New artist-in-residence program at Wake Forest University will honor Maya Angelou

John Newsom
Apr 19, 2021

Poet, writer and civil rights activist Maya Angelou began her relationship with Wake Forest in 1973 when she came to the university for a speaking engagement.

Jemal Countess, Getty Images

John Newsom
Wake Forest University will establish a new artist-in-residence program to honor the late Maya Angelou.

The university announced Monday that the program will bring a celebrated artist — someone who combines achievement in the arts and a commitment to improving the human condition — to campus at a later date to work with students and faculty.

Wake Forest said it will decide on the nomination process in the fall and plans to announce the first recipient of the Maya Angelou Artist-in-Residence Award in early 2022.

“The significance and beauty of this award is that it honors the life and life’s work of my mother while inspiring artists who have demonstrated a powerful commitment to uplifting humanity through exercising virtues she lived by: courage, creativity, hope, tolerance and social activism,” Guy Johnson, Angelou’s son, said in a statement issued by the university. “To honor her legacy, we must look upon ourselves and ask, what are we doing to improve the human condition?”

The university said it’s using a gift from one of its graduates to start the new artist-in-residence program. Wake Forest didn’t identify the donor or disclose the amount.
Wake Forest said a campus committee has worked for the past four months to develop criteria for the award. That group has been assisted by the **Dr. Maya Angelou Foundation**, an organization Angelou created to support educational and health care equity initiatives.

**Angelou** — the poet, writer and civil rights activist who worked with both Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X — began a relationship of more than 40 years with Wake Forest in 1973 when she came to the university for a speaking engagement. Wake Forest awarded her an honorary degree four years later.

In 1982, Angelou was named the university’s first Reynolds Professor of American Studies and held that faculty post until her death in 2014. A Wake Forest residence hall that opened in 2017 was named for Angelou.

Angelou wrote more than 30 books of fiction and poetry. She gained international fame for “I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings,” her autobiographical account of her early life. An actor, screenwriter, playwright and frequent lecturer, Angelou was awarded a National Medal of Arts in 2000 and a Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation’s highest civilian honor, in 2010.

At Wake Forest, she is still remembered as the professor who taught humanities classes that focused on poetry, drama, literature, race, African culture and Shakespeare.

“Dr. Angelou taught students — as she taught her readers worldwide — that artistic expression is at the heart of human courage, renewal and liberation,” Wake Forest Provost Rogan Kersh said in a statement.

“Artists honored with this award bearing her name will reflect that commitment in their work as in their lives. Their engagement with students and other community members will further affirm the ‘wonder-working power’ of the arts, to quote a favored Dr. Angelou phrase, on our campus.”

*Photos: Maya Angelou, April 4, 1928 - May 28, 2014*
Maya Angelou speaks during the National Black Theatre Festival Opening Night Gala on August 3, 2009.

Walt Unks/Journal
Maya Angelou prepares to speak during the Lay My Burden Down Conference at Wake Forest University, October 18, 2013.

Lauren Carroll/Journal
Maya Angelou reacts after a performance by her class in the World Poetry in Dramatic Performance Theatrical Vignette at Wake Forest University, August 9, 2011.

Jennifer Rotenizer/Journal
A crowd snaps photos of Maya Angelou, while she speaks during the 2009 National Black Theatre Festival on Tuesday, August 4, 2009.

Jennifer L. Rotenizer/Journal
Maya Angelou blows kisses to the crowd during her 80th birthday celebration held in Corpening Plaza, April 19, 2008.

Lauren Carroll/Journal
Maya Angelou blows kisses to the crowd as she and Mayor Allen Joines process into Angelou's 80th birthday celebration held in Corpening Plaza, April 19, 2008.

Lauren Carroll/Journal
Maya Angelou speaks at a rally for Barack Obama at the Carolina Theatre in Greensboro, Sept. 18, 2008.

Bruce Chapman/Journal
Sen. Hillary Clinton holds hands with Maya Angelou as they are applauded following their program at Wake Forest University's Wait Chapel, April 18, 2008.

Lauren Carroll/Journal
Maya Angelou laughs with Sen. Hillary Clinton during their program at Wake Forest University's Wait Chapel, April 18, 2008.

Lauren Carroll/Journal
Maya Angelou remembers her friend Larry Leon Hamlin at his funeral at Union Baptist Church June 13, 2007.

Jennifer Rotenizer/Journal
Maya Angelou relates a story regarding her acceptance to a Yugoslavian family party while traveling for a production of "Porgy and Bess" during the Juneteenth Roundtable Dialogue "Race Relations and Bridging the Gap" at the Urban League of Winston-Salem, Thursday June 15, 2006.

Bruce E. Chapman/Journal
Maya Angelou reads her poem "Our Grandmothers" while Serenus T. Church Sr., the pastor at Mount Zion Baptist Church, looks on during the 2012 Mother's Day church service.

Andrew Dye/Journal
From Maya Angelou's 2004 book 'Hallelujah! The Welcome Table,' a collection of memories and recipes.

Dwight Carter/Random House

Scott Martin/Journal

Scott Martin/Journal
Maya Angelou and Oprah Winfrey share a laugh during a party on April 7, 1993 celebrating Angelou's 65th birthday.

Christine Rucker/Journal

Scott Martin/Journal
Maya Angelou speaks at Wake Forest University convocation, Aug. 27, 1991.

David Rolfe/Journal
Maya Angelou speaks at Wake Forest University convocation, Aug. 29, 1991.

David Rolfe/Journal
Maya Angelou from a Nov. 22, 1987 interview with the Winston-Salem Journal.

Allen Aycock/Journal
Maya Angelou in December 1987.

Allen Aycock/Journal
Maya Angelou in June 1986 at the release of her book "All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes".

Cookie Snyder/Journal
Maya Angelou from an Oct 11, 1985 interview.

Charlie Buchanan/Journal
Maya Angelou from an April 7, 1983 interview with the Winston-Salem Journal.

Charlie Buchanan/Journal
Maya Angelou from Dec. 1981.

Wake Forest University

Charlie Buchanan
Maya Angelou in 1977.

Cookie Snyder/Journal
Maya Angelou from a Winston-Salem Journal interview in 1977.

Cookie Snyder/Journal
Guests paused for pictures before going inside for the ribbon-cutting ceremony at Maya Angelou Hall, Wake Forest University's newest residence hall. Named for the late Maya Angelou, the 76,110 square-foot hall is the first residence on campus named for a woman or African-American.

David Rolfe/Journal

Contact John Newsom at (336) 373-7312 and follow @JohnNewsomNR on Twitter.

John Newsom