

NORMAN POET'S MANUSCRIPT SURVIVES, WINS STATE AWARD

BY TAMI ALTHOFF

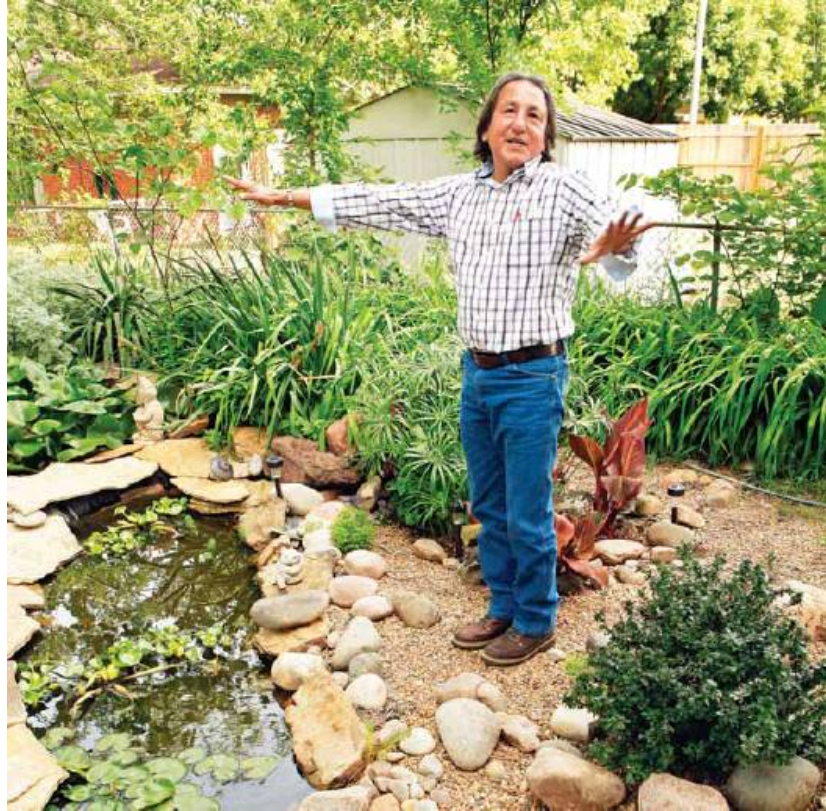
For The Oklahoman

NORMAN — A poet and visual artist, Joe Dale Tate Nevaquaya has spent most of his life recording reactions to the world around him. He never thought that outward expression would lead to a 2012 Oklahoma Book Award for Poetry for “Leaving Holes and Selected New Writings,” a collection of works he wrote decades ago that was published last year by Mongrel Empire Press.

In 1992, “Leaving Holes” was co-winner of the Native Writers’ Circle First Book Award for Poetry. Due to the closure of the small press that agreed to publish the manuscript, there was a 19-year lapse between the book’s award and its publication.

“I don’t really talk about my work that much,” Nevaquaya said. “The original manuscript was written almost 20 years ago, and prior to that, I destroyed a whole volume of my work from my childhood and teen years.”

Between the time “Leaving Holes” won the award in 1992 until it was published last year, he considered destroying it also. It was a singular



Award-winning poet Joe Dale Tate Nevaquaya walks through a garden in his backyard.

PHOTO BY STEVE SISNEY, THE OKLAHOMAN

manuscript. After the company that had agreed to publish it went under, the manuscript was lost. Nevaquaya spent years trying to track it down.

"It had gone to New York. By the time I got it back 10 to 12 years later, it was in Chicago. I thought maybe it wasn't meant to be published," he said. "I debated destroying it or sticking it in a trunk for my grandson or whoever. Even now I'm unsure of the work."

Sources of richness

Many would argue those insecurities are unfounded.

"It is time to celebrate the arrival of these poems, acknowledge the visions and give them their place in the circle," poet and performer Joy Harjo wrote in a review of the book.

Rilla Askew, author of "Harp-song," said, "'Leaving Holes' is a work of breathtaking richness."

Nevaquaya, who now lives in Norman, spent his childhood years in Bristow and on skid row in Oklahoma City. With tribal affiliations to the Yuchi and Comanche tribes of Oklahoma, Nevaquaya writes about

poverty, pain and his decision to make a life for himself despite the obstacles he encountered.

"I've been writing ever since I was a kid. It wasn't discouraged," Nevaquaya said. "I came from a home where English wasn't our first language. Every time we stepped out of our front door, there was another language and culture we had to understand and coexist with. We were very poor. We had to be active and participate in our lives."

"That's where I saw the tragic beauty that was our lives. It was horrible and beautiful at the same time."

An important theme in Nevaquaya's poetry is his great respect for women, as he writes about in "For the Grandmothers."

"It's always been about love and honor," he said. "It harkens back to what some of our ancestors did for us."

Encouraging others

Nevaquaya said he doesn't think of himself as an American Indian po-

et or an American Indian contemporary artist. He thinks of his poetry as messages from himself to himself.

"I just am," he said. "Everyone's got a creative bent. It's up to the individual to announce ourselves and reflect on our existence and, hopefully, contribute something."

Nevaquaya said he tries to encourage that each day during his job as a resource teacher at Norman's alternative school.

"One of my goals is to get children to participate in their own lives," he said. "I'm really excited for the young people. It's fun seeing them go through their struggles and finding their way. If I can ease that a little bit, then I've helped."

Working on new poetry

Currently, Nevaquaya is working on a new body of poetry.

"I'm not hesitating about this one," he said. "I'm doing it for my family."

He said the collection should be complete by next year.