

# Cleveland & the write stuff

HOW THE CITY IS USING LITERATURE TO EMPOWER  
YOUTH AND OVERCOME SOCIAL DIVIDES.

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CLEVELAND

At a long conference table on the east side of Cleveland, Daniel Gray-Kontar listens closely as one of his students, a high school senior, starts to read her latest poem.

*large brown eyes  
whisper transgressions  
blue skies speak during dark times*

As the student performs, Mr. Gray-Kontar – poet, teacher, academic, activist – glances down at the text on his laptop. He smiles and nods his head. “Nice!” he says. “Mmm.”

Sydney Copeland, the student, listens to his feedback. Together they go over the rhythm and flow of her performance, and Gray-Kontar, who as usual wears a black pork pie hat and sports coat, taps on the table to indicate the pace he’s seeking. For Sydney, it’s a lesson in how to make her words connect with an audience. In time, she may become one of his stars, like the three adult students representing Cleveland at this year’s National Poetry Slam in Chicago. Gray-Kontar helped bring home the title in 1994, when his poetry career was taking flight and Cleveland was just beginning to rewrite its own gritty narrative of Rust Belt decline.

Now he’s passing the torch to the city’s minority youth at Twelve Literary Arts (TLA). The nonprofit is an incubator for young poets, playwrights, and rappers of color to learn and refine their writing skills in workshops and perform it publicly. Gray-Kontar launched

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Siaara Freeman, a young poet in Cleveland, performs at a local poetry slam event. Competitors are being selected to represent the city in a national poetry contest.



Students critique their writing at Twelve Literary Arts, a program in Cleveland that helps young poets, playwrights, and rappers of color refine their writing skills.

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the organization in 2016 as a response to the fractures he saw along racial, gender, and generational lines.

“We are, or have been, one of the poorest big cities in the United States. We are one of the most segregated cities in the United States,” says the activist poet. “What better place, what better opportunity, to dream a new world?”

Many cities have nurtured book clubs and literacy initiatives to build and bind communities. Cleveland stands out for its ambition and scope in using literature to empower marginalized groups, foster economic dynamism, and bridge social divides. From veterans groups and workplace book discussions, to female-student literacy and an annual book prize, Cleveland is increasingly finding new ways to connect its diverse population over fiction and verse.

“With all the different programs and activities, the city offers real opportunities for writers,” says Elizabeth Taylor, literary editor at large at the Chicago Tribune.

Extending those opportunities to everyone, and making sure their voices are heard, are part of the challenge that literary activists here are embracing. Could it be a model for other divided cities?

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Cleveland, once an emblem of urban decline, has undergone a renaissance over the past quarter century. Its downtown area, filled with microbreweries and trendy restaurants, is a magnet for Millennials. Its economy has boomed as the city has become a national hub for health-care and

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— **Daniel Gray-Kontar**, a poet, teacher, and activist, stands next to a mural outside Twelve Literary Arts, of which he is the executive artistic director



life-science firms.

Yet it is the industrial wealth generated in the previous century that underpins much of the city’s arts and culture philanthropy. Most prominent is the Cleveland Foundation, founded in 1914, which today has assets of \$2.5 billion and supports hundreds of nonprofits in the greater Cleveland area, including TLA.

Another legacy is the Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards, established in 1935 by poet and philanthropist Edith Anisfield Wolf, in honor of her father, John Anisfield, and

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husband, Eugene Wolf. It remains the only major US prize for literary works that tackles racism and diversity. Each of the four prizes pays \$10,000, the same as the National Book Awards.

“There are so many book awards, but Anisfield-Wolf is really special because it recognizes more than just a great book and takes on the race question and how we address it,” says Ms. Taylor, co-editor of the National Book Review, a journal.

Past winners include Martin Luther King Jr. in 1959, and three Northeast Ohio natives: Langston Hughes, Zora Neal Hurston, and Toni Morrison. The jury committee is chaired by Henry Louis Gates Jr., who directs the Hutchins Center for African and African American Research at Harvard University in Cambridge, Mass.

In recent years, the Cleveland Foundation has leveraged the reputation of the Anisfield-Wolf award and its message of

ways Cleveland can be the beneficiaries of this great canon of literature and ensuring that it works year-round influencing hearts and minds,” Long says.

Contributing to the city’s literary culture, experts say, is a nationally recognized library network. The 27-branch Cuyahoga County Public Library system leads the nation in per capita circulation and visits among libraries of its size. It consistently earns a five-star rating from the Library Journal Index.

