

EVENT TITLE:

It was the Best/Worst of Times: Launching a Youth Literary Arts Org in 2020

Event Description:

The art and activism of young people flourished despite 2020's political, social justice, civil rights and health crises. In media res, the BreakBread Literacy Project launched a national youth arts organization: publishing *BreakBread Magazine* and providing free creative writing classes, events and literary apprenticeships for creatives age 14-24. Project founders will discuss the ups, downs, lessons learned and future of a literary org that seeks to change the face of publishing.

Event Category:

Publishing, Editing and Technology

Event Organizer:

Jamie Lyn Smith

Moderator:

Jamie Logan

Jamie Danielle Logan holds a BA from Tulane University (English & Classical Studies) and an MFA from the University of Memphis (Creative Writing). She has served as Managing Editor at *The Pinch* and *Product* magazines and now does so at *BreakBread*. She is pursuing a PhD at the University of Southern Mississippi and is Associate Editor for the *Mississippi Review*. She has published in the *New Ohio Review*, *Palette Poetry*, and elsewhere.

Event Participants:

W. David Hall teaches English at Valley International Preparatory High School in Chatsworth, CA. Most recently, he retired from a 20-year stint as on-site director of the Kenyon Young Writers Program, but he still keeps tabs on the place. His work can be seen in the *Kenyon Review*, *Callaloo*, and *After The Pause*. "Prince Valiant Works the Black Seam," first published in *Callaloo*, was also published in *The Best African American Fiction 2010*. He has written a textbook for writing called *Culture In Context: A Basic Writing Guide with Readings* (Pearson, 2003). He is also CEO of BreakBread Literacy Project, a recently created literacy non-profit dedicated to bringing forth high school and college voices that aren't often at the forefront. When not writing or teaching, he lives in the Marvel Universe and is learning the fine art of living every day to its fullest from his wife.

Cara Echols is an artist, writer and graphic designer. She serves as Art Director and Leadership member for BreadBread Literacy Project. Cara enjoys writing experimental and speculative literature

and is currently working on her indie magazine *CompoSe Art Magazine*, as well as a short story collection which has yet to be formally titled.

Charlie J. Eskew is an author from Columbus, OH. His novel *Tales of the Astonishing Black Spark* was a winner of the Foreword Indies Multi-Cultural prize. He has also written a novella, *When The Light Lay Still*, from Rebellion Press. He can be found on twitter @CJEskew and Instagram @Author_Cjeskew.

Jamie Lyn Smith is a writer, editor, teacher and activist. She earned her BA in English and Theatre from Kenyon College, her Masters in Education from Fordham University, and her MFA in Creative Writing from Ohio State. Her short story collection, *Township*, is forthcoming from Cornerstone Press in January 2021. Jamie Lyn currently serves as Fiction Editor at *BreakBread Magazine* and on the Leadership Team for BreakBread Literacy Project. She continues to serve as a Consulting Editor (Fiction) at the *Kenyon Review*. Her writing has appeared in *The Pinch*, *The Kenyon Review*, *The Mississippi Review*, *American Literary Review*, *Yemassee*, *Bayou*, and other fine literary magazines. A recovering theater nerd and New Yorker, she is currently working on *Hometown*, a novel about millennial crises and the rise of white nationalism in the rural Midwest, for which she received a 2020 Ohio Arts Council Individual Excellence Award.

Opening Remarks and Housekeeping Announcements

Welcome to *It Was the Best & Worst of Times: Launching a Youth Literary Arts Organization in 2020*. My name is Jamie Logan, and I will be your moderator today.

The art and activism of young people has flourished despite 2020's political, social justice, civil rights, and health crises. In media res, BreakBread Literacy Project launched a national youth arts organization. Today, BreakBread provides a community where young creatives ages 13-24 can take root and grow through four initiatives:

- BreakBread Magazine: Groundbreaking new work from young creatives
- BreakBread Reading Series: Community reading events for young voices in literature
- BreakBread Creative Classroom: Free creative writing workshops for young creatives
- BreakBread Literary Apprentices: Publishing internships for artists, writers & editors

By providing mentorship, instruction, and access to high-quality literary experiences, we seek to level the playing field, one young writer at a time.

