

Carlos Contreras

With Cynthia Baughman & Shelley Thompson



Photograph by Barry McCormick

Carlos Contreras is a twenty-six-year-old poet who competed on the team that brought the National Poetry Slam Championship home to his native Albuquerque. His many other awards include the New Mexico Hispanic Entertainers Award for Poet of the Year in 2007. As a high school student, Carlos was accepted into the Voces program at the National Hispanic Cultural Center, a month-long workshop in poetry composition and performance. The next year he returned as an intern and mentor. Today, with a degree in English and Sociology from the University of New Mexico, he is the lead coordinator of the program. He has published poems in several anthologies, and a book, *A Man in Pieces: Poems for My Father*. Contreras performs solo and in groups around the state and the nation. *El Palacio* commissioned him to tour the New Mexico History Museum/Palace of the Governors and compose a poem in response to the trip, and to talk with us about his life in poetry. (Carlos's poem begins on page 28; view his performance of the poem at elpalacio.org.)

El Palacio: When did you first get interested in poetry?

Contreras: My interest in writing began at a young age. In fact, I remember writing before I could spell. I used to have a little composition notebook, and in it I would write out random combinations of letters, and then ask my mom or dad, "What does that spell?" Their response was often, "nothing jito," but years went on, and soon I was having them read short stories. I was always drawn to making things rhyme. I was a lover of music at a young age – primarily RAP music – I loved the way words were put together, and the musicality created by the human voice; as my skills developed I began to write rhyming poems. It wasn't until high school that I found performance poetry, or Slam. I was a student at Menaul School. I took an extracurricular course during a section of the year they called "E-term." Our teacher was the school librarian; the topic was performance poetry. A few documentaries and guest presenters later, I was on my way. I was seventeen the year I took the class – that would also be the first year I qualified for an adult slam team that left to compete in Seattle, Washington, for the National Poetry Slam Championships.

El Palacio: What prompted you to start performing?

Contreras: My initial inspiration and influences were local poets. Most notable was the in-class performance at Menaul School by Kenn Rodriguez. Kenn is now the city slammaster for Albuquerque. Back then, some nine years ago, he was a Slam poet taking school gigs wherever they came. I saw Kenn perform and was hooked. The first reading I attended was an open mic that featured works by Danny Solis. I got up on stage, froze about half way through, and had to start over. I still consider it one of my best performances; had I not finished my poem, I might never have gotten on a stage again. I always tell young people, "It's like riding a bike; if you fall off, don't give up on riding, get back on, expect to fall again, and if you don't, be proud of yourself!"

El Palacio: Were you shy as a kid or have you always been an extrovert?

Contreras: I've always been a talker. When I was little my brothers and parents would offer me money if I could just be quiet for a few minutes. I was more interested in their attention

than their cash though; I never won their challenges. I've channeled that energy into trying to encourage others to be social, outside the box, and comfortable speaking up in the world – without a voice in this world, people get swallowed up.

El Palacio: Can you define “Slam poetry” for us?

Contreras: Slam is the competitive art of spoken word. Anyone that reads poetry on a stage can be a Slam poet – they just have to be willing to have a number applied to their performance directly after. Slam started in the late 80's in Chicago, created by a man named Marc Smith. He was a construction worker, looking for regular Joes to have a buy-in when it came to poetry. So he created a competition, since everyone likes to see people win and lose. Slam is a competition in which five judges are selected at random, the poet is given three minutes and nine seconds, and there must be no props, music, or plagiarism. The rest is up to the performer. At the end of the piece, judges score it from zero to ten. The high and low scores are dropped, the middle three are kept as the poet's score for the round. Most Slams are three rounds, with the lowest scorer(s) from each round sitting down, and the high scorers moving on.

El Palacio: Do you think the competition is good for the creative process?

Contreras: Yes! There is always this argument that Slam and the competition it encourages have a negative effect on writers and writing, but the fact of the matter is, when “page poets” submit for publication, they are competing just the same. They may not see the score cards immediately, but they are getting a thumbs up or a thumbs down.

El Palacio: What are the advantages of performance poetry versus poetry written primarily for print?

Contreras: First, allow me to say that I respect poetry in all forms, page, stage, or otherwise. One advantage of performance poetry is that there is less room for confusion. When someone is speaking clearly, directly, and in person, the poetry is often more easily understood. Performance poetry often gets the label of “being real.” I'll take that as a compliment any day.

El Palacio: Do you think that print publication diminishes your work?

Contreras: I love to see my work in print, although sometimes publication makes it clear to me that I still have many things to learn when it comes to writing for the page. I would like to have a book of work published by a major commercial or independent press one day.

El Palacio: What other poets, writers, artists, or musicians have inspired you?

Contreras: I'll go from most relevant and local to more wide reaching. Poets who inspire me: Hakim Bellamy, Aaron Cuffee, Jasmine Cuffee, Damien Flores, Kenn Rodriguez, Joe Romero, Esme Vandrager, Jessica Lopez, James Altamirano, Levi Romero, and Faustino Villa to just name a few, and guess what, they all live in Albuquerque! Musicians that inspire me: Bob Marley, Brother Ali, Talib Kweli, Lauryn Hill, Invincible, Eminem, Santana, Everlast, La Junta, Diles, Patch, Jungle, and the list goes on.... Most influential initial inspiration: Slam poet Saul Williams. Notable Teachers: Dr. Fenni Coleman, Levi Romero, and Mr. Lucero, my twelfth grade English teacher.

