**Event Title:** Write On! Literary Centers on Fostering Sustainable Youth Communities

**Event Description:** How do we balance agency and boundaries within youth writing programs? How do we create, or allow our students to create, sustainable creative youth communities? Panelists from Grubstreet, The Muse Writers Center & The Porch will discuss the nuances of creating spaces that balance teen writers’ growing need for creative and personal autonomy with the need for guidance & boundaries, as well as the importance of giving students the tools to create their own creative communities post-graduation.

**Event Category:** Writers Conferences and Centers

**Event Organizer and Moderator:**

**Susan Page Deutsch** is a youth teacher at The Muse Writers Center, though she has played many roles at The Muse over the past 12 years: teen student in the original Teen Writers Workshop, intern, adult student, teacher, and staff member. She is also a writer and freelance editor, and has previously spent time working in the (snowy) offices of *New England Review*.

**Event Participants:**

**Travon Godette** earned an M.F.A. in Poetry and an M.A. in Literature from McNeese State University, while also holding a B.A. in English with a focus on Secondary Education and Ethnic and Gender Studies. He currently serves as the Manger of Youth Programs at GrubStreet.

**Jessica Grace Kelley** is a novelist and the Youth Program Director at The Muse Writers Center in Norfolk, VA. Her novels have won several awards including the
YA Molly Award, the Emma Merritt Award, and the YA Authors.me Contest. Jessica is currently represented by Christa Heschke at McIntosh & Otis.

Introductory Remarks and Housekeeping Announcements:

Welcome to Write On! Literary Centers on Fostering Sustainable Youth Communities. My name is Susan Deutsch and I will be your moderator today. Thank you all so much for joining us.

A few housekeeping notes before we begin:

• For those needing or wishing to follow along to a written text, please let me know, and a printed copy 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.

• Be aware of those with chemical sensitivities and refrain from wearing scented products.

• 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.

• This also includes wearing masks and other PPE. While masks and other safety measures are not required, please be respectful of others’ decisions. If asked to maintain social distance from someone, please do so to the best of your ability. We keep each other safe.

The format of this event is as follows: I will briefly introduce our wonderful panelists, then they will each speak for a bit about their respective youth programs before we dive into our discussion. At the end we will have some time for an audience Q&A, so please hold your questions until the end.
Without further ado, it is my pleasure to introduce you to today’s panelists:

Participant Initial Remarks:

Travon:
My investment in youth work is directly tied to my own upbringing and struggle in finding spaces where my voice mattered. My mom raised three sons on her own under the tough love mantra of “if you don’t like my rules, then move out of my house” (no shame, it’s all she knew at the time). My grade school teachers would similarly send me out of the classroom at least once a week for talking too much. My coaches too would kick me to the sideline to run gassers for being smart-mouthed. I was getting in so much trouble for speaking my mind that I started to believe expressing myself would always result in consequences. But how does a “trouble-maker” with a 2.0 GPA get almost perfect scores on state exams while balancing four sports, music/video/story production, an active social life, and a part-time job go on to receive an MA and MFA in creative writing while internalizing limitations set by the adults in his life? Genuine support and room to grow.

It was my 10th grade English teacher, Mr. Speek, who snapped me out of this destructive mindset. Instead of calling me disruptive, he called me creative. Instead of being loud, I was energetic. Instead of troubled, challenging, or unfocused, I was just bored, under engaged, and uninvested. He spoke to me like a human being (not a child), connected with me based on my passions and life experiences, and kept me engaged by recommended books and artwork created by and starring people of color. I got my best marks of my high school career in his class as it was the only class I actually wanted to do my homework in. There was something deeper connecting me to the material in this class: an open invitation to be myself and create community. Similar small moments of self-advocacy or autonomy also began standing out as highlights in my life: my parents trusting me to paint my own room whatever color I wanted, my guidance counselor letting me choose my own classes based on interests and skill sets, my coach asking me what play we should call with ten seconds left and the homecoming game on the line. Each of
these moments would not only foster self-confidence, but also a valuable sense of ownership of the environments I was a part of. Since this realization, making space for teens has remained at the forefront of my career path. I’ve been fortunate enough to work with youth in a myriad of settings; substituting as a middle school music teacher, hosting magic lessons at my local Boys and Girls Club, coaching high school and college track athletes at the DI level, and even teaching composition 101 and 102 (yes, some organization classify youth as anyone between the ages of 5 and 35). Now imagine there were an entire sector filled with people like Mr. Speek trying to make space for the flourishing young minds. This is how I found myself at GrubStreet.

GrubStreet is a nonprofit literary arts organization that works to make sure anyone who loves to write has access to high-quality support and instruction regardless of their ability to pay. The Young Adult Writers Program (YAWP) offers low-stakes writing opportunities to Greater Boston and beyond regardless of experience level. Here, teens can find/form their writing communities, generate new works, and enjoy as many free snacks as their hearts desire. We offer three types of programs: free Saturday writing sessions, weeklong Teen Summer Classes, and a three-week summer Writing Fellowship, as well as free one-off events with partners like Brookview House, 826 Boston, Sociedad Latina, Teen Empowerment, and multiple local schools and Boston Public Library branches. Most of the teens in this program come from low-income, immigrant, BIPOC communities where their art hasn't always been valued or encouraged. Our program aims to assert the value of their work and their ideas, and to center their art firmly in their own identities through their own lens. Every year, our teen fellows earn a stipend after the end of three weeks training and writing with professional working writers in the field. They go on field trips, learn the ins and outs of writing, and build a community of young artists that we hope will continue onward as they develop their craft long after the program. This program is 17 years old and more than 1,000 teens are served in this Young Adult Program every year.

