

Meet Arizona's first state poet laureate  
**(COLD OPEN)**

***Aberlto Rios:** We are at the far edge of all time – by our own  
measures,  
The farthest forward we as human beings have ever gone.*

*We are citizens of a place centuries and seconds old,  
This desert, which was a desert before names, this Arizona. [00:23]*

**(FADE OUT)**

**{SHOW MUSIC STARTS}**

**KAILA:** WELCOME TO VALLEY 101, A PODCAST FROM *THE ARIZONA REPUBLIC* AND *AZCENTRAL.COM* WHERE *WE* ANSWER THE QUESTIONS YOU ASK ABOUT METRO PHOENIX. I'm your host, Kaila White.

{PAUSE}

**Kaila:** That poem you just heard at the top of the episode was written by Alberto Rios, Arizona's first state poet laureate. At the end of last year the Republic asked Alberto to write a poem to welcome in the new year, 2020.

I first met Alberto Rios a decade ago when I was a student studying journalism and creative writing at Arizona State University. I was so excited to meet him. And that excitement carried on years later, when I sat down with Alberto to learn more about him. I wanted to find out how Arizona shaped his career and what it meant to him to be our state's first poet laureate. And I'm excited to share that story with you now.

So let's dive in.

**{Outcue show music}**

**Kaila:** Alberto Rio's road to poetry was a long one, starting when he was a child.

**Alberto:** [00:01:55] I was born in Nogales, Arizona, on the border between Arizona and Mexico. That border became a very important figuration in my life. It was a big part of how I grew up.  
[00:02:06] [11.4]

**Kaila:** ~~Throughout his life~~ he quickly realized he lived in the middle of two worlds. His father was from Mexico and his mother was from England. Spanish was his first language and it wasn't until he went to school that English started to become a primary language for him.

**Alberto:** [00:05:44] one of the first things we were told when we got to first grade was you can't speak Spanish in here. [00:05:49][5.6]

**Alberto:** [00:05:51] And so we all looked at each other and somebody raised their hand and said, oh, seguro que si. Of course, we can just listen. Teacher says that what I mean, you are you are not to speak Spanish. [00:06:01][10.5]

[16.0]

**(cue music)**

**Kaila:** As a young boy, he was confused by his inability to speak Spanish in school. It made him feel anxious, even though as a poet, knowing two languages would later open up a bigger world for him.

**Alberto:** [00:03:14] if I hold a pen in my hand and I can only call it a pen, I'm done with it. I own it. I mean, that's it. I can move on. But if in that moment, however much of a millisecond it is, if I also have to think, well, I know that it's called a pluma , what am I going to say when asked [00:03:34][20.0]

**Kaila:** He began school in the late 1950s. While in school, he was a good student who could quickly finish his classwork.

**Alberto:** [00:11:57] I could finish it sooner. And so I was left to my own devices, in essence. [00:12:03][5.3]

**Alberto:** [00:12:04] And I would look out the windows. And the crime I committed, of course, was daydreaming. [00:12:12][8.5]

[13.8]

**(outcue music)**

**Kaila:** His second grade teacher caught him daydreaming. So much so that she called in his parents to the school.

**Alberto:** [00:12:28] they went to the school and they sat in the front seats, which were little, little second graders seats. I'll always remember that. And I was sitting in the back so I could hear all this, which was even funnier. And the teacher, Miss Lee, said, my

parents said, what's he doing? Is he done something wrong? You know, we'll we'll take care of it. [00:12:48][20.0]]

**Kaila:** She said oh no he's a good student, gets his work done but he's daydreaming in class.

**Alberto:** [00:13:01] And my parents looked at her. Daydreaming and she said daydreaming. And they looked at each other and they looked back at her daydreaming. And she said daydreaming as if that said it. All right. And and so they kind of are looking at each other. They said, OK, we'll take care of it. [00:13:22][20.8]

**Kaila:** On the ride home, second-grade Alberto awaited some type of punishment. He thought, oh no I won't get dinner, but dinner came.

