

EVENT TITLE: Don't Worry, Be Scrappy: Navigating Instability in Community Writing Programs

Event Description: Community-based writing organizations, especially those that engage marginalized writers, can provide essential consistency in lives shaken by change. How, as leaders of these organizations, do we weather our own maelstroms of insufficient funding and staff turnover without sacrificing program quality? Join a group of educators, advocates, and nonprofit administrators as we discuss the factors that can disturb consistency in a community writing program and how to combat or avoid such challenges.

Event Category: Program Development

Event Organizer & Moderator

Mallory Hellman: Mallory Hellman is Director of the Iowa Youth Writing Project, a K-12 outreach organization based at the University of Iowa. Her work focuses on empowering marginalized communities through creativity and mutual aid. She is a graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop, a houseplant enthusiast, and a Sunday school teacher at her local synagogue.

Event Participants

Olivia Jones-Hall: Olivia Jones Hall is the Director of Youth Programs at Literary Arts, a nonprofit in Portland, Oregon. Her work across 8 school districts in Oregon is at the confluence of creativity, education, and youth advocacy. She studied Creative Writing at Oberlin College.

Suma Karaman Rosen: Suma Karaman Rosen has nearly 30 years' experience in corporate, nonprofit and educational settings. She joined InsideOut Literary Arts in January 2017, and is inspired daily by the students the organization serves. She is dedicated to amplifying youth voice, from the classroom to the community.

Richie Wills: Richie Wills is a Nigerian American writer and performer from Buffalo, NY. He is Program Coordinator and Teaching Artist with the Just Buffalo Literary Center and has been published in *Buffalo's Back: An Anthology of our Times*, *Variety Pack* and elsewhere. He is co-founder of

GrayWills Book Club focusing on BIPOC authors and an Oishei Fellow for leaders of Color. Richie has advocated for the arts through the creation of a cultural plan for Buffalo and Erie County and coordinates PRISM—a monthly creative writing session for LGBTQ+ youth.

Opening Remarks and Housekeeping Announcements (3 min)

Good afternoon, and welcome to, “Don’t Worry, Be Scrappy: Navigating Instability in Community Writing Programs.” If you’ve just heard our title and realized that you’ve stumbled into the wrong panel, please stick around; the last eight years have taught me that nonprofit administrators come equipped with tremendous senses of humor. Besides, we intend to solve all the world’s problems in the next 75 minutes; don’t you want to stick around for that?

Before we get started, a couple of administrative notes: Both Brianna Johns and Alyesha Wise are unable to join us this afternoon due to unforeseen and unfortunate circumstances, but we will be joined in their stead by two absolute powerhouses of community engagement: Olivia Jones-Hall and Richie Wills. You can find Olivia and Richie’s bios on the AWP website and on the handouts we’ve provided.

By way of introduction, my name is Mallory Hellman. For accessibility, I’m a 37-year-old petite white woman with short, curly blonde hair and blue eyes. Today, I am wearing [____]. For the last eight years, I have served as director of the Iowa Youth Writing Project, a tiny but mighty K-12 arts outreach organization based at the University of Iowa. We bring generative writing workshops to marginalized youth at after-school programs, community centers, shelters, and residential treatment facilities. The IYWP carries out its mission to amplify young voices through publication, sustained relationships with undergraduate mentors, workshops with nationally renowned writers across genres, and public reading opportunities. We reach about a thousand students per year.

Our work is both joyous and essential. Often, it’s also turbulent. Since I took my position in 2015, the IYWP has gone through four associate directors, three office locations, two grants and funding managers, several hundred volunteers and interns, and as few American dollars as humanly possible.

When I got the idea to gather this panel, I was, not for the first time, the only member of the IYWP's staff. I was also, not for the first time, dealing with massive burnout that inhibited my capacity to carry out our org's mission to the fullest. In the depths of my exhaustion and despair, I thought about starting a goat farm. I also thought, perhaps more constructively, "Other orgs like ours must have survived similar challenges." As it turns out, many have. We're fortunate to have leaders of some of them with us today. With that, I'll let each of our panelists introduce themselves, starting with Olivia.

Participant Initial Remarks (5 min)

Olivia Jones Hall

I'm Olivia Jones Hall, and I am the Director of Youth Programs at Literary Arts in Portland, Oregon. I have been with the organization for just over 4 years, and have held three positions, all within youth programming, coming into the role of program director in mid 2021. I lead a team of 4, and our work offers a variety of opportunities to reach students.

