

Cleveland's writers bloc: Literary organization the Lit provides supportive community for local authors and poets

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Judith Mansour came to the Lit in 2007 as executive director. "We're trying to change the culture from being just a place for writers and poets to also including people who love to read," she said. Writing is a lonely business. There's no way around it: Even in a crowded coffee shop, work, for a writer, involves sitting down to face the blank screen, or the empty page, all alone.

Alone, that is, except for all those pesky anxieties and insecurities that keep knocking on the door, insisting on keeping the writer company.

This isolation makes some writers a little crazy. Franz Kafka, for instance. His jolly description of the writing process could induce even James "The Factory" Patterson to explore other career opportunities.

"Writing," Kafka said, "is utter solitude, the descent into the cold abyss of oneself."

Or how about the recently departed J.D. Salinger, who spent most of his life in isolation in New Hampshire, hiding from the world and (according to his daughter) drinking his own urine?

In Cleveland, where we have some experience with the cold descent into the abyss -- we call it "February" -- writers have an alternative to going Salinger.

They have the Lit, Cleveland's only nonprofit organization dedicated to the literary arts, which provides writers with workshops, classes, showcases, a quarterly magazine and, best of all, a sense of community outside academia.

When writer and Cleveland State University creative writing professor Sheila Schwartz died, her many friends and students crowded into the Lit's center for her memorial. When the new editor of the literary

magazine Granta came to town, the Lit threw a party for him.

And when Neal Chandler retired from the writing faculty at CSU, ending the longstanding public fiction workshop he led, the Lit picked it up and kept it going.

Cleveland already has a de facto community of established and published writers -- Dan Chaon, Paula McLain, Kristin Ohlson, Thrity Umrigar, Sarah Willis and others -- who have ended up living near one another in Cleveland Heights and, often, taking teaching gigs at local universities.

But for the lesser known and emerging writers, the Lit provides both home and school.

Umrigar often finds herself recommending it to less experienced writers. "At readings, I get a lot of queries from writers who want me to read manuscripts and give them advice," she said. "I feel guilty saying no, so it's great to have a forum I trust and respect, so I can suggest, 'Why don't you take this workshop, or this class?' I feel like I'm delivering them into safe hands, and not saying, 'Pay \$2,000 and fly halfway across the country for this workshop.' "

"It's good that Cleveland has this gathering place for writers," said Deena Epstein, program officer of the Gund Foundation, one of several foundations that have supported the Lit over the years. "It's a piece of attracting and reclaiming the creative class here, and it says we value poets and writers."

That public validation is key to Mark Yasenchack, who cried last week when he learned he won the poetry award in the Lit's second annual writing competition (see accompanying box).

"Yeah, that was a real professional high point," Yasenchack said of the tears. But, he said, they came at the end of an especially hard year for all artists, a year of financial uncertainty and the artistic angst that goes with it.

Yasenchack, who has supported himself as a visual and ceramic artist for 20 years, said he undergoes a kind of crisis of faith every year. "For any artist, every year it seems that you question if that's what you're going to do from now on," he said. "It's like it's open to debate."

The award, and the recognition that comes with it, gives him an answer in that internal discussion. "Artists don't get a lot of that recognition, and it came at the right time," he said.

Group defines strategy, raises funds

Founded in 1974 as the Poets League of Greater Cleveland, the Lit has undergone two major changes in its 35-year existence. The first, in 2001, brought the Poets League together with a group called the Writers Center. As the Poets and Writers League of Greater Cleveland, the group moved into a new literary home at Fairhill Center, on the city's East Side, and used a \$50,000 grant from the Cleveland Foundation to launch a capital campaign for the space.

The second period of change, spurred in 2007 by several foundation grants for a strategic reorganization plan, is just coming to fruition.

"We needed to professionalize the board and make it more responsive," said Suzanne DeGaetano, the

AND THE WINNERS ARE

Here are the winners of the Lit's Muse Literary Competition for 2010. For more information on the organization, go to the-lit.org.

Poetry

First place: "Oar," by Mark Yasenchack.

Second place: "Guys With Their Hands in Their Pockets," by Thomas Dukes.

Fiction

First place: "I Am What I Play," by Toni Thayer.

Second place: "Sales Call," by Scott Lax.

Creative Nonfiction

First place: "North Africa," by Heather Bentoske.

Second place: "The Counterfeit Killer," by Amei Wallach.

former board president and a co-owner of Mac's Backs bookstore in Cleveland Heights.

The old board was mostly writers and poets, she said. "Writers don't have any money, and the people we know are other poets and writers who don't have any money either."

DeGaetano said the group's former executive director, Darlene Montonaro, the first paid staff member of the organization, did most of the fundraising. "Some board members helped, but most of us, we couldn't and we didn't. I didn't even understand that's what the board was supposed to do."

"It's a trade-off," said Montonaro, who left three years ago for personal reasons. "A board of artists is a wonderful thing in many ways, because it means that your programming is going to be artistically sound. But I think you need the fundraising and some of the other things board members have to do, too."

The new board includes lawyers, accountants and business people. "We had to move the board toward a different kind of culture," DeGaetano said.

The board hired a new executive director, Judith Mansour, who had been assistant director at the Cleveland Museum of Contemporary Art.

When Mansour arrived in the summer of 2007, she brought a double whammy to the Lit. She has experience in arts administration and fundraising, the lifeblood of the nonprofit world, and she is also a writer.

In 2003, Mansour earned a master's degree in creative writing from Cleveland State University, and she worked for a time as an editor at Northern Ohio Live magazine, which folded last year.

New space, big ambitions

The flurry of changes included a new name -- the Lit -- a new "branding" logo and a new home. At the end of 2007, the Lit moved into a big, open loft space in the Artcraft Building, in the arts district along Superior Avenue on the fringes of downtown Cleveland.

The new space serves as an emblem for the organization's ambitions. "We want to do more, in terms of programming, on a bigger scale," Mansour said.

Attendance at events and classes, she added, has increased by 600 percent since the move. The 35th anniversary celebration last fall, which recognized the founders of the group, drew just over 200 people and raised \$38,000 toward the group's annual budget of \$148,000, about 70 percent of which comes from foundations and other donations.

Most of the events promote the work of local writers, one of the Lit's core missions. The biannual showcase, "Writers and Their Friends," will return Saturday, Sept. 11, at the Ohio Theatre in PlayhouseSquare, but with a new name and format.

Meanwhile, the Lit holds readings, discussion groups and book signings for authors like Dan Chaon, who last fall did a signing of his latest book, "Await Your Reply," and Thrity Umrigar, who did a signing last month for her book "The Weight of Heaven."

"They're very good at boosting writers," Umrigar said. "You always feel supported."

Somewhat counterintuitively, the Lit is aiming to grow by offering fewer classes. DeGaetano said the old schedule offered as many as 30 classes a quarter -- many of which did not attract enough students to go forward. By contrast, the spring 2010 schedule, which starts in April, has just four classes, plus the ongoing fiction and poetry workshops held once a month.

Classes, which will be announced closer to April on the Lit's Web site (the-lit.org) range from \$55 to

\$225, depending on how often they meet.

Classes are the gateway to membership in the Lit for many, including John Stickney, who started taking classes and workshops about 27 years ago.

"I started taking these workshops, and I found a community of writers I hadn't known existed before," said Stickney, who retired as a special agent for the U.S. Treasury Department last year. "I had felt kind of isolated, and I got the feeling that everyone felt isolated. This was a lifeline for all of us."