CityLit Project Enters Partnership with Maryland State Arts Council to Present State-Wide Poetry Program

New Leadership Announced as Nonprofit Literary Arts Organization Expands and Pens First Lines of New Chapter

JULY 11, 2016 – CityLit Project’s board of directors announced today that the organization has entered into a partnership with the Maryland State Arts Council to manage the administration and promotion of the state-wide Poetry Out Loud program. In addition to expanding the national recitation contest to more schools in counties throughout Maryland, CityLit’s board of directors hopes that this increased presence will help it deliver other literary arts programs across the state, said board chair Francis “Bunky” Markert.

To manage Poetry Out Loud and CityLit’s other programs, the organization has hired writer and arts administrator Carla Du Pree as its new executive director. Du Pree started on July 1.

“We are excited to partner with CityLit Project, which has an established record of elevating the literary arts in Baltimore, to expand the program to serve even more students across the state,” said Theresa Colvin, Executive Director of the Maryland State Arts Council.

The National Endowment for the Arts and the Poetry Foundation launched Poetry Out Loud in 2006 to inspire youth to learn about their literary heritage and build confidence through the memorization and recitation of significant poetry. The Maryland state finals take place in March of each year followed by national finals in Washington, D.C., in April. In 2015, Maryland had the fifth highest participation in the country. In total, four Maryland State Champions have reached the National Finals, and two of those students placed in the top three spots in the country.

“CityLit is thrilled for Carla to join us to not only administer Poetry Out Loud, but to lead our organization to new places while carrying on its traditions,” said Markert. “We expect to reach a wider audience within the state, capture the imagination of younger audiences, and attract many more in the community who love the literary arts.”

CityLit Project’s growth comes just as it adds six new board members: Dana Harris-Trovato, Senior Program Associate, Touchstone Discussion Project; Chelsea Lemon Fetzer, past creative writing instructor for youth at the New York Writers Coalition; Steven Leyva, adjunct faculty of writing at the University of Baltimore and editor of Little Patuxent Review; Holly Morse-Ellington, adjunct faculty of academic literacy and creative writing at the Community College of Baltimore County and an editor of The Baltimore Review; Bobbi Nicotera, Communications Specialist, Open Society Institute, and an editor of The Baltimore Review; and Clarence Orsi, who recently earned his Ph.D. in English from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. They join chair Francis “Bunky” Markert, former CFO for the Maryland Historical Society and Baltimore Office of Promotion and The Arts; founding chair Charles F. (Chic) Dambach, former CEO of the Alliance for Peacebuilding; Lalita Noronha, educator, author, and past president of the Maryland Writers Association, as well as an editor for The Baltimore Review; Brian Lyles, Deputy Director of Individual Giving at Center...
Stage, and **Peggy Hoffman**, development and management consultant for arts-based organizations and former co-owner of Minas Gallery and Boutique in Hampden.

A writer and literary arts ambassador, Du Pree served as executive director of the Howard County Poetry & Literary Society (HoCoPoLitSo) for four years. She has significant experience with writing, editing, and public speaking, and has worked with prominent authors such as Donald Hall, Isabel Wilkerson, Nikki Giovanni, Lucille Clifton, and Martin Espada, among others. She has also served as a judge for Poetry Out Loud, which will be one of the primary programs she takes on at CityLit.

“With record arts funding, it’s a wonderful time to be a writer in Maryland,” Du Pree said. “I intend to further raise the profile of the literary arts, including recognizing young cultural creatives who represent communities we rarely hear from. I love being part of a network of change, purpose, and possibility.”

Du Pree earned her MA in Writing from Johns Hopkins University, where she has also served as a lecturer and thesis advisor. Next July, she will complete a six-year stint as a councilor with the Maryland State Arts Council, where she serves as vice chair and chair of its Diversity Outreach Committee. Du Pree has also worked as a consultant in engaging and supporting nonprofit arts organizations and individual artists, with a focus on increasing the level of applications by diverse writers to arts awards in the Baltimore metropolitan area. She recently presented a reading of words and song, “Raising Our Voices: Womyn Out Loud,” to raise awareness of diverse, emerging literary artists.

CityLit Project’s announcements include the resignation of **Gregg Wilhelm**, who founded the nonprofit in 2004 after discovering Open Book, a renovated warehouse in Minneapolis that is home to the Loft Literary Center, Milkweed Editions, and the Minnesota Center for Book Arts.

CityLit’s origin story took on an air of local lore when its first event took place the spring after Hurricane Isabel washed out the Baltimore Book Festival. Two weeks before CityLit Festival, headliner Edward P. Jones won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction. The following year, two weeks before the festival, nonfiction headliner and then-managing editor of the *Washington Post* Steve Coll won the Pulitzer Prize for nonfiction. No such luck in year three, but Paul Rusesabagina (the main character depicted in the motion picture *Hotel Rwanda*) debuted his memoir to overflow crowds at Pratt Library, the festival’s presenting partner. In 2009, CityLit Festival presented the previous year’s Pulitzer Prize winner for fiction Junot Díaz and National Book Award winner for poetry Mark Doty. This year, CityLit Festival featured acclaimed poet Claudia Rankine in celebration of National Poetry Month and upon reflection of the anniversary of the uprising.

“Thanks to my nonprofit mentor and CityLit’s founding chair, Chic Dambach, I have long understood how organizations have life cycles,” said Wilhelm, who *Baltimore* magazine named an Arts MVP in 2009. “Succession is part of that cycle and it keeps an organization relevant to those it serves. I could not be more thrilled that someone with Carla’s track record and passion for the literary arts is taking the reins.”
“Gregg Wilhelm has created and nurtured a remarkable cultural institution for Baltimore and Maryland,” said Dambach, who still sits on the organization’s board. “We are all deeply indebted to him for making CityLit happen, and we look forward to his ongoing commitment to the organization.”

Wilhelm has worked in the literary arts field since 1992, with publishers such as Johns Hopkins University Press, Tidewater Publishers, and the Bibelot Books-affiliated Woodholme House Publishers. He has shepherded nearly 150 books to print during that time. Meanwhile, he has taught writing and publishing courses at Loyola University, University of Baltimore, Community College of Baltimore County, and Johns Hopkins University’s Odyssey program. Wilhelm earned an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Tampa in 2014, and has since received a Rubys Artist Project Grant and an Individual Artist Award from the Maryland State Arts Council. Earlier this year, he joined the first-ever U.S. publishers delegation to Cuba organized by the trade news magazine, Publishers Weekly.

Over the last twelve years, CityLit Project has partnered with organizations, venues, and artists to host the CityLit Stage at the Baltimore Book Festival, conduct writers’ workshops, deliver programs for youth, and present one-off events like Lit’s Not Dead, Across Words, and Geo-Poe: A Literary Geo-Caching Adventure. In 2010, it launched the CityLit Press publishing imprint and the Harriss Poetry Prize, which awards winning chapbook poets with publication, 50 gratis copies, and $500 (judges have included Michael Salcman, Dick Allen, Tom Lux, and Marie Howe).

“It’s every founder’s dream to do the best work possible and see his vision evolve beyond his direct daily involvement,” said Wilhelm, who was named founder emeritus and will help with the leadership transition. “With this expanded board, Carla at the helm, and partnership with the state arts council, the future may be unwritten but the next chapter is in capable, creative hands.”

The organization’s next public event is CityLit Stage at the Baltimore Book Festival. The festival takes place at the Inner Harbor on September 23, 24, and 25.

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