

The State of the Studio – July 2004

The first of periodic epistles from Teri to keep you current.

This past week I was invited to meet with a book club in Colville, Washington. Even though I was on our family farm in eastern Washington it was still a hundred mile drive. I suggested that in addition to meeting with the book club, I offer a writing workshop to teens at the local library. I wrote up a little flyer offering to the first fifteen 13 -18 year olds to sign up a class on story writing. The librarian was a little skeptical. She explained that not only was it the first week of vacation for these kids, but also at the very time I was offering this, Harry Potter was opening at the only town theater.

After my book club luncheon I arrived to a full house – some from Colville schools, some from Kettle Falls schools, some from home schools, all completely enthused about having a writing class. There was also a waiting list and there were complaints that I limited the age group.

Amanda, a 16 year old, said in her introduction that they never got to do anything creative with their writing in schools because their teachers are always teaching for those tests. Courtney, across the table, seconded this, and other kids nodded in agreement.

Two hours flew. These kids could write...well, some of them. Some were too shy to share anything. Some wanted to share everything. One boy is working on his senior project: a memoir about his hippie parents and their back to the land project that took them to Colville. Another, an 8th grader, one of those tiny guys that is still waiting for a growth spurt and a deeper voice, read these funny, lovely descriptions of when his parents got mad at each other. Heidi took my email. She is home-schooled and desperate to be an author and wants to be my email pal. "I will send you my work and you can tell me what you think." (She hasn't sent any. This is fine with me.)

I told them about Studio 26. They were wowed by the concept.

REASON for this story: The kids will come.

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A HISTORY

Last fall, trying to figure out how one starts a non-profit thing for kids, I met with many people who have done just that. Two pieces of wisdom that have continued to be invaluable came from Trish Millines who started Technology Access Foundation. She said starting something like Studio 26 would be a tremendous amount of work, and it would be worth it. (That may not seem so profound to you but her voice in my ears sometimes is invaluable!) Then she said that often people along the line will try to change your vision of what you want to do. You have to be very clear about where you are not compromising and what topics are not up for discussion in the initial creative stages of the project. If you aren't careful, you'll sway too much with people's suggestions and you won't recognize your project anymore.

In the months that followed this meeting with Trish, I have more and more clearly been able to realize what some of those essential pieces are for me in relation to Studio 26. As you know, last winter Sherry Prowda joined me as a founder. I could go on and on about what a stroke of absolute essential luck it has been to find her. Not only does she hold the same passion for this project and have completely different skills to offer, but she also clearly gets and insists on the same essential pieces.

Here are three of them with explanations that might help you, a board member, either understand or explain to someone in the future.

- 1) Location. We must have our own location, independent of the schools, teen clubs, parks system, or a church. Yes, it would be much cheaper to team up with an established program, BUT it is important that world headquarters not be associated with any institution. We want to make our own rules. Many kids have poor associations with schools. We want to imbue the kids with a sense that writing is important enough to have it's own building. We are working to get the front retail store happening, which will further the sense of Studio 26's distance from an Institution. (More on that later.)
- 2) The teachers/writers/tutors do not get paid. We believe in community service and that everyone should do it, whether that is licking envelopes at the local public radio station, serving on a board, or teaching a writing class. I am a teacher and a writer. I would rather do my community service in my area of expertise. I am not alone. We haven't even begun to actively recruit writers to teach, and yet of the fifteen writers we have asked in passing, 100% have said yes. It has also been suggested to me that there are many excellent writing teachers working in the private schools who would love to have an opportunity to work with public school kids as their time allows. There are some wonderful programs in Seattle where writers can get paid to teach writing. Ours is not one of them, although (thanks to Barbara Thomas) there has been some good discussions about other ways to compensate the teachers.
- 3) The students do not pay. Periodically, the "nominal fee" issue comes up as an idea. We might consider asking kids who have not attended classes they have signed up for to pay a deposit for subsequent classes, a deposit they get back when they attend the classes. We might consider a suggested donation. But maybe not. I taught high school for 20 years in a school that mixed private, public and home school kids in an eclectic school situation that rarely exists. I have a million stories about this but in the context of not paying: many kids will not come if they have, in any way, to reveal that they have no money. Our first target group, and the group that we will be attending most emphatically to attracting to our place, will be those kids that cannot afford to take private classes, those kids that don't naturally come from a home climate that pays for ballet lessons or extracurricular soccer teams. We cannot let any amount of money be a barrier to getting these kids to come.

WHERE WE ARE NOW:

(Please as you read this: let me know about concerns, questions, ideas, etc. Because we are still such a loose organization without clear structure, Sherry and I do sort of bulldog our way along, but it is with the assumption that if you as board member feel we are heading off course....help us, for God's sake...We will be developing a structure to more closely include board member feedback.)

