

Q&A // GREGG WILHELM

ON THE PRINTED WORD

Loyola's unique student-staffed book publishing operation and the CityLit Project are both ways to get Baltimoreans, especially the young, 'excited about the literary arts'

By LAUREN SHULL (SUN REPORTER)

Gregg Wilhelm stands in front of a large metal cabinet in a classroom full of computers, proudly displaying the books that his students have published. It's an eclectic mix, ranging from poetry to wine guides to a translation of the diaries of a second-century Christian martyr.

Wilhelm makes his living off the printed word. In addition to helping run Loyola College's student-staffed educational publishing house, Apprentice House, he is founder and CEO of the CityLit Project. At Apprentice, students learn to develop projects and design and market books. CityLit, meanwhile, aims to "nurture the culture of literature" in Baltimore through programs and workshops, including an annual festival at the downtown library.

The Loyola graduate had just finished grading end-of-semester papers and took a break from his busy life — which he says he manages with the help of a very supportive wife and lots of coffee — to talk to *The Sun* about what he does for the written word.

Tell me about this classroom — what goes on in here?

Apprentice House has been around for 15 or 20 years. It was a mock company producing pretend-projects as part of one course in the communications department at Loyola College. And then the technology really caught up with the idea. (Now we can manufacture all our books digitally) a process by which books are published in smaller numbers, based on demand. ... So (Andrew Ciofalo, who originally taught the course) started publishing the first books, and he invited me back to teach some guest courses. He went on sabbatical, and I and another Loyola College graduate who teaches in the communications department — Kevin Atticks — sort of took that kernel of an idea and developed three courses that feed directly into the work of Apprentice House, which now routinely produces 10 books a year, roughly. ...

In the fall I teach intro to publishing, which is learning the whole process of how a manuscript becomes a book. Also in the fall, Kevin teaches the design course for projects that have already been accepted and been edited. This spring I just finished the marketing class in which the students create marketing plans.

Where do you get the manuscripts?

Early on, we did the obvious stuff — the best-of-the-best nonfiction journal, the best-of-the-campus fiction journal. And that's all well and good, but we needed Apprentice House to be a much more dynamic and trade-oriented operation.

Some of it is just from my network. Some of it, we just sit around and brainstorm. Like, "Wouldn't it be neat to collect the best writing of that 18-to-22-year-old crowd who are working in Bal-

timore's colleges?" When you talk about Baltimore's literary scene and its heritage, it's always the Poe, Menckens, Fitzgerald kind of thing and less about who's actively working in the literary arts now.

What makes Apprentice House different from other publishing houses?

Apprentice House bills itself as the country's only campus-based, student-staffed book publisher. All those words are important — there are newspaper publishers on campuses, there are journal publishers on campuses that are student-staffed. But we're the only book publisher in the sense that we're a university press, which are very different animals and have a very different mission. We're educators first and foremost.

What happens over the summer when the staff is gone on vacation?

That is a trick, because this is the first full year that Kevin and I have been doing this. We need to meet and talk about that. What do you do when your staff turns over every 14 weeks or between semesters or goes away for a week in Easter or goes away for 2½ months over the summer?

I've talked to two young people about interning here over the summer. Kevin and I sort of steer the ship so work still gets done, even in the absence of students.

Tell me about your other life, with CityLit Project.

The idea dawned on me that I wanted to do more to not just promote the writers that I was publishing but to more comprehensively nurture the culture of literature, which is our tagline at CityLit. So I started the foundation, the beginnings of CityLit Project, in 2003.

In the fall of 2003, Hurricane Isabel blew through Baltimore and quite literally wiped out the Baltimore Book Festival. So after that, the literary arts community rallied and said it would be a shame if there was no celebration of the literary arts in Baltimore (that year). So we rescheduled a scaled-down version of the festival for the spring of 2004 at the Enoch



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Pratt Free Library. And that's become our signature event. ... I've always had a stage at the Baltimore Writers' Alliance Book Festival, ... and it's been called various things — so in the fall of 2004 I changed the

name to the CityLit Stage at the Baltimore Book Festival. And then the Baltimore Writers' Alliance folded. So we took over managing the Baltimore Writers Conference, and that became our

third anchor program. With the Creative Alliance, we started a very popular series of writers' workshops called Write Here, Write Now. That became an ongoing anchor program, and we re-vamped publishing here at Apprentice House to publish some of the very best writing from the first three years of the Write Here, Write Now workshops. Then we did a rock-and-roll concert called Lit's Not Dead. It's music and young writers — a young, edgy kind of literary arts to target the 18-to-34-year-old demographic, which is experiencing the steepest rate of decline in reading.

We did something called CityLit Espanol last year in an effort to

reach out to the Latino community. It failed miserably, so we're thinking about how to do that better. The youth portion of that endeavor was very successful. We did writers' workshops and we invited the youth to design the cover art and title. Then we took it back and produced it here at Loyola. The Spanish-language club translated it, and we had a book party for it. We did all this in one month, and the kids were blown away — it was very successful. So what we're doing is spinning that out into CityLit Teens. Assuming that's successful, and I think it will be, that'll be another anchor program.

How do you balance these two things?

There's synergy in what I do at CityLit and what I do at Loyola. What surprises me is how much I'm enjoying the teaching. I've never taught before — I've never had to develop a syllabus and do it over the course of 14 weeks. And the students here are fantastic, but really when you think about it, you're teaching book publishing to people who don't read. Or don't read a lot. They don't read the way I read — you're reading textbooks or you're reading a syllabus, or you're reading short things online. I believe in the Internet, I believe in online journals and I believe in blogs, and I think that's great, but I also very much believe in these things (books). I'm very much an admirer and a champion of these artifacts called books because I think they're perfect.

How did you get into book publishing?

I did a year at divinity school at Duke and I came back home to Baltimore and I needed a job. I stumbled into Johns Hopkins Press and said, "Do you have anything?" and they said sure. ... And I fell in love with it.

I carved out a career in books in Baltimore, of all places. I never had the desire to go to D.C. or New York. And I think in my own small way, I've been able to do something that no one else was quite doing in Baltimore. ...

It dawned on us last year that CityLit was working. Any small business, any new business, you sort of give it three years and see where you stand. We've done successful programming, we've been well-received by the media. The Maryland State Arts Council and the city, through the Baltimore Office of Promotion and the Arts, have been tremendously supportive financially. Now we're looking at how to collaborate with corporations for sponsorships, how to reach out to foundations, and all the things that any nonprofit has to do to remain financially sustainable so that it can continue to address, meet and grow its mission. So that's exciting, that's really exciting.

CityLit's my main gig. In the end, it's all about promoting the literary arts and getting the community of Baltimore excited about the literary arts and getting all sorts of young people, be they 20-year-old college students or 16-year-old inner-city kids, jazzed about the literary arts.

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