In recent years, as the downtown area has attracted a new generation of young professionals, the writing culture has become part of the city’s carefully cultivated “Cleveland cool” image. One downtown restaurant/brewery holds a monthly reading series called “Brews & Prose,” and the city now has a vibrant screenwriting community.

Other initiatives target young people, such as Lake Erie Ink, which teaches a variety of writing genres to children in after-school and summer programs, while TLA is aimed at giving voice to a greater diversity of aspiring writers.

TLA’s offices are located in Cleveland’s Waterloo Arts District, a bohemian downtown neighborhood with art galleries, boutique shops, and cafes. Its clubhouse features colorful murals and inspirational posters related to writing and social justice, as well as bookshelves stacked with classics and new writing. Jazz seeps from the sound system.

Shortly before Gray-Kontar arrives from teaching a special program at a high school across town, students light candles and ask each other to name someone famous they would like to converse with, a ritual to shift everyone into a creative mind-set. Then Gray-Kontar enters, lighting up the room with a joyous greeting that gets all the students clapping and cheering.

The poet is mindful that Cleveland’s current writing culture is rooted in its past. “It’s important for our writers to know they stand on tradition,” says Gray-Kontar. “They stand on a very rich literary and artistic tradition in Northeast Ohio.”

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Seated at a long table in West Side Community House, a social service agency here, 10 girls in Grades 5 through 12 break down two short poems their instructor, Ali McClain, has given them. Then Ms. McClain asks if they saw any alliteration and what the key images are. When they’re not sure what the style of the poem is, she explains free verse.

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**‘WE’VE BEEN TRYING TO SCALE UP FROM WHAT STARTED AS A VERY QUIET, ANONYMOUS CHECK-WRITING PROCESS INTO WHAT ARE THE WAYS CLEVELAND CAN BE THE BENEFICIARIES OF THIS GREAT CANON OF LITERATURE...’**

— **Karen Long**, manager of the Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards



**‘ONCE AN ADULT HAS LEFT THE [EDUCATION] SYSTEM, THERE’S ALMOST NOTHING TO GET THEM BACK IN.’**

– Ann Kowal Smith, executive director of Books@Work

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The Sisterhood is an after-school program for Greater Cleveland that uses poetry as well as other fiction, nonfiction, and memoir books with social justice themes. “We’re trying to expand their vocabulary, [get them to] think critically about what they’re reading, connect it to larger ideas, and understand what the writer is trying to do,” says McClain.

Later in the class, the girls work their way through three poems they have written and read aloud to each other in preparation for an upcoming open-mike event for students.

“Reading them out loud gives them a sense of confidence and pride,” says McClain. “I like to hear them read their work and be able to hear their own voice.”

Ronnea Worley, a ninth-grader, was shy when she started at Sisterhood. “It was weird having people I know watching me and listening, and I didn’t want to mess up. But once I got up there and nobody was judging me, I was able to speak louder and deliver a message,” she says.

“I write about the bad things going on in my neighborhood. It helps me release some of that negativity and talk about how I feel about what’s going on there.”

McClain describes Ronnea as “smart and driven,” and her classmates appreciate her ability to “crack a good joke.” She prefers to write in free verse and loves reading contemporary poetry.

“I am thankful that Sisterhood has helped me come out of my shell, and I’ve made a lot of friends,” says the young poet.

Bulletin boards laden with colorful photos, inspirational sayings, class assignment details, and birthday wishes for one of the girls decorate the walls. “No matter what this life’s adversity may bring” is boldly splashed on one radiator cover, “Sisterhood” on the one next to it.

Originally the brainchild of social-work graduate students from Baldwin Wallace University in Berea, Ohio, Sisterhood started in 2009. McClain was hired in 2010. The curriculum tackles social skills, social justice, health, and other subjects, and she stresses advanced literacy and finding stories that

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– Ali McClain, a teacher with Sisterhood, an after-school writing program

students can relate to. They also produce a weekly blog, “So Nobody Else.” The title comes from a Sisterhood student’s maxim: “We write so no one else will tell our stories.”

One of the poetry exercises they’re working on is called “Alternate Names for Black Girls,” a riff on a poem by male poet and YouTube star Danez Smith. McClain had the students write their ideas for girls; one suggested “more than just target practice.”

“To see what they think an alternate name, positive or negative, for a black girl is can be very chilling,” says McClain. “That’s why it’s so important that underrepresented girls can represent for themselves and tell their stories.”

