Lila Wallace-Reader’s Digest Writers’ Awards:

Theat of the possible

WALLACE-READER’S DIGEST FUNDS

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Between 1990 and 2000, the Lila Wallace-Reader’s Digest Fund awarded more than $9 million to an exceptional group of 92 poets, playwrights, novelists and nonfiction writers. Grant periods of three years have allowed these writers, who each received a total of $105,000, to devote concentrated periods of time to what they love most: writing. What is unique about the Writers’ Awards is the way the program has connected writers to their communities. As part of their awards, these writers have had opportunities to work in partnership with nonprofit organizations of their choosing to share their love of language and the written word with diverse groups of people.

Over the past decade, these writers have conducted workshops, organized performances, mounted exhibits and given readings in settings as varied as schools, churches, public libraries, YMCA’s, homeless shelters and hospitals. Their constituencies have included teenagers and the elderly, Vietnam veterans and recent immigrants, ranchers and inner-city gang members, teachers as well as adults just learning to read.

For the writers, these experiences have shed new light on the value of community engagement and the ways in which being connected to people often feeds the creative process. Playwright Ellen McLaurin, whose affiliation with American Friends Service Committee in New York City, brought Balkan refugees together for a series of dramatic workshops, said, “This experience hasn’t just changed my work, it’s changed my life. I found out what I care about and what I will put my muscle behind.”

Poet and short story writer Simon Ortiz, whose writing draws from his Native American heritage, echoes the sentiment.

Ortiz worked with the Telluride Institute in Colorado to organize residencies for Native American writers and visual artists at reservation schools and public schools with large Native American populations. “Being able to help develop young writers and taking my writer’s voice into the community have become part of everything I do.”

Affiliate organizations, which received $30,000 apiece to help administer writer-run programs, benefited along with program participants. The effects were far-reaching at San Francisco’s Glide Memorial Church, well-known for its comprehensive outreach programs and services, during its affiliation with poet June Jordan and her students from University of California, Berkeley. “Many people from Glide’s recovery and human service programs were motivated by the poetry sessions to continue their education by completing GED requirements or beginning college,” said Janice Mikulski, Glide’s executive director of programs. “One young woman, whose family had been welfare recipients for five generations, sought and received financial aid for college and, with additional support from Glide, is one semester from graduation. Her goal is to teach poetry at a university and publish her own poems.”

In some cases, working with writers has motivated affiliate organizations to rethink how they operate. A Writers’ Award to short story writer and poet Grace Paley created an opportunity for her to reunite with an organization she helped found in 1967, Teachers & Writers Collaborative, which links people from those two professions. “From an organizational and...
personal perspective, working with Grace again has provided an inroad to re-exam-
ing our beginnings and our mission,” said Nancy Shapiro, director of Teachers & Writers Collaborative. “Her commit-
ment to teaching, social justice and a lit-
erary career helps us communicate that it is indeed possible to combine all three.”

With the rare opportunity to put their writing first for three years, many of the writers discovered how their work had a new kind of power. “It’s not the choice that many of my colleagues would have made, but it afforded me the time and energy to open up other areas of my writing and to explore other genres,” said Lydia Davis, who received word of her Writers’ Award on the day after her 50th birthday. Davis used her award period to write a series of short stories, essays and experimental prose pieces, and to work on a translation of Proust’s Swann’s Way.

Mura used the community affiliate of his Writers’ Award to create an expression from his native Acoma Pueblo language that describes the Native American tradition of using whatever one receives to help someone else. For Mura, a third-generation Japanese-American, the son of parents interned during World War II, “The translation was a wonderful oppor-
tunity, but it didn’t pay anything upfront,” he added. “The Writers’ Award allowed me to do something important to me without having to take on additional teaching — as well as fulfill a desire to become more involved in my community, which before I couldn’t have justified, financially.”

For playwright Richard Nelson, the award influenced the kind of work he chose to take on. “It allowed me to pursue work less commercial than I might have otherwise,” he recalled. “I produced one work on a vast scale and another involved a complex collabora-
tion; neither might I have attempted to do.”

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tion; neither might I have attempted to do.”

Mura extracted the second challenge from this situation. Without training, he was considering teaching an extra course because I needed the income,” she said. “This has been incredibly liberating.”

The first was isolation: although Asian Americans represented the largest minor-
ity group in Minneapolis-St. Paul, Asian American writers in the Twin Cities often felt overlooked by the mainstream writers’ organizations. One of the effects of this isolation was that Asian American high school students seldom saw writers who looked like them. Mura extracted the second challenge from this situation. Without training, young Asian American writers could not go into the community as writing teachers and mentors.

The Writers’ Bloc was designed as a two-
tiered program, offered annually for three consecutive years. The first set of intensiveworkshops brought together a high school and college writers, Asian American and non-
Asian American writers, and high school and college students. Each seasonal set of workshopsculminated in a public reading for the adult and student writers, as well as a poetry reading for the high school students. Each seasonal set of workshops culminated in a public reading for the adult and student writers, as well as a poetry reading for the high school students.

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dadors for the written word. These emerging writers represent the many cultural experiences of Asian Americans in the Twin Cities and are continuing to enliven the Twin Cities’ literary and educational scene.

For the past decade, recipients of Lila Wallace-Reader’s Digest Writers’ Awards have shown how they can connect more effectively to their craft and their commu-
nities. Given the right mix of time and financial support, writers become effective ambassadors for the written word, enrich-
ing the lives of people they encounter and reinvigorating passion for their own work. Post Joy Harjo, whose Writers’ Award has provided the opportunity to celebrate the musical and oral Native American literary traditions through writing workshops, readings and community gatherings, has said, “This is something I wish any writer — any artist — could experience.”

