City Lit Press plans to hold two poetry chapbook contests each year, both in honor of local poets. Poets who have not yet been published in book-length form may also submit their work for the Clarinda Harriss Poetry Prize ($250 and 25 copies of your book; deadline every Oct. 1). Laura Shovan won this contest last year with her manuscript, Mountain, Log, Salt, and Stone; African-American poets under the age of 40 who have not yet been published may submit their work for the Black Infinity: Adele V. Holden Prize for New African-American Poets (same prize; deadline every Feb. 1). Holden was the school teacher who wrote the Eastern Shore memoir Wilhelm published at Woodholme House. City Paper published Wilhelm’s story of his relationship with Holden in 2008, which explains the name “Black Infinity” (Feature, May 28, 2008).

City Lit Press also plans to publish three stand-alone titles each year. Wilhelm is currently working on publishing a book of poetry. It’s a collection by New Orleans poet Vincent A. Cellucci titled An Easy Place / to Die about post-Katrina New Orleans. Wilhelm is getting some help on the design and layout of the book from a University of Baltimore MFA student named Jonas Kyle-Sidell. The UB program emphasizes design and publishing as well as the craft of writing, so Wilhelm has regularly sought interns from the program for projects.

And as City Lit Press began to take shape last year, Wilhelm did more than hire a few interns. He pitched a whole partnership to the University of Baltimore.

"It has evolved into a family of programs that help instill and sustain a culture of literature."
of Baltimore's School of Communications Design MFA program in Creative Writing and Publishing Arts. In mid-August, he took up residency in its offices on the corner of Preston and North Charles streets.

UB now provides City Lit, including City Lit Press, with office space and interns and Wilhelm with opportunities to teach. He also gets faculty privileges on campus, including the use of classroom space and the swanky, recently installed Mac labs. Wilhelm provides UB with real-world, hands-on projects for MFA students and the bonus of an independent literary program funded by the Baltimore Office of Promotion and the Arts, the Maryland State Arts Council, and the National Endowment for the Arts operating under its roof.

Wilhelm is quick to point out that City Lit and the Press are still quite independent from UB. "We still have our own budget and our own board," he says. But this partnership has allowed City Lit and the Press to move out of Wilhelm's basement and into an office suite with university faculty who are also interested in publishing.

So Wilhelm is optimistic about the future. He doesn't give advances, but he does offer fair royalties, and he's pursuing a "radically different model" for publishing, distribution, and marketing that involves digital technology that keeps costs down and allows him to take risks on writers and writing that the big houses can't—or won't.

In addition to the book of New Orleans poetry, Wilhelm is currently working on the memoirs of a Highlandtown waitress. She was in an abusive relationship during the '60s and '70s, left with kids in tow, and waited tables to make ends meet. But not just any tables.

"She was a waitress at Johnny Unitas' old Golden Arm, so she knew all these sports figures," he continues. "She was a waitress at Hausser's and was for many years and still is a waitress at Sabatino's, so she met all the politicians and ball players and Dean Martin and Frank Sinatra."

Celebrity appearances notwithstanding, a Baltimore waitress's story is the kind that might be hard to sell in New York. But in City Lit Press, Wilhelm has created for himself the freedom to find and nurture raw voices and untold stories. "So you've got a very East Baltimore story—you've got the story of a great woman who, during a difficult time for women, decided to take the brave step of breaking away from an abusive relationship and finding a job, and then you have the people she encountered being a waitress at these quintessential Baltimore joints," Wilhelm says. "She's never written before in her life, but it moved me. How do you tell a writer that that's what I'm looking for?" But that is what Wilhelm is looking for. And around here, he'll find it.