Road-Tripping With California’s Poet Laureate (Who Helped Invent The Jello Jiggler!)

I’ve met Gioia on several occasions, but when I asked to come along on one of his trips to see what life on the road with a professional poet was like, I didn’t think he’d say yes.

He did.

And the next thing I knew he drove his 10-year-old Lexus sedan into the KPCC/LAist parking lot, and was helping me put my stuff in the trunk on the way to a reading in Santa Barbara.

The first thing I noticed is that he doesn’t seem to have Google Maps or digital navigation telling him where to go. He was also unamused by my attempts to use map apps on my phone.

“If I can’t find the 101, I have no business being California’s poet laureate,” he said.

He’s got a point. Gioia’s about as Californian as they come. He was born in Hawthorne, went to high school in Gardena, moved up the coast to attend college at Stanford, and now splits his time between Sonoma County, where he lives, and Los Angeles, where he teaches at USC.

He has spent time away from the Golden State, like when he got his masters in comparative literature at Harvard or when he was a business executive at General Foods who helped invent beloved Jello products. He also chaired the National Endowment for the Arts from 2003-09.

While chairing the NEA, Gioia championed Poetry Out Loud, a poetry...
competition for teens. Since then, he’s made an effort to feature the poetry of youth at his readings. I asked him if there’d be a Poetry Out Loud participant in Santa Barbara. He said no, so I asked him what his plan was for the evening.

“Well,” he began. “I hate to say this on the radio, but I almost never plan what I’m going to read until I see the audience. And in this case, I’ve invited all of the current and all of the previous Santa Barbara laureates to read with me, and so I’ll wait to see how the reading goes up ’til that point, and if people need funny poems, maybe I’ll do some funny poems.”

I’d never heard him perform a funny poem, and by this point, I’d heard him recite a lot of poems — including a dark reflection on the people of Los Angeles (“Pity the Beautiful”), a ballad about the life and death of his great-grandfather (“The Ballad of Jesus Ortiz”), and a message to his first son, whom he lost to sudden infant death syndrome (“Majority”).

But, as if on cue, he recited a funny poem he told me his mom enjoyed: “The Panther” by Ogden Nash.

“The panther is like a leopard, Except it hasn’t been peppered. Should you behold a panther crouch, Prepare to say Ouch.
Better yet, if called by a panther, Don’t anther.”

The winding road that led Gioia to become poet laureate actually started with his mother, a working class Mexican woman who loved poetry but didn’t have a lot of formal education (he, on the other hand, has a B.A. and an M.B.A. from Stanford and an M.A. from Harvard).

It’s probably why some of his favorite moments on his two-year journey around the 58 counties of California don’t feature poets per se — at least, not academic ones — but everyday folks.

“I think I’ve had the best question on the tour asked by a farmer. And he said, ‘I’ve never been to a poetry reading before, and I didn’t think I’d like it, but I really liked it,’” Gioia remembered.

And then the farmer, who came to Gioia’s Madera County reading, asked him: “Can someone without much education write poetry?”

“That’s such a brilliant and important question, and I would never get asked that question at Berkeley or Stanford or Cornell,” he said.

It’s not surprising to me that after over 120 readings, moments like this one stick with Gioia. After all, they reflect his cultural mission, “to enlarge the conversation to include as many people as possible.”

“The Panther” is Ogden Nash.

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Poets laureate, appointed by the governor, are supposed to do just that: make poetry accessible to everyday Californians.

As his time as poet laureate comes to a close, how does he think he did? “You mostly fail,” he admitted. “You speak to a hundred high school kids, 90 of them may not care or they’re politely interested, and that’s okay! If you can reach one or two kids, help clarify their existence ... maybe a couple of others you get to take their English classes or school more seriously ... That is a huge victory.”

Once he’s done, Gioia said he hopes to return to writing. It’s been tough to write while on the road constantly.

“Driving is not the best place to write poems, and that’s not only for safety reasons, but you’re distracted driving,” he explained as he drove. “But what I have gained from driving thousands of miles across the backroads of California are thousands of images, of memories, of places, of people, and I’ve already seen that percolate through my poetry.”

The next poet laureate of California has yet to be announced.

You can ride along with KPCC/LAist reporter Carla Javier and California Poet Laureate Dana Gioia by listening to the audio version of this story. It aired on KPCC’s arts and entertainment show, The Frame.