BeyondChron
The Voice of the Rest
20 YEARS ANNIVERSARY

Viewers who think writing poetry is a form of intellectual self-pleasure need to be exposed to the work of Alejandro Murguia. The first Latino Poet Laureate of San Francisco uses poetry as a vehicle for attacking or reconsidering the status quo. A grounding in history gives Murguia a foundation for identifying the sociopolitical problems he wishes to challenge with his words.

"Keeper Of The Fire," from directors David L. Brown, Raymond Telles, and Louis Dematteis, provides a good start in recounting the life of this activist poet. The title describes the role a poet plays in a community. The communal songs the poet is attuned to nourish the community's hope and creativity.

Poetry and political activism does not sound as disjointed a union as the casual viewer may think. Pablo Neruda and Federico Garcia Lorca are two in a long historical chain of poets who've fought for political change. Murguia himself probably earned the U.S. federal government's side-eye for openly supporting Nicaragua's Sandinista movement and even organizing Sandinista solidarity committees. Even today, the film's subject still fights the good fight against such local menaces as the Monster in the Mission and tech gentrification of San Francisco.

The key to the link between poetry and political activism, says Murguia, is in poetry's ability to open the personal imagination. Opening the imagination leads to envisioning a better world than the one the current socioeconomic system tries to sell as immutable.

The film offers snippets from such Murguia works as "Silicon City" and "Boy On A Wooden Horse." Read in Murguia's smooth resonant voice, the listener feels as if they're in the presence of truth being uttered.

That feeling of being exposed to honest verbal artistry comes from Murguia's spiritual influences. The poet draws from his personal experiences as well as those of others. A self awareness of his identity and perspective as a Chicano also helps, as does his hatred of overwhelming social injustice.

"Keeper Of The Fire" also touches on some colorful aspects of Murguia's past. His relationships with the City Lights crowd and the famed Nicaraguan poet Ernesto Cardenal get strong mentions. But Brown, Telles, and Dematteis' film plays down its subject's literary celebrity to focus on showing Murguia's affinity for La Mission and the various ways that affinity is manifested.

If this film doesn't succeed in displaying the same amount of passion and commitment Murguia displays in his poems and fiction, at least it respects the poet for the good trouble he continues to stir for La Mission's residents.