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Mura’s other honors include a National Poetry Series Contest award for his collection, The Writer’s Perspective. His book of essays, The Color of Desire, explores the experience of being Asian American, weaving together both personal and political insights. His book of poems, The Writer’s Perspective, won the Carl Sandburg Award from the Friends of the Chicago Public Library. Mura’s other honors include a National Poetry Series Contest award for his collection, At War We Lost Our Way; an NEA Literature Fellowship; a Loft-McKnight Award; two Minnesota State Arts Board grants; a Pushcart Prize and a Discover/The Nation Award.

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Poets on Poetry series published by University of Michigan Press. Finally, the award made it possible to complete my memoir, Where the Body Meets Memory: An Odyssey of Race, Sexuality and Identity, giving me the added time to work on the book and press on through rewrite after rewrite.

"Of course, the award also allowed me to establish the Writers’ Bloc program at Asian American Renaissance. For me, the most valuable part of the experience was reading and hearing the voices that make up our Asian American community and being exposed to the diverse concerns and backgrounds of the participating writers. The Writers’ Bloc gave our young mentor-writers the chance to work with established writers and high school students, and to work as a group supporting each other.

"It was so important for the high school students participating in that program to see people who looked like themselves, saying, ‘I am an artist. This is the way I define myself. Writing poetry is what I do.’ When I was in high school, I didn’t want to associate with other Asian Americans. I didn’t want to think of myself as a Japanese-American, or as a person of color. Later in my life, I felt that to call myself an ‘Asian-American writer’ was to locate myself in a literary ghetto, that I would enter the world of literature at the back door through an affirmative action program. However, as I went on writing, I discovered that some of my strongest poems were tied to my Japanese background. They were about the internment camps. They were about my grandparents. They were about my parents, about Hiroshima, and survival after the atomic bomb.

"The Asian American students in the Writers’ Bloc wrote about their families, about love, and about imaginative dreams. They also wrote about cultural conflicts with parents, about school experiences, and acts of self-definition. One of the writers, for instance, was a young Hmong woman who had a kidney disease. The elders and her mother had not wanted her to seek out Western medicine treatment, but she had opted to get a kidney transplant. I just writing about her disease was a departure from Hmong tradition. Her courage to do so helped the Hmong students, especially the women, realize the possibilities for themselves. That was true over and over again for the students as they listened to the mentor-writers read and talk about their work.

"The lessons go beyond being a member of a minority group in America. The cultural similarities and divisions within the Asian American community also became an important element of the program. In the Asian-American community, people tend to identify with their particular national or ethnic group. Someone who grew up in Vietnam believes that he or she has nothing in common with someone who grew up in India. However, we found that, when we came together through the arts, we could say, ‘We share some of the same experiences and some of the same mythology. Let’s work together.’

"It’s wonderful to see that the writers who worked with the Writers’ Bloc are still writing. I see them continuing as a presence in the community in many different ways, adding to the variety of voices here in the Twin Cities. The Writers’ Award has had a ripple effect that will go on for many years, far beyond whatever I do individually. When you have people writing about their lives and the lives of the people who were excluded from literature before, the result is a much more democratic vision of poetry.”

— Excerpted from “White Dragons” by Sherry Quan Lee, participant, Writers’ Bloc.
Equally significant, the award allowed me to realize my long-standing dream to make Poetry for the People socially responsible in a way that other people could see their lives. It turned out to be a good exchange. We showed up with food every week, rain or shine, and they made a commitment to their own voices.

There were times when we had as many as a hundred people, diverse in gender, race, age, and ability. We always began by sitting in a big circle and... those in the most desperate personal situations, wanted to focus on the most technical aspects of poetry. After the group discussion, we'd disperse into smaller groups, to talk about the poems they'd written.

Most of the people in our workshops were older. At first, my student teachers found this daunting; they weren't sure what they could offer people older than their parents. There was some resistance on the other side as well, when the older people saw that they would be working with a bunch of kids. However, everyone came quickly to the understanding that, when you learn to write a competent poem, people will care, or at least understand. This is an astounding realization. It cuts across class and age and race.

In our culture there are very few ways to achieve this understanding. It means setting up a community of trust. This became a profound draw for our people at Glide... had done. When you have several hundred people hushed because you have come up and taken the microphone, that's amazing.

My hope was to create something that would catch on across the country. I know that when it comes to community outreach, Glide Church is unique, and Poetry for the People is unique. I also know that there are a lot of good people out there, and I hoped they would be emboldened by our success. It has happened just as I had hoped. Our graduating student-mentors have set up Poetry for the People in New Haven and Los Angeles; and Humboldt College has created Poetry for the People North. This award is helping people all over the country recognize the pivotal relationship between the arts and the advancement of any human civilization.
In my first year as a student teacher, I facilitated a group of eight community members. My group was diverse in terms of gender, race, age, and ability. They all shared one thing: none of them had ever written about their personal experiences.

I remember one student—a young boy who brought in a poem full of abstract ideas and meaningless metaphors. The rest of us had no idea to what he was referring. I gave him some guidelines and politely encouraged him to apply to them the next draft. At the next meeting, the poem had become a moving description of his feelings at the hospital bed of his lover, who had died of AIDS. This was not only the first time he had written about it, but also the first time he spoke about it. Reading the poem was a turning