Gregg Wilhelm

President and CEO of CityLit Project, Publisher of Pagoda Press

At the age of 13, Gregg Wilhelm wrote, illustrated, and bound (with twine) his first book—a sci-fi story borrowed from the intergalactic adventures of Star Wars and Buck Rogers. Today, the Highlandtown resident is the founder and president of Baltimore’s CityLit Project, a nonprofit organization that nurtures the entire culture of literature through literary festivals, author readings, writers workshops, and youth education, along with teaching writers how to get published and market their books. A publisher, editor, and writer himself, Wilhelm is devoting his life to making Baltimore a literary destination.

“I’ve always had an affinity for books as artifacts,” says Wilhelm, who was born and raised in Hampden and is a graduate of Loyola College where he also serves as director of Apprentice House, a student-staffed publishing company. By day, Wilhelm is the director of communications for the Babe Ruth Museum.

After five years of publishing local authors through Woodholme House Publishers, Wilhelm had the epiphany that to publish was not enough. “I came to the realization that if I didn’t do more to help develop a culture of literature and develop audiences, who would buy books?”

Wilhelm founded CityLit Project in January 2004 when he produced the first CityLit Festival at the Enoch Pratt Free Library, featuring a standing-room-only crowd for The Known World author Edward P. Jones, who won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction just days before the festival. He repeated the phenomenon with the second annual CityLit Festival, when featured author Steve Coll won a Pulitzer for the nonfiction Ghost Wars days before coming to Baltimore. CityLit Project also includes a publishing division, Pagoda Press, and the recently launched site CityLitProject.org, which is the city’s first one-stop shop for local literary news.

Judy Cooper, coordinator of programs and publications at Enoch Pratt, sees Wilhelm’s work as a labor of love for both the literary community and for Baltimore. “He’s just very passionate about books and writing and connecting them to people in Baltimore and trying to create a really vibrant literary scene,” she says.

—J.T.