During this panel, project founders will discuss the ups, downs, lessons learned, and future of a literary organization that seeks to change the face of publishing. We hope sharing our story empowers you to launch initiatives and open doors for creatives in your home community.

Before we get started, a couple administrative notes:

- For those who wish to follow along with a written text, please let the moderator know and a printed copy of the presentation will be delivered to you.
- Please make sure that spaces marked for wheelchairs remain clear of chairs or other barriers.
- Treat service animals as working animals and do not attempt to distract or pet them.
- Please be aware that your fellow attendees may have invisible disabilities. Do not question anyone's use of an accommodation while at the conference, including for chairs reserved for those with disabilities.
- We realize the lines for the bathrooms may be long, but please refrain from using an accessible stall unless you require such accommodation. Please also be aware family restrooms located on level 2 are reserved for those with disabilities or those wishing to use a single-stall restroom.
- If you have any questions or concerns regarding conference accessibility, please call or text the Accessibility Hotline (503) 455-4127 or email events@awpwriter.org.

Participant Opening Remarks, Initial Thoughts, or Readings:

W. David Hall:

- For the past 20 years or so, I have been involved with the Kenyon Young Writers Program. Every summer, high school kids from all over the world come to Kenyon College for two weeks and eat, sleep, and breathe creative writing. There are workshops by day, taught by some of the most amazing writers I know, with readings at night. The kids publish their own anthologies and build lifelong friendships. It is magic..
- Three years ago, in 2019, however, I “retired” from that program. I loved what we were doing, but the workshop was eating up more and more of my summers and there were aspects of the job—making sure kids were obeying curfew, hustling art supplies for teachers, hosting daily meeting—that weren't as fun as they once were. Those things I would gladly give away. But I didn't want to walk away from working with the kids. There were teens starving for a genuine space to create and a supportive atmosphere in which to create.
- So then, the hubris kicked in: I thought, why couldn't I continue that work, but in a different way?
- So was born BreakBread Literacy Project.
- A quick aside: I am a huge Marvel movie fan, my favorite being the first Iron Man movie. There's this scene where Tony Stark has just made a really sleek version of his armor and he wants to try it out. He says something science-y to Jarvis, his onboard computer, like “Give me full power.” To which Jarvis explains that is probably not the best idea his first time out. He needs to go slow, figure out what this powerful suit can do, and so on. Tony shrugs off the advice and barrels ahead full throttle, saying “Sometimes you gotta run before you can walk.”
- Like I said, I am a huge fan, so much so that I internalized this sentiment —“Sometimes you gotta run before you can walk”—as part of BreakBread's business model. I would take this

vision of developing young creative voices into spaces all over the country. Kids would write, would create, would publish, would get school credit for their time, would get a small stipend for their labor. They would also break bread with us. All for free.

- No real money. No real connections. No real plan. Just a lot of heart. Like I said: “Sometimes you gotta run before you can walk.”
- Well, as it turns out, launching a literary non-profit takes a little more than heart, I don’t care how much you have.
- As I continued researching non-profits and developing this vision, I reached out to my good friends Jamie Lyn Smith and Crystal Salas. Not only are they fabulous writers and educators in their own rights, they also shared the vision even before I could articulate it and both signed on without hesitation. They brought structure and focus to the project. We fleshed out our mission statement, developed curriculum and outreach, set up our website, and brought more and more people passionate about the vision onboard.
- Then came COVID.
- Now, as dramatic as that sounds, that didn’t hurt us as much as it could have. Because we live on different sides of the country, we were already working remotely, so we were able to just shift most everything to online. It also allowed for more people to get involved since travel time and money was no longer a barrier. However, it did exacerbate the problem of access. Even the most basic hardware and internet connection costs somebody something. Not being able to work with kids where they might naturally congregate meant leaving some behind. On a more personal note, however, it did give us all meaningful work in a very dark time. In that one year, you had the pandemic, lockdowns, job loss, civil unrest, contested elections—and you still had young people in need of a brave space for art. And that was what we focused on, for the kids and for ourselves. When we launched the first issue that fall, I knew we were onto something spectacular.
- Running before you learn to walk leads to a lot of stumbling and we have had our share. We didn’t start with enough money. We didn’t start with a Board of Directors (although we have one now). We didn’t start with a network of locations from which to operate. Personally, I didn’t have any knowledge of what it was going to take to make this thing work. We have all lost quite a bit of sleep and sanity trying to keep this ship upright and afloat.
- But when it gets crazy and we have to start rooting through the sofa for change to cover a bill, I consider our AllStaff meetings. Once every so often, when we are deciding what work goes into the magazine, we meet and hash it out. I am always humbled that my Zoom screen is overflowing with the images of my friends and young creatives who are all here to make BreakBread and its vision a success.