**Alberto:** [00:14:33] And so I thought, oh, no, Laurel and Hardy, my parents, they let me watch Laura Hardy. Oh, no, I'm going to get a talking to before bed and and have nightmares. [00:14:42][9.0]

**Alberto:** [00:14:44] And nighttime came. Went to bed. My parents never brought this up again. [00:14:52][8.1]

[17.1]

**Kaila:** According to Alberto, his parents weren't big talkers. As that little boy he realized they didn't punish him because there wasn't any punishment to give.

**Alberto:** [00:15:20] This is just for you to work out and to understand that you. You're OK. And I mean, it would have helped had they told me that, of course they didn't. [00:15:33][12.5]

**Alberto:** [00:15:33] They just literally said nothing. And left it to me. And I think that was in many ways the beginning of my writing [00:15:43][9.7]

[22.3]

**Kaila:** He realized he had to do something other than daydream in class. That's when he turned to the back of his notebook. As a kid, he saw it as doing something bad because you would only turn to the back of a notebook to rip paper out to make a spit wad or write a note to pass to a classmate. Instead he was doing something different...

**Alberto:** [00:17:54] So to write in the back of the notebook, I have to say, we don't have this sensibility anymore as adults. But it took my breath away to do something. First of all, nobody was telling me

to do. You forget you're you're a kid. Everybody's telling you what to do. And and to just write things. But also the far end of that, that was difficult with no one to show them to. [00:18:20][25.9]

**Kaila:** And so he wrote all through junior high and high school. It took him a long time to really understand why he was writing. He wasn't doing it for school work, or to make someone like him.

**Alberto:** [00:19:33] . And it didn't look like anything I was writing. Words that were new to me. And then that became phrases that I liked, just like the way they went together, that became sentences and that later became poems. Really? Or what? Or at least poems. Stuff. [00:19:47][14.3]

**Kaila:** He showed no one what he was doing. Not his parents, not his friends, and not even his teachers.

**Alberto:** [00:20:50] and what I came to see is that's what in so many ways made me a writer. I was doing it for nobody else except me. [00:21:00][9.5]

**Alberto:** [00:21:08] It just stopped me. These words, these moments, these these whatever they were, and the backs of my notebooks started to get longer than the fronts of my notebooks. And that was the beginning of of writing for me. It was very personal, inexplicable. And as I said earlier, powerful feeling to me. [00:21:30][22.4]

**Kaila:** He went on to get writing degrees from the University of Arizona. He published collections of his poems. In 1982, he started teaching at Arizona State University.

[\(cue music here\)](#)

**Kaila:** Over his career, he wrote about many topics using both languages, Spanish and English. He also drew inspiration from Arizona and the Sonoran Desert.

**Alberto:** [00:25:51] *And so it is a big, immense act of the imagination that me, as a writer, I get to start filling in in ways different from how things have been filled in before me. There's still room for me. There's still room for what I'm thinking. There's still room for all of that* [00:26:10][19.3]

**Alberto:** [00:26:37] And it was a caution to me and to anybody who lives in it to say, you better listen. Right. The desert has more to

say than you are hearing. And I've always taken that to heart  
[00:26:51][14.0]

**Kaila:** His connection to the border also shaped his writing.

**Alberto:** [00:24:49] *And so, yeah, growing up on the border and in Arizona, all of those things, difficult as they might seem to an outsider, were the stuff of my stability, were the stuff of growing up in a poetic sensibility.* [00:25:03][14.0]

**Kaila:** He took his experiences and observations and created poems.

**(outcue music)**

**Kaila:** I asked him what the most memorable moment in his career was and he pointed to this...

**Alberto:** [00:34:21] Several years ago, Janet Napolitano asked if I would write a poem for the impending visit of Presidente Vicente Fox of Mexico. I wrote that and I read it in front of it. We had a lot of fun [00:34:32][11.2]

**(fade out) (fade in reading of that poem..)**

Juntos,

Demos vuelta al mapa hasta que veamos claramente:  
La frontera es lo que nos une,  
No lo que nos separa.