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Among the more unusual literary ventures in Cleveland is Books@Work, which runs reading clubs in workplaces run by literature professors. All employees are invited to join, from managers to entry-level workers, even chief executives, with an emphasis on bringing personal experiences to bear on book discussions.

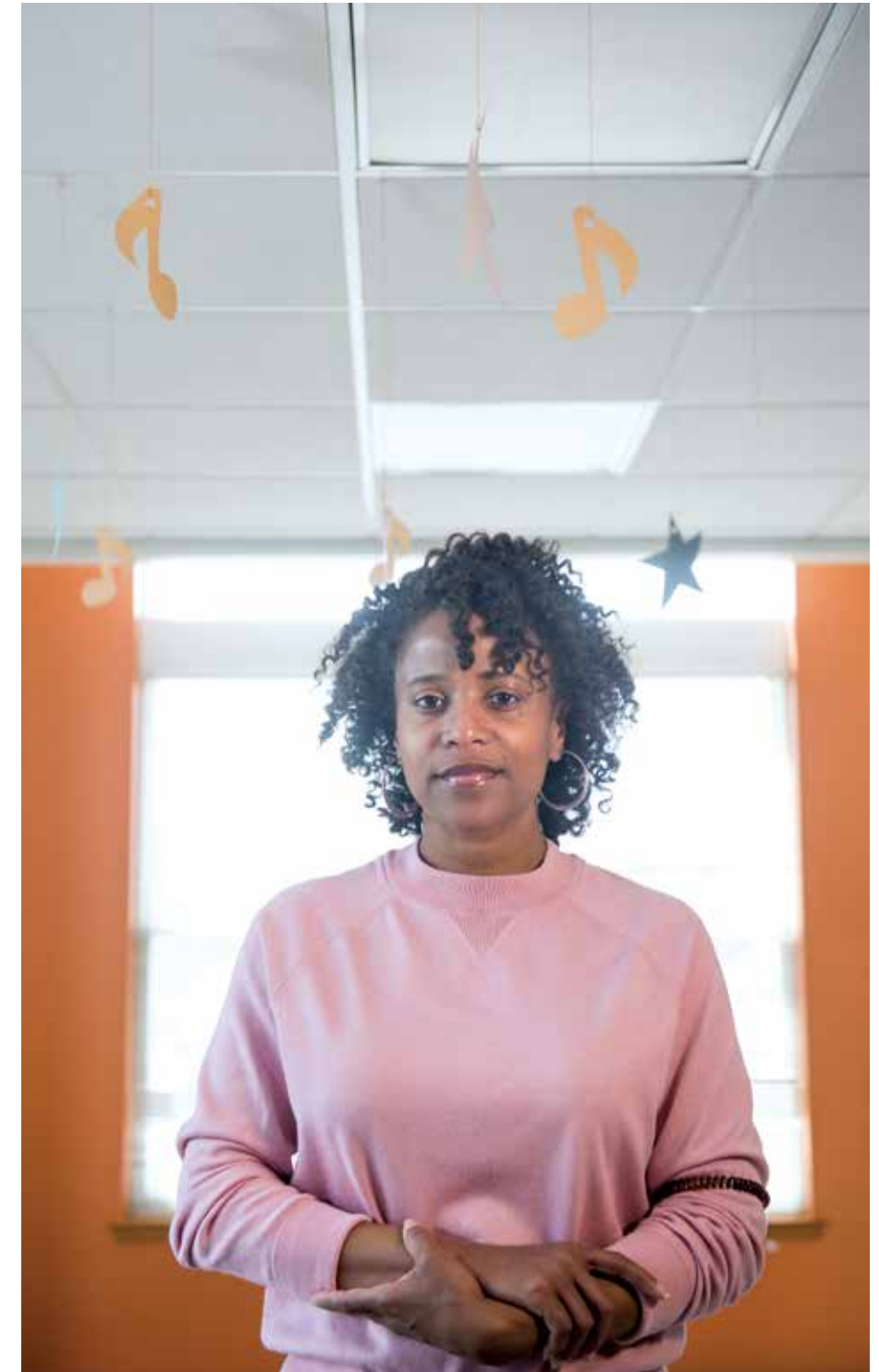
Its founder, Ann Kowal Smith, developed the idea in 2009 for a project aimed at improving adult learning in Northeast Ohio. “Once an adult has left the [education] system, there’s almost nothing to get them back in,” she says.

Books@Work has spread to businesses throughout Northeast Ohio, and to 22 states and seven foreign countries. Roughly 6,000 people have participated in the reading clubs.

