

CITY SAGE

Gregg Wilhelm finally steers his ambitious CityLit project into publishing

BY HEATHER HARRIS

GREGG WILHELM has the right look for an independent publisher: He's tall and lanky; he wears plastic-framed glasses; his hair is spiky in that done, but not too much, way. Today he's wearing a short-sleeved plaid button-down shirt and jeans, sitting with one leg pulled up into an office chair, and, at 4 p.m., carrying his coffee like a fall accessory.

Wilhelm, a one-time *City Paper* contributor, has spent 18 years in and around the local publishing industry, publishing the likes of Rafael Alvarez and Michael Olesker. Before you can ask him why he's not in New York at Random House or one of the other publishing behemoths, though, he'll say something about his master's degree in theology, or he'll tell you the story of publishing a former Baltimore City school teacher's memoirs of growing up on the Eastern Shore. And the more he talks, the less you can see him anywhere but Baltimore, starting up an independent press as the next chapter in the saga of CityLit (citylitproject.org), the nonprofit literary arts project he began in 2004.

CityLit is Wilhelm's ambitious movement to expand Baltimore's literary culture. Stated that way, it's sort of a vague notion. In practice, CityLit is book festivals, author readings, community writing classes, and programs for kids and teens all aimed at getting Baltimore a little closer to one of its bus-stop bench slogans.

Wilhelm's muse is the program he describes as the grand dame of lit programs, the Loft in Minneapolis/St. Paul. As Wilhelm tells it, when visiting new cities, he always looks for the "cool local bookstore," and his 2002 trip to Minnesota to meet his future in-laws with his then-girlfriend was no different. He went looking for an independent bookstore called Hungry Mind. He found a warehouse called Open Book that housed not only the bookstore (which later became Ruminator Books), but also Milkweed Editions literary press, the Minnesota Center for Book Arts, and the offices and classroom space of the Loft.

This is what I want to do, he thought to himself. *But back in Baltimore, who are all these players?* "I knew I'd have to do a lot of those parts myself," he says.

So instead of bringing pre-existing programs together, he began to partner with local organizations to create them. He part-

nered with the Enoch Pratt Free Library for festivals; he partnered with Creative Alliance at the Patterson for classes. "And it has evolved into a family of programs that help instill and sustain a culture of literature," he says.

Launching a viable literary press would be the biggest challenge. Wilhelm had been working with independent publishers in Baltimore since 1992, first at the Johns Hopkins University Press, then at the archdiocese for Cathedral Foundation Press, then through the legendary and now-defunct book retailer Bibelot at an imprint it called Woodholme House, then at Tidewater Publishers on the Eastern Shore. But even with his experience and the Loft model of what was possible, in 2002 he was in no position to start publishing books on his own. It was too risky and expensive.

Flash forward eight years. CityLit Press, which published its first book, *City Sages*, earlier this year, is the culmination of all of the CityLit programs and all the work that went into them. CityLit 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 submit their work for the Clarinda Harris 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 in book-length form may also 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).

CityLit 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 CityLit Press began to take shape last year, Wilhelm did more than hire a few interns: He pitched a whole partnership to the University

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GREGG WILHELM HELPED CREATE HIS OWN LOCAL LITERARY NETWORK, INCLUDING A NEW PRESS.