Together,  
Let us turn the map until we see clearly:  
The border is what joins us,  
Not what separates us.

**(fade back out)**

**Alberto:** [00:34:32] that poem. Is now on the wall at the border entry port of call in Nogales at the Mariposa entry. And when I was growing up, there was a little William Carlos Williams poem, way to the side at the border. And I used to see it. And it was all kind of, you know, Vines had crawled over it. Nobody ever really looked at it. And I don't even know which poem it was. Honestly, I probably could still find it, but I was always struck that there was something more than a plaque, that there were words. Right. And now to be able to

participate in who I was as a child by doing this as an adult and having that poem, that however many bajillion people see it every day is quite an honor. [00:35:15][43.1]

**Kaila:** In 2012, Governor Jan Brewer signed a senate bill to create the position of a state poet laureate as a way to celebrate the state centennial. After a year of deliberation within a special committee, Alberto Rios was unanimously chosen.

**Kaila:** So what exactly does a poet laureate do? According to the bill, they must do four public readings a year and visit both urban and rural areas. They also are supposed to do outreach to communities that might not otherwise be exposed to poetry.

[\(cue music here\)](#)

**Kaila:** Alberto wanted to make sure he served the community in *his* way.

**Alberto:** [00:28:44] I've called my tenure all these years as the poetry of a thousand encounters. I want to do a thousand little things every day, all the time. Everywhere I go, everything I say. That's what the where the poet laureate needs to be. Not in a big event that's neon and closes up in as a one off kind of deal. That's what's been important to me, is to live the life, not perform the role. Oh, I've got to remember that. That's good. [00:29:16][31.7]

**Alberto:** [00:29:50] But one of the great things is I could have gone to, let's say, an elementary school the week before I was poet laureate. It was just me. [00:29:55][5.4]

**Alberto:** [00:29:58] After I was poet laureate, then it's the poet laureate coming. [00:30:01][3.2]

[8.6]

**Kaila:** He realized holding that title, he could make even more of an impact to share poetry to more people. Not only is he an Arizona figurehead, but he has received the Walt Whitman Award for Poetry. He won the Latino Literary Hall of Fame Award for his memoir Capirotada (ka-pee-ro-ta-da).

*(Kaila, can you write here more of a personal note about what he has meant for humanities in arizona)* But apart from the titles and awards, what I appreciate about Alberto is his clear passion for poetry and for Arizona. His words capture Arizona's quintessential nature, and make me see this state I love so much in new ways.

*(fade back in Copper and Oranges poem)*

**Alberto Rios:** [03:36] Let us move forward on purpose with purpose,  
Knowing we come from, and have learned from, today.  
Good night, and good morning. [03:42]

**{cue MUSIC STARTS}**

**Kaila:** As you can tell, Alberto is a captivating speaker. I so deeply enjoyed talking to him and I'm glad I got to share that conversation with you today. If you want to check out his poetry I'd recommend just that - listening to him perform it. You can find many videos on YouTube of him performing for poets.org, poetry festivals and more.

**Kaila:** Well, that's it for today. Audio you heard in this episode was from the University of Arizona Poetry Center. Thank you to Maritza Dominguez for writing and producing this episode.

If you have more questions about how metro Phoenix is changing, or if there are other Arizona artists or writers you would like to learn about, submit them to us at [valley101.azcentral.com](http://valley101.azcentral.com). And if you're a new listener, remember you can go back and listen to old episodes. Let us know what you think by leaving us a rating or review on your podcast-listening app. As always, thank you for listening to Valley 101, a podcast from *The Arizona Republic* and [azcentral.com](http://azcentral.com). See you next week.