ASU poet: Humanities an essential part of health care

Alberto Ríos heartened by approach to humanities at ASU's John Shufeldt School of Medicine and Medical Engineering

By Scott Bordow, ASU News
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Story highlights

Arizona's inaugural poet laureate Alberto Ríos was a featured guest for a recent ASU Health event on narrative medicine.

Ríos, director of ASU's Virginia G. Piper Center for Creative Writing, believes the humanities are an essential part of health care.

Ríos shared story about how poetry made a difference for people in palliative care.

Alberto Ríos had a story to tell.

Ríos, Arizona's inaugural poet laureate and director of Arizona State University's Virginia G. Piper Center for Creative Writing, was taking part in a fireside chat as the featured guest for ASU Health's "Narrative Medicine and Impact on Health Outcomes" event, part of the Grand Rounds speaker series.

The event, held last week on ASU's Downtown Phoenix campus, explored how storytelling and the human experience can deepen understanding, strengthen connections and shape health care and patient outcomes.

Ríos sat on the stage next to Kristen Will, associate dean in the John Shufeldt School of Medicine and Medical Engineering. Will asked a question about using poetry as a means of helping patients.

And that's where the story began.

Ríos said that he had worked with palliative patients who had less than six months to live. Everything, he said, was being taken from the patients. Blood, blood pressure, nurses asking questions and needing an answer.

Ríos understood the patients needed to do something constructive. So he and a student he trained would walk into the patient's room with a laptop computer and a portable printer and start talking. Eventually, they'd find a way to get the patient to talk about something that no one in their family knew about.

"It was often in the form of an instant or a fragment. A moment," Ríos said. "We were looking for the magic of the thing this person has carried with them their whole life that never fit into a story."

Following the conversation, the student would write a poem about that moment on a single page of paper, print it out and put it in a frame.

One day, an elderly woman lying in her hospital bed took the frame and handed it to her husband. They read the poem together and began to cry. When they were finished reading, he tried to give the frame back to his wife.

"No, no, no," she said. "This is for you."

The student in the room, Ríos said, had planned to pursue a career in humanities. But she was so touched by the moment she decided right then and there she wanted to become a doctor.

"She looked at the care and the way people respond and what they're going through in a way so different from simply treating them," Ríos said.

"We want to say 'medicine' as if it's one thing, but I see it more as 'medicines.' Every one of us requires a different one. Now, that's an impossible task, but it's the way we need to start thinking. Who are we and what do we need, each, individually?"

Ríos said he's heartened that the Shufeldt School weaves health humanities directly into its degree programs, treating it not as an elective but as a fundamental pillar of training alongside medicine, artificial intelligence and engineering.

He told the story of a cast member — he's not sure who it was — from the British comedy troupe Monty Python. Ríos said the cast member wanted to become a doctor when he was younger, but as he was about to enter medical school, thought to himself that the medicine he would practice already was established, but the kind of comedy he wanted to do was not.

"He said that called on what he felt was the creative side of him," Ríos said. "What I think the Shufeldt School is doing is very different. It's a new way of appealing both to him and to people in general."

Will said the intersection of humanities and medicine should not be considered a one-way street, as in humanities becoming part of the health care curriculum.

“We always (say) that we’re integrating humanities into medicine or health, but really the framework and the lens of what we’re really doing is putting the medicine and healing and care into humanities,” she said.

At the beginning of their fireside chat, Will read a thought piece that Ríos had written for the occasion. It read, in part:

The humanities are a form of medicine, not because they cure us, but because they teach us how to recognize what hurts.

A poem can be an X-ray. It passes through the surface of a life and reveals the hidden break, the old wound, the delicate architecture holding us upright. It does not set the bone or close the incision. What it offers is another kind of healing, the sudden knowledge that our suffering has a shape, that someone else has seen it, and that what was hidden inside us can be brought out into the light.

Medicine becomes a form of the humanities the moment the body becomes somebody. Science can identify the fracture, the tumor, the irregular heart rhythm, but healing requires a reading of the life surrounding the evidence.

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Main image



Arizona’s inaugural poet laureate Alberto Ríos, who also serves as director of ASU’s Virginia G. Piper Center for Creative Writing, was a featured guest for a recent ASU Health event on narrative medicine. The event explored how storytelling and the human experience can deepen understanding, strengthen connections and shape health care and patient outcomes. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News

Text image(s)



Kristen Will (left), associate dean in the John Shufeldt School of Medicine and Medical Engineering at ASU, hosted a fireside chat for ASU Health's Grand Rounds speaker series with University Professor Alberto Ríos (left), Arizona’s inaugural poet laureate and director of the Virginia G. Piper Center for Creative Writing at ASU. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News