In addition to corporate clients, Ms. Smith also works with nonprofits and has developed a program for veterans at the Louis Stokes Cleveland VA Medical Center, a rehabilitation facility for veterans who may stay for several months in an adjacent residential wing. On a recent morning, eight veterans gather in the residence’s TV room, which has couches and plush chairs. Most wear some kind of military apparel: camouflage pants, a US Marine sweatshirt, an Army baseball cap.

Today, these veterans have one thing

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## 'BY THE END OF THE SESSIONS, FOLKS ARE OPENING UP ABOUT BIG THINGS LIKE HOMELESSNESS OR SUBSTANCE ABUSE.'

—Thom Dawkins, facilitator of a book club at a Cleveland veterans center

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in common: They have read “The Smiling People,” by sci-fi author Ray Bradbury. After briefly introducing themselves, their branch of service, and whether they had deployed in combat, the veterans take turns reading out loud. The story is about a man who berates his family members during a special meal he has prepared for them. The macabre twist is that he has recently murdered all of them.

After the reading, the veterans talk about who the man was and what motivated him. A Marine veteran seated in a chair in the corner says, “He was fed up with them running his life and telling him what to do.”

“His family never did listen to him,” says a man in camouflage pants and a dark blue hoodie. “But now they have to—in his mind.”

One Vietnam-era veteran listens intently but remains silent throughout the session.

They all agree that the protagonist in the story suffered from some mental illness. Bradbury, they feel, is a wonderful author because of his ability to convey what was going on in the man’s deranged mind and create all of the conversations for the dead characters.

Walter Byers, a social worker for the US

Department of Veterans Affairs, says the goal of the program is for participants to relax and to get to know other residents. Many seem energized by the discussions and unwilling to let them end after the allotted hour, so conversations spill out into the hallway. Mr. Byers says he’s thinking of extending the sessions by another half-hour.

Today’s facilitator, Thom Dawkins, a lecturer in the English department at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, says the book club offers a break from structured therapy regimens.

“So not only is it low stakes, but what happens in these rooms is extremely welcoming and engaging,” he says. “By the end of the sessions, folks are opening up about big things like homelessness or substance abuse.”



On a Thursday night, Gray-Kontar stands in the bar of the Medusa Restaurant & Lounge. The club hosted The People Grand Slam, the final competition to select the poets who will advance to the nationals. His adult students have won three of the four

slots to represent Cleveland in the National Poetry Slam in Chicago in August.

It’s after 11 p.m. as he makes his way out to the street, high-fiving and hugging all of his poets, as well as many of the other poets and the host. It’s fairly quiet on the street, except for the groups of attendees who are standing on the sidewalk, enjoying the balmy spring evening and sharing their thoughts on the slam.

He later reflects that this could be one of the strongest teams Cleveland has sent to the finals in a long time. “I anticipate a strong showing from them and that they will continue to elevate Cleveland’s reputation as a world-class literary arts destination,” he says.

Disturbed by the social fractures he saw in the community, Gray-Kontar chose to bring about change by cultivating youth of color. “Twelve Literary Arts serves black and brown poets who have been pushed to the margins of society,” he says. “The program is designed specifically to support writers of color – and allies of writers of color – who can become writers and teachers of writing.”

After Gray-Kontar leaves, Siara Freeman exits the club’s front door. She’s wired from the long night of competition in front of a high-energy crowd who cheered the lines they liked and booed a few they didn’t.

Her work is serious: Many poems are about the trauma of her father being murdered when she was 16. But she also showed another side on stage, opening with a poem called “Yo Mama” that had the audience roaring with laughter about shared experiences among mothers, and closed with another crowd pleaser, “Hexes for Your Exes.”

“So, my strategy was, I’m turning 28 tomorrow,” Ms. Freeman says. “I’m grown up. Don’t do this to win. If I do that, I may as well be 21 again. Do this to enjoy myself, however this works out. It will work out.”

Before tonight, Freeman hadn’t “slammed” since she was 23, but she has built a successful career as a poet. She considered moving elsewhere, but Gray-Kontar’s TLA program inspires her. He sweetened the reasons for her to stay by hiring her as one of his teachers, and now she loves the renaissance in her hometown.

“The coolest thing about Cleveland isn’t LeBron James,” she concludes. “It’s Daniel [Gray-Kontar] and all of the poetry and art happening here.” ■



Military veterans Gloria Tolley and Gerald Bowman listen as members of Books@Work, a nonprofit that runs reading clubs in workplaces, read aloud during a session at a veterans medical center in Cleveland.