The annual honor, which is bestowed upon an individual who lives or works in the Windham villages or Willimantic, “They are people who just give their heart and soul to the town,” he said.

Eldridge said he often tells students “giving back to your community” is important.

Life experiences have molded Windham’s new poet laureate

By MICHELLE FIRESTONE
Chronicle Staff Writer

WILLIMANTIC — Eastern Connecticut State University English professor Daniel Donaghy grew up in Kensington, a neighborhood in Philadelphia that wasn’t exactly a poetic locale.

He described his old neighborhood as being a violent place, including stabbings and shootings, as well as drug dealing.

His solace during this troubling time? Poetry.

As the inaugural poet laureate in Windham, Donaghy, the Willington resident officially named to the post Tuesday, said he aims to teach others about the value of writing, listening and reading poetry.

He said he “wouldn’t have gotten where I am today” without finding poetry and hopes he can pay back his teachers by teaching others “that their stories matter, that they matter.”

Donaghy said he was inspired to change his undergraduate major from physics to English after meeting English professor and poet Harry Humes in the early 1990s at Kutztown University in Pennsylvania.

He continues to be a mentor for him.

“Everybody benefits from hearing other people’s stories and also being able to tell your story,” said Donaghy, who was named poet laureate during the Windham Town Hall meeting.

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ing a ceremony at Windham Town Hall Tuesday morning.

The 2017 Romantic Willimantic Cupids — Yolanda Negron and Sandy Reed — were also named during that ceremony.

Cupid, which dates back to 1982, is an annual honor bestowed on an individual who lives or works in the Windham villages or Willimantic for their work in the community.

The town council recently established the poet laureate position, with the intent the individual would promote reading and writing poetry in the community.

Per the resolution approved by the town council, the poet laureate is a one-year, volunteer position and that person will not be compensated or reimbursed for expenses incurred.

The resolution also states the poet laureate cannot charge a fee for performing services as poet laureate.

However, the resolution does not prevent the poet laureate from earning royalties or charging a fee “for his or her literary output in his or her private capacity.”

Donaghy has a doctorate in English literature from the University of Rochester in New York, a master’s degree in creative writing (poetry) from Cornell University in Ithaca, N.Y., a master’s degree in English from Hollins College (now Hollins University), in Roanoke, Va., and a bachelor’s degree in English from Kutztown University.

He is an accomplished poet who has published four collections of poetry, had hundreds of poems published in literary journals and received several awards for his poetry and teaching.

The literary journals he has been published in include the Antioch Review, Notre Dame Review, North American Review, the Southern Review, Prairie Schooner and Poetry Daily.

Donaghy said he plans to visit local schools and work with community groups, sending the message that “everyone has a story.”

“When it all comes together, it could be a really nurturing experience, and that’s what I hope to provide,” he said, referring to his future work as poet laureate.

Donaghy has been teaching poetry at Eastern for 11 years.

“I really like to say that I teach voice classes,” he said.

Donaghy noted you can do a Google search for instructions about how to write a sonnet, a type of poem, for example, but a “poem needs to have a heart and that’s where the voice part of it comes in.”

“Do we really know what our innermost voice sounds like?” he asked.