Jamie Lyn Smith:

- When David approached me-- with Crystal AC Salas-- about starting BreakBread Literacy Project, I had just left a tenure-track assistant professorship at a small liberal arts university, where I’d been given the opportunity to create an underfunded litmag from the ground up. In the three years I edited Bridge, this meant wearing many hats: Editor in Chief, Copy Editor, Marketing Director, Acquisitions Editor, Managing Editor, Social Media Manager...everything except Art Editor, which was brilliantly executed by Cara Echols. This was an incredible learning opportunity, and I brought that practical experience to

BreakBread along with a background in production management, grant writing, and program administration.

- BreakBread was an offer to work with a dream team, and one that we could assemble alongside people who shared our vision; a completely free youth arts service organization that actively engaged under resourced communities in literary arts. BreakBread provided us with the opportunity to be “unbought and unbossed”: none of us had to showcase the English Department at a failing institution, recruit students to an expensive writing program, appease a conservative Board of Directors, or otherwise shore up the master’s ivory tower with the master’s tools.
- Now with that, we also lack access to the master’s coffers, so we’re constantly scrambling to figure out how to keep the lights on. The only things I would do differently if we had it all to do over again, would be to establish a Board of Trustees before launching the project, and begin with \$50-100k seed money. As the saying goes for winemaking, so it goes for publishing: the best way to make a million dollars is to start with two million. Then again, I look at endeavors like 916 Ink in Sacramento, and it took them a decade to get to where they are now: from all-volunteer, to like, 24 paid staff. BreakBread has to be as patient and purposeful as we are ambitious and optimistic: all this takes time, and love. So much love. There was a shortage of this kind of neighborly love during the pandemic, and the reason BreakBread not only survived but thrived, is that we have taken into practice the invocation, “Let all that you do be done in love.” We’re all both very gentle, and very truthful with each other; I’ve never worked in any environment that is as positive, caring, and invested in everyone’s well-being. Like I said though, we’re lousy capitalists.
- But since we’re here today to talk about the best and worst of times, I have to say that I’m grateful for our bad timing. I truly believe that if we had launched BreakBread in 2018, the pandemic would have been the end of us, a fledgling nonprofit. Instead, the pandemic shaped what the organization does, and how we do it. Instead of concentrating in two or three places where we’re geographically based, BreakBread reaches young writers from around the country, and around the world. We’ve been able to offer high-quality digital learning experiences and build a strong community of practicing artists who mentor young people in Richwood, Ohio-- population 2,329 souls-- and let them learn writing alongside young writers from Mumbai City, population 12.4 million people. And now that the BreakBread team has created this online community, it feels like a disservice or a slight to call it “virtual”... like it’s not real, or somehow lesser than a residential experience. Seeing BreakBread blossom in a forum we never would have imagined but but necessity has been a powerful lesson in community, even as we long for the day when we can do some of this work in person, face-to-face, in the city streets and towns and little hamlets we call home. And maybe someday we’ll be able to set up hubs in lots of cities, working collaboratively with schools, libraries, and other youth service organizations to offer young people options in places that are isolated from literary “centers.” That’ll be a great day. But until then, the folks at BreakBread are sustaining hope, creativity, and communities of care that help young writers thrive. And I’m just so glad to be a small part of that, alongside such good and worthy friends and artists.