El Palacio: Where else do you find inspiration?

Contreras: I am a regular working Joe, nine-to-five kind of guy, and inspiration is everywhere. I write about life experience, the reality of life, the ugliness of life, and the sometimes happy moments. I find inspiration in waking up and starting my truck for work. I look at the world through the lens of a poet twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. I might not write every day but every second I am on this earth is a second I am soaking up material for possible work to come.

El Palacio: How do you choose topics?

Contreras: I often sit down and just see where my fingers on the keyboard lead me. I rarely sit down and say, “I'm going to write about.....” I usually just sit down and write, then try and work with whatever came out. Sometimes it doesn't always work out, but more often than not, it's something I will work with sooner or later. Often I have between five and a dozen poems all being worked on at the same time.



Placitas photographer **Barry McCormick** created this portrait of Carlos Contreras by projecting one of his poems onto his face.

El Palacio: Are all of your poems autobiographical or do you create characters?

I love to write about the self. I often write pieces that are partially autobiographical and partially fiction. I love character sketches and things that make people think about the human condition. You catch pieces of my life in a lot of my poems, and fictional information as well. My work tends to be a mix of the real, and the created – I just let you try and figure out what is what, on your own.

El Palacio: How do you decide how personal to be?

Contreras: Writing for me is therapy. Sometimes one has to hurt in order to be able to heal, therefore, I rarely hold back. I expose whatever it is I want to, and worry about it later. I draw no lines with my work, and will never do so: the reality of life is what is attractive to many about the work that I do. And unless I can be real, and vulnerable, I will never get the populations I work with as a teacher to trust me or themselves enough to open up and be honest with themselves and the rest of the world.

El Palacio: When did you start teaching?

Contreras: I started teaching as a teacher of record on an Intern License last year. However, with teaching being a loose term, and with the work in the community and school around the state that I have done, I guess you could say I started teaching nine years ago. I started doing workshops in schools at the age of seventeen. I actually remember on a couple of occasions, calling in sick to classes at my own school, to go do writing workshops at another (I had an awesome mom). I have been teaching high school classes to primarily adult incarcerated, and post-incarceration populations since fall of last year.

El Palacio: Tell us about your work with prisoners.

Contreras: My job came about in a funny way. I was bussing tables at a local restaurant, Flying Star, when I ran into an old boss of mine, Greta Roskom. Greta and I got to talking about a new opportunity she'd been given, to run and staff Gordon Bernell Charter School, which was soon to open. I immediately went home, emailed her, and asked to be interviewed. The rest is history. Entering the Metropolitan Detention Center was like a dream come true. I have always been fascinated by the results of incarceration and now I was going to get to work first hand with those individuals, in hopes of making a difference. I was mainly support staff for the first year, however, I was given the go-ahead to conduct open mics, and bring in guest poets. Over the past two years, we have had world-renowned artists in the pods of MDC. I have worked with numerous groups of inmates on writing narrative poems. I have witnessed many individuals confront the demons that put them behind bars. I have seen the good, the bad, and the ugly when it comes to poetry; I have been blessed to be given a window into a population that many forget about. Sixty-five percent of those behind bars have children and lack a high school diploma--if we do not show those adults the importance of an education, how, upon release, do we expect them to translate that same important message to their children?

El Palacio: When *El Palacio* attended a performance by your Voces students, we were struck by the encouragement and support that the students showed each other. How do you foster that atmosphere?

Contreras: The first point I make about Voces, on the first day of June, at the National Hispanic Cultural Center, is that it is a safe place. The Voces program should be a place where young writers come to stretch, grow, and challenge themselves and

each other, so I reinforce that the space we share is a safe and supportive place, and that everyone needs to foster such an attitude and working condition. The kids love to be there, so really, it doesn't take a lot of work, just a little encouragement and checking in from time to time.

El Palacio: We were also struck by the range of material the students presented--from funny and lighthearted to wrenching personal tragedies. How do you coach young students on composing and presenting stories about such terrible situations as having a drug-addicted parent?

Contreras: I seldom coach for content – meaning, rarely do I tell students exactly what and how to write about something. Students get multiple ideas from which to begin pieces of writing, and they decide what to refine, edit, rewrite, or throw out. We often see writing that never arose from assigned prompts, but instead, grew from ideas the students came up with on their own. Sometimes these ideas are heavy-hearted subjects that needed to come out. What I do is prepare writers to welcome and run with any idea, if and when it comes.

El Palacio: What is your most popular poem, or your favorite to perform?

Contreras: My most popular poem right now would probably be a poem I call “These People.” It is a character sketch piece. It introduces five different characters, some of whom are real, some of whom are fictional (I let the crowd try and figure that out). It is theatrical in its delivery, and usually is a crowd pleaser. It is a poem that I can really perform the socks off of, “go over the top,” so to speak. The poem(s) I like most are those I've written about my father over the years. My father is a Vietnam Veteran, and former Marine. He suffers from post-traumatic stress syndrome. I write a lot about his struggles with PTSD, and what it did to us as a family over the years. I love to perform this kind of work – it is the closest to my heart, and tells what is most important to me: family.

El Palacio: Would you rather publish in *The New Yorker* or have a YouTube hit?

Contreras: I love YouTube, however, I have to say I would much rather be published in *The New Yorker*. Being seen on YouTube doesn't pay my bills – and don't get me wrong I am not all about money, but the easier I can pay my bills, the sooner I'm touring year-round, sharing my gift with countless individuals, paid or pro-bono. That is what I am working towards. ■