- The board is growing! From the originals of Marc Ottaviani who will thankfully be teaching language arts at Cleveland next year (We all know you took this job, Marc, to further the Studio 26 cause), Kip Greenthal and Lisa Verhovek, we are thrilled that both Ann Senechal, (a professional writer/editor who will work from home base in Boston and return to Seattle [where she has lived for years and will one day return] for our quarterly board meetings) and Barbara Earl Thomas, (a writer and painter and luminary in the Seattle arts community) have accepted membership on the board.

The following are people we are considering asking. Please let us know ASAP if there are any people on this list you have concerns/thoughts about and/or if you have ideas about other people we should consider.

Mary Ingraham: (Has worked in publishing, husband Jim was an early Microsoftie (I think??), loads of fun, has said when she returns from vacation she wants to talk.

Nancy Pearl: The Librarian

Felicia Gonzalez (worked in development at the Henry Gallery.)

Lisa Wisener (as in Wisener Hall at Bush Upper School), worked in early days at Microsoft. Lisa was very active in the Bush School capital campaign. They since have moved their three kids to Medina schools, late elementary school and pre-teen. Her husband is a Franklin alum and very active there.

- Our business plan is finished and ready to be shown to future funders, once Anne Senechal in Board Duty #1 finishes editing it. I will get a copy to each of you. We modeled this plan after Arts Corps original business plan, thanks to the generosity of Lisa Fitzhugh, the Executive Director. While Lisa said ultimately many things changed, the exercise of creating this plan was enormously helpful in defining their program and proved to their initial funders that they had put the requisite amount of time and energy into defining the essentials. We received a donation from artist, Ann Gardner, who financed the graphic design of this document, including a cover sheet which I am attaching. I think you will like it. We are considering configuring this cover sheet into Studio 26 stationary.

- Our 501C-3 papers have gone off to the IRS! If you think this is a big deal, you are correct. We have been working for months with Leanne Ryan, a lawyer practicing in Bremerton, to complete these. Our lawyer estimates three months to get our non-profit status, although we expect any day the official letter that our status is “pending.”

For fund raising until we receive our official status, we will include a letter explaining that our non-profit status is pending and the organization will receive a letter for their tax exempt donation just as soon as we are official.

- Our first public mention will come September 1 when Dave Eggers is in Seattle for a book signing at University Bookstore. He will announce at this event the creation of Studio 26 and invite people interested in helping to sign up. This should not be confused with a future fundraiser with Dave, but Dave feels strongly that we need to begin the buzz. Both the San Francisco and the NYC (newly opening) 826 Valencias are very reliant on an energetic, young group of people committed to a wide variety of volunteer work and I see the future wall painters, word spreaders and wacky idea havers in this group.

In addition to the (significant) challenge of fund raising to begin this place, it is important to get young, fun members of the community we are serving involved, both on a volunteer basis and paid. While Sherry and I, of course, are just about as hip and fun and cool as anyone in their 40s and 50s can be, we are not hip and fun and cool and as young as we used to be...and a top priority is to find these people.

- We have begun conversations about the potential for having a retail store. While my initial reaction to starting the writing center and a retail store was something like: you have got to be kidding, I have warmed significantly to the idea. 826 Valencia has a 500 square foot space that is a pirate store and a very cool pirate store at that. They believe it is essential to their being as it serves to create a creative, wacky environment that draws attention to the place in an unusual way. The NYC place has a superhero theme. Since

neither Sherry nor I have a lick of expertise (or passion) for retail, we have thought it would be spectacular to find someone who does and wants to work with us to create this space. We've had Linda Dershing (from Linda's Tavern, and other clubby, hip ventures.) consider helping design our space, we've had some interest by a group called Threads for Art of creating/curating (for a price, although the price could be significantly lower) a fantastic retail world that would turn some heads. An architectural firm has volunteered labor to do whatever we need to turn a raw space into Studio 26. We've got a lot of generosity happening out there. Can we corral it into an unusual store that would draw attention, draw kids, draw consumers and draw revenue to us???

Lisa Verhovek thought of having a magic store in the front. Can you imagine what kind of space the right person could create with that?! And think of the directions that could go...magic tricks ala Ed Sullivan and magic things from around the world and we could magically make discounts for the kids taking workshops on the magic of writing... Oh well.

Or another theme perhaps?

826 has a hired part time manager who runs the store and they believe that it breaks even financially and contributes in much more important ways than financially.

Mostly we want to pose to you, the board, your thoughts about the retail space: feasibility, first impressions, good ideas, etc.