My goals in doing this work are primarily to help students feel seen and heard, and then hopefully to help administrations and school systems see the value of writing. I think that young people are overlooked and disregarded in a lot of ways—from small things like the unfortunate nature of school lunches, to larger and more politicized issues like gun violence in schools. But young people are actually very dedicated, creative, and astutely aware of the world, and their lives and their minds deserve to be taken seriously, and in order to do this work we need motivated adults who share those beliefs.

I was drawn to this panel because my job is now more about managing relationships with all the adults who make this work possible. It takes a really special kind of person to want to do creative work with teenagers, and there are really good and really frustrating challenges that go into retaining teaching artists and sustaining arts programming, and I'm excited to talk with these awesome folks today about how to continue reaching people to give them the opportunity to work with young folks, because I do think it's an incredible opportunity.

Suma Karaman Rosen

My name is Suma Karaman Rosen, and I have the distinct pleasure of serving as the Executive Director of InsideOut Literary Arts. I joined the organization in January of 2017, as the first “hired” executive director since our founding in 1995. (We were founded and led by Dr. Terry Blackhawk for twenty years, and then by our amazing Interim Director, Alise Alousi, who now serves as our Director of Schools and Community Partnerships.)

Over the last 28 years, InsideOut has served 70,000 youth in the greater Metro Detroit area with high quality creative writing (primarily poetry) instruction both in and after school. Our mission is to inspire and equip young people to think critically, create bravely and share their voices with the world. We remain committed to amplifying youth voice across our community – and beyond!

I was drawn to be part of this panel because I believe sustainability comes more from the right team than the right funder. I’m known for saying “the program is the people” – I believe this sentiment is key to understanding what we do and how we do it. I love finding ways to better support, nurture, and grow staff – from our cadre of 25-40 part-time teaching artists (who are actual employees) to our full-time core staff of 11. We are always looking for ways to be better, and that starts with the people.

Richie Wills

Good afternoon, I’m Richie Wills, a Program Coordinator and teaching artist with the Just Buffalo Literary Center in Buffalo, New York. I started as a volunteer in their after-school writing program and eventually became a paid program assistant, where I coordinated bringing literary arts to the streets of Buffalo. Then eventually, I became a Program Coordinator. So my story is truly one of determination for the literary arts. My motivation for this panel comes primarily from understanding the importance of literary arts spaces for youth to express themselves.

I grew up in queens in a severely underfunded school district with very little access to resources and programs for writers, not to mention a community of other writers, and so now, being a coordinator for an after-school writing program where we’re able to provide youth opportunities to

see the inherent value in their writing, share their writing, and their voices are so vital. But as many of us know, this kind of work does not come without its challenges; the literary arts field remains **one of the most underfunded in the arts and cultural sector** and, therefore, especially vulnerable, particularly when you serve marginalized communities.

As a coordinator of one of these writing programs, not only do I want to continue sharing knowledge of how we navigated challenges, but I also firmly believe that sharing knowledge across organizations is essential so we're not all siloed in our various struggles; what I've found is that if you have a challenge you're dealing with in your organization, then I can assure you other's are either dealing with a similar challenge or have found ways to tackle it and so I am grateful to be here and look forward to speaking with you today.

Moderator Questions (52 min)

1) Tell us a bit about your organization's programming. (5 min)

Richie, Suma, Olivia

2) Organizations like ours can take on so many different staffing structures, and an early and ongoing debate for directors often involves the ratio of employees to contractors to volunteers. Where does your organization's person power come from? How is your labor structured? (7 min)

Suma, Olivia, Richie

3)) A question I'm sure is burning through everyone's mind here: How is your organization funded? Is that funding stable? When it's not, how do you tighten the belt without sacrificing program quality or staff salaries? (15 min)

Olivia, Richie, Suma

4) In the staffing structure you previously described, do you see a lot of staff and volunteer turnover? How do you handle this when it does happen and/or how do proactively create a structure that avoids it? (15 min)

Olivia, Richie, Suma, (Mal?)

5) How does your team proactively address and/or deal with burnout? (15 min)

Richie, Suma, Olivia

Audience Q&A