Cara Echols:

- When I began my journey with BreakBread Literacy Project, I had been on a 2 year hiatus from truly creating and being a part of the literary and arts community. I had entered the pandemic with my sights on taking the “time off,” so to speak, as a creative refresher. In some great hand of fate came my college mentor and dear friend Jamie Lyn who began to explain this creative venture that was taking form. I had spent three of the best years of my college career as art director of the literary magazine Bridge alongside Jamie Lyn’s spearheading. There I found great fulfillment and purpose in creating layout, forming a visual space for young people to be recognized and heard. So why not jump on board a new project that promised similar joy?
- A note that during my final years in college I began to dive deeper into the understanding and study of artistic censorship and gatekeeping. This intrigued me greatly. And while I worked on Bridge, I felt this pull that while it was tied to the university it would never truly give the voice to all that it sought to reach.
- Upon reading the BreakBread mission statement and talking with our “fearless leader” David Hall, I knew that this magazine, this great venture to pursue the truest voice of young creatives, was breaking down those barriers of censorship and inviting new, fresh and true voices to take part in community and supplication of sharing one’s story. I am reminded during every allstaff that this is a magazine for the young creatives by the young creatives, as we meet and I watch fervent, die-on-a-hill yes’s from our literary apprentices who advocate for the dynamic poetry, prose and art that we read and view. It is a refreshing sight and yet a reminder that yes, we as humans thrive off of what is true and like ourselves. We ought to demand more stories that we see ourselves in as a diverse culture. And I see BreakBread as a driving force to invite, continue to promote, and call to action this push for true literature and art that showcases the reality, breath, and beauty of who we are as diverse young people living and experiencing life in this world.
- In thinking about what BreakBread truly invites, I am reminded of the art installation “Dinner Party” by Judy Chicago, in which she creates a triangular table setting celebrating and commemorating both historical and mythical women -- ranging from artists, goddesses, activists, martyrs, and more. This design provides not only a visual interest but also a practical application in which one may commune and converse at any angle and everyone sits at the head of the table -- in essence, creating an equal playing field and yet elevating everyone who comes to sit. That is how I see BreakBread, an open table where everyone is elevated and noted for their work and voice. The table is set. It calls us all. It says this is a safe space and all are welcome here.

Charlie J. Eskew:

My first introduction to BreakBread was when Jamie Lyn Smith invited me to read at their launch event. I had the opportunity to watch this amalgam of creative energy and bottomless passion from the young writers as well as the founders. While it isn’t exactly rare to find these qualities in creatives there was something unique here in the aim to cultivate young artists, to mentor them, while equally creating a space where they had agency in producing a project that opened the door for their peers. When Jamie Lyn approached me for the project, I was admittedly anxious, like, "You're going to

entrust the dude who once microwaved a Pop Tart for two minutes with the fostering of the literary future and stuff?” Fortunately, though, I’ve had the chance to grow and, I hope, help others do the same for over a year now in this wonderful madness of free thought and expression that is Break Bread. Working with Literary Apprentices, hearing their voices, their ability to regard all works with a level of respectability and criticality I’d argue is missing from some of the most tenured artists and editors has left me slack jawed more times than not.

It wasn’t long after the protests in 2020 that I began, and, more than ever before, I wanted to find a way to support communities that remain underrepresented in literature, in ways that had at *least* half as much capsaicin and plastic munitions.

This was something molded in the foundation of the project which, as I’m sure we’ll go further to discuss, is integral to creating a space for creatives, young ones most of all I’d argue. I’ve written since I was eight years old, and while my thinly veiled rip off of Ronin Warriors-*Legends of the Stars, Fragments of a Shattered Dream, colon, is this title too long yet?* will tragically never see the light of day, I kept going, and eventually made a thing, and other people saw that thing and said Hey, let’s do a thing together. In between those two points though? There were so many moments of doubt, of questioning the specific plot points required for a melanated main character to get an ISBN, of what the hell am I even doing? So many moments I think are absurdly easy to avoid for young men and women by cultivating spaces like this. There isn’t just the focus on young writers, but on learning and listening to their experiences as, in my case, translated through their fiction- where these voices aren’t only heard but celebrated, and treated with a critical eye that constructs in ways that aren’t as available to some as they really kinda sorta entirely should be.

Moderator Questions:

1. Let’s begin at the beginning. Why do you think that BreakBread needed to take root in 2020? How does its vision relate to the changing social climate?
2. What unifies the organization’s all-volunteer staff?
3. Why is non-hierarchical collaboration, and collaboration in general, important to BreakBread?
4. Our audience is no doubt wondering about the logistics. Can you explain these for us?
5. What advice would you give others who are facing similar challenges?
6. What lessons have you learned?
7. What does the future hold for BreakBread?