As the Manager of Youth Programs at GrubStreet, I strive to ensure we are always doing right by our teens: letting them choose the topics they find most interesting, allowing them to design a space and community guidelines that feels comfortable for them, giving them opportunities to return as leaders, etc. It is of the utmost
importance that teens acknowledge this space as a place in between home, work, and school. A place where they’re surrounded by people who care about them and don’t need permission to rummage through the fridge. A place where they’re doing work they sought out and applied for and are free to take breaks when needed. A place where training for the “real world” looks like practice expressing themselves, asking for help, and advocating for their needs without feeling like a burden to others. At GrubStreet, we aim to use creative writing and the resources we have available as a means to further such autonomy and show them that sustaining lives as writers is more than possible. As a result, our teens go on to start poetry clubs at their schools, complete chapbooks and novels that earn awards and fellowships, and even get accepted into collegiate writing programs. They respond to our surveys saying these classes gave them newfound confidence to identify as writers, speak their minds, and stand up for others.

Don’t get me wrong, it’s tough finding the perfect balance between taking risks with student-selected programs and filling seats, but at the end of the day this work matters. The people in this room matter. It says a lot about the organizations we represent. It says a lot about the people we are. And it says a lot about the young people we once were as we craved for such writing companionship in our earlier days. I’m both excited and humbled to be sharing a panel and a conference room with everyone here today. For the rest of the session, I’m excited to share my perspective as well as seek suggestions from others who are in similar positions.

Jessica:

My work with youth and creative writing collided about seven years ago when I started teaching fiction to teens at the Muse Writers Center. My initial motivations were somewhat indulgent—I was professionally transitioning from verse to novels for teens and I realized if I was writing for teens, I should probably know who young people currently were and what they wanted. At the time, The Muse Youth Program was small, with only one class for young writers and one for teen writers. I taught a class with a thirteen-year-old writing about a lion cub in a cave, a sixteen-year-old, writing grotesque shock horror, and a senior in high school writing poetry about coming-of-age sexuality. All valid subjects, deserving of
space, but maybe not the same space, and they were all completely different genre interests that might change by the next time the teens were in the classroom. This experience was my instant education on one of the nuances about teens and youth—they can be different versions of themselves for a moment of time, and we need to meet them where they are. This can be complex, since who these young people are and what they need drastically varies by education quality, home life, socio-economic elements, and other factors they can't control.

Over the past eight years, the Muse youth program has evolved to meet as many needs as we can with limited resources. As the Muse Program Manager, I manage five sectors, each crafted to find specific youth audiences with different socio-emotional needs.

- The Youth Writing Program offers craft classes and workshops to elementary, middle and high school students—all donation only, because we never want finances to be a barrier.
- Outreach Programs send teachers and authors to halfway houses, libraries, and schools, striving to reach young people that wouldn’t typically come to us. We hope to offer inspiration, safe communication, and to teach them the art of using writing as a healthy emotional outlet.
- Internship Programs for high school and college teach life skills while offering school credit and volunteer hours.
- Summer Camps are offered to elementary, middle school, and high school, with full scholarships available.
- Youth Open Mic Nights: Sessionly, often themed events geared toward social fun, meant to provide a stage for all young writers to share their work.
- Teen Writers Fellowship, an intense writing fellowship for Sophomores and Juniors in high school. The Program spans to two semesters, and offers free workshops, craft classes, public reading events, and publishing industry education. Fellows are paired with a published mentor that fits their writing aspirations, and fellowship teachers spend the final semester teaching publication standards by having the fellows build a book package they can share with agents and editors at the Hampton roads writers conference. Our goal is to widen the door to publication through
knowledge and skill, and to give the fellows the tools to create their own writing communities when they step into the adult world.

- Finally, we’re working on creating specific special needs programming by the end of this year. Our programming is inclusive to all, but as a special needs parent, I am acutely aware of the demand for special needs communities to have space where they’re the focus.

The Muse typically has a youth retention rate of three years or less. That's not much time. Through this panel, I hope to offer a little insight on how we give young writers with a wide variety of needs and experiences personalized individualism and ownership in a space that facilitates the freedom and tools to create, grow and explore while still providing necessary boundaries, never roadblocks.

**Moderator Questions:**

1. **How do you balance agency and boundaries in a youth program?**

**Travon:**

- Place between home & school model.
- Teen curated community guidelines.
- Teen-driven program design.
- Teens summer takeover (“invade the seaport”).
- Risk-reward analysis of autonomy.

**Jessica:**

- Guided ownership—the By Teens For Teens Program.
- Set expectations early and stay consistent.
- The delicate balance between parent and student communication.
2. How do you create, or help your students create, a sustainable creative community that allows former students to remain connected and engaged even once they have left your youth program?

Travon:

- Graduated YAWPers are invited as application readers.
- Past fellows doing Q&A’s and readings at student orientation.
- An anthology reveal party as well as several reunion workshops and community events.
- Boston Arts Calendar postings to connect our teen community with local events year-round.
- Fellowship finalists being invited back to write for our blog.

Jessica:

- Muse Adult Programs
- Online communities
- Intern programs
- Guide students to new local resources
- Provide tools to create new community
- Always keep the door open