- Sherry met with Diana Blackmore, a risk management expert, to discuss what sort of insurance coverage we will need for Studio 26.
- We met with Jenise Silva, former head of corporate giving at Safeco, to learn her thoughts on Studio 26 and the likelihood of corporate funding. We are happy to report she was impressed with the idea and with the work we have been doing - made us feel good that we were moving along in the right direction. She particularly commented on our relationship with 826 Valencia, saying that corporate sponsors are very interested in the sharing of best practices from like organizations.
- SHERRY'S NEW JOB. Sherry has accepted a position at the Frye Art Museum. Imagine that. Interesting work from there popped onto her radar screen at about the time she was remembering she has two kids in college. This new work has in no way diminished her enthusiasm for Studio 26 and she will continue to be an integral part of the creation, although obviously with somewhat less time.

Here is the plan for now: She is working 80% for the Frye and has made an arrangement with them that will allow her the freedom to attend to Studio 26 biz as it comes up during the week. I will take on more of the '26' work. While initially we had our budget projections reflecting she and I sharing a 1 and 1/3 director's job, we have jiggled that to something like I will be director at 80% time with compensation accordingly and she will be some other job title at 20% time. Her 20% salary will represent an in-kind donation. (or was that 75/25? I guess it is a moot point until the gigantic donations start rolling in.) Like Sherry, I will probably need to be doing some other for-pay work while Studio 26 is forming, although will try to see how I can guard as much time as possible for Studio 26. If only my novel, which just this past week is being shopped to publishers in earnest, would garner a contract large enough so I wouldn't have to seek other work this coming year. That is one big IF and I would appreciate any finger crossing, magic charms, chanting or any other way in which you might be able to add to my get-good-publisher-contract-and-have-it-not-take-too-long wishes. This is not just about my own personal fame and fortune. Let's face it, if I got a Bill Clintonesque advance it would go a long ways (like all the way) towards that first year's funding of 26. That might be a bit ambitious....

WHAT YOU CAN DO (besides the above-mentioned finger crossing):

I think that people might have great ideas about areas in which they can help, have connections, see a need that neither Sherry nor I have considered. Take the below things we've thought of as suggestions that might spark something in you. Call or email with other ideas you have of things we'll need, even if you don't see yourself as the person to do it.

Also, I also think we want to try to keep all board meetings to a minimum and do stuff via email and smaller meetings. I'd be pleased to have coffee with anyone to flesh out any ideas you might have. And I am an email queen: I check often, I get back to people right away, I type fast.

Some thoughts:

We hope to open our doors in January, assuming we have found the right 2500 square foot space in Columbia City, to include a small retail space in front, a small administrative space, and a large classroom space. The most crucial thing right now is money, MONEY, money. We have no track record so in order for us to lease any place we have to be able to prove we can make the rent....and then there is the everything else expenses.

We have identified many funding sources. Perhaps you have others in mind. If you could commit to writing a grant to one (or more!)/doing the legwork around that, I'd be delighted to meet with you to discuss.

We will need a bank of computers. Who wants to get resourceful and find out how to appeal to Apple to give us 10 MACs??? And printers. And tech help??

We will need furniture. I know the school district has a warehouse of surplus furniture and if you dig around enough you can find old but cool wooden tables and desks. But it is a bureaucratic maze and they have to be delivered by union employees and I'm not even sure they would let a non-school program borrow some....but they might. Or somewhere else??? (We have a donated funky, but cool, couch and a donated work table. It's a start.)

Barbara Thomas had some initial ideas for ways we could compensate workshops leaders other than monetarily. Are you out there Barbara??? A great project would be to a) recruit writers/teachers and b) scour the world for 'things' to reward the writers for teaching. (The Prowdas will donate writing time in their almost built Methow Valley vacation home, Jim and I can donate time in our San Juan Island studio apt, and my sisters and I would donate time for a writing retreat to our eastern Washington farm....all places periodically empty and waiting for someone to come be creative.)

I have started compiling a list of young, hip, of color, not of color, artistic, good role model PEOPLE who may or may not identify as writers or teachers, but who would want to do some volunteer work for us tutoring and passing out flyers and painting walls and designing or ????. Know anyone??

Know anyone who would design our website pro bono and/or other design/logo work? We will laud their work in large print wherever it goes as well as write poems in their honor and do other nice things as yet to be determined.

This is just a start....

THE NEXT PHASE:

Does everyone know our First Real Official Board Meeting is September 20th at 6:00 PM?
We have had an unofficial board meeting to elect officers so we could get our Master Business License. We needed three officers and how convenient that we had three board members at that time. Is Lisa as happy to be the president as we are to have her? Does Kip really feel good about being Vice President/Secretary? And is it realistic that Marc with his brand new Cleveland High School job plus Rainier Scholars will figure out what a Treasurer is supposed to do? We might do some juggling at the next meeting if that makes sense....

And lastly, thank you, sincerely, for being a part of this. I believe I write for both Sherry and I when I say we have great admiration for people who put energy and optimism into untried things, who have the imagination to consider what isn't there and who care enough about making things better to do something about it. Sounds like we're running for office.....but we mean it.

Teri