read it. So you take your work very seriously. What is? How do you come up with a poem? But when I called you or we talked. Or I think actually it was part of the application process, was that whoever got selected needed to be prepared that first week. So how do you find that inspiration? When I say to you or someone says to you we need a poem about trees for Arbor Day. And that was a fabulous poem by the way.

Ann Browning Masters:

Thank you it it. Really varies for me sometimes. I don't pick a topic particularly and write about it. It's something that I just think about, and then there's a rhythm or a language to it that I try to get down and then flesh out from there. Other I've had the bizarre experience of waking up in the middle of the night with a few lines and just having to get up and write that down immediately because. I found. And if I don't write the poetic lines down when I wake up like that, they are gone the next morning. So I've learned to pay attention. Get up, stumble around, find something to write on. And do it. Because it's poetry is like dreams. They're gone in the morning.

Melissa Wissel:

Right. I have that. When I think of something in the other night, but it's not poetry, it's usually something I've forgotten to do at work. So what keeps you going? Yeah. I mean, what, what do you stay active? I mean, what? What you just there's still more stories to tell

Ann Browning Masters:

One of my biggest projects is getting this Minorcan story down, and I'm halfway through another book that begins when they got on the boat in Minorca and goes through contemporary times. And I've broken that down into our historic periods of first Spanish second, you know, British. So on and it's won't be a comprehensive story because that would be impossible. But it's a little bit more of an academic book than my first book here.

Melissa Wissel:

That is it. So it's poems. It's a collection of collections, and you're writing them as you go. Kind of or you're you. You find something in history and you think about it, and that event is what kind of inspires.

Ann Browning Masters:

And and that that's the mix also because sometimes something just occurs to me and then there are other times when I go, I really need a poem for the second Spanish period, you know, and I think about that and do a little more research and then something emerges and then I go for it. That's a really flexible all over the place procedure.

Melissa Wissel:

OK.

Ann Browning Masters:

But I really want to. That's this is my one of my driving things right now. And then of course after that I'm going to do a cookbook I think. And then after that I will continue on with my other writing which is not like this at all. It's more social commentary, social awareness work that I've not published or done anything with.

Melissa Wissel:

And you're retired, so this is just all in your spare time.

Ann Browning Masters:

I don't feel very retired.

Melissa Wissel:

This keeps you busy.

Ann Browning Masters:

Yes, very busy. And like you said, I have a critique group that meets twice a month. My first critique group here in Saint Augustine. We met for thirty years, if you can imagine that. And I've been with this group in Ponte Vedra about ten years. So it's the most helpful thing in the world. Have good poets with good ears give you feedback and that's how I continue to process it and hopefully make it better.

Melissa Wissel:

It was funny because when you said you had sent me a copy and said now this isn't my final because I have to take it to my critique group and I read it and I thought, I don't really know what you need to have that critique. It was beautiful and the final product was as well. If you're just now tuning in, you're listening to The Break Room. I'm Melissa Wessel, communications director for the city of Saint Augustine. And I have with you this week Doctor Ann Browning Masters. She is our city poet laureate. And after talking about all of your inspirations and what motivates you inspires you, you do have a poem to read for us, and as when you do these publicly for us, you give us a little back story. So I'm going to pass it over to you to give us the back story of the poem that you've decided to share with us today.

Ann Browning Masters:

OK, Minorcans have an affiliation with datil Peppers and if you live in Saint Augustine and go into any restaurants you may have seen Minorcan food or Datil pepper infused foods. There are some myths about the datil pepper, such as the Minorca and brought with them from Minorca which I visited there four times. They do not have datil peppers and they think you're crazy because datil in Minorcan Minorca, that dialect of Catalan is date, so there are no date Peppers in Menorca. So there's one thing. But very much associated with this group

in cooking, and I too, you know, we've had our Peppers out in the backyard, that kind of thing, so. This is *The Saint Augustine Minorcan Litmus Test* to see where you are with that, which I'm sure everyone in this room can pass. Right now, OK. Did we bring datil peppers from Menorca? Did we bring down Peppers from New Smyrna? Did we find datil peppers locked in the Fort? None of this matters, unless. You are Minorcan. The Saint Augustine Minorcan litmus test. Begins with the green and orange beauties that you grow in five-gallon pickle buckets. Unless your parents or in-laws give you a handful. Put gloves on your Mediterranean hands, for you are about to slice Hellfire cousin from a two-inch pepper guaranteed to burn you up alive with those innocent white seeds. Throw those seeds away and chop up that pepper. Sprinkle that flaming dice on some fine perlot. And if you don't have perlot, use beans and rice. And if you don't have beans and rice, are you Minorcan but I digress. Now take a bite. Eat it all. Can you still talk? Do you want the garden hose? If you like what you ate, if you would eat more. We will then call you a good Minorcan.

Melissa Wissel:

And that's the and that was your poem entitled.

Ann Browning Masters:

*The Saint Augustine Minorcan Litmus Test.*

Melissa Wissel:

Do we know where the I'm going to sound like I don't know this. I don't. I did always thought it came from somewhere or the datil peppers from here then.

Ann Browning Masters:

A University of Florida retired botanist has says that he has traced them to South America. So, I am where he was at that point years ago when I talked with him. It was unknown if they were indigenous from South America or if they arrived from the slave trade. So that's probably been figured out by now, but I haven't gone back to check. But it definitely did not spring out in Saint Augustine. So, and definitely it's a great source of amusement when you ask them about it.

Melissa Wissel:

I was going to say we won't let everybody here be, you know, we don't want to change everything about where they come from because a lot of people would have. To change the labels on their products, probably, so.

Ann Browning Masters:

Very, very true.

Melissa Wissel:

We're just going to ride with that well and it's been a pleasure having you and I enjoy, we're going to have another year and a half ish to work together. So we look forward to seeing you at our events. We look forward to seeing your work around the community, the Minorcan festival and any of the other poet fest things that you're involved with. And as you represent the City of Saint Augustine.

Ann Browning Masters:

Thank you very much. This.

Melissa Wissel:

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Narrator:

You've been listening to The Break Room, a weekly program addressing projects and programs offered by the City of Saint Augustine. Join us each week as the city's communications director, Melissa Wissel, has in-depth conversations with the people who make our town work to meet the needs of our community. See you at this time next week for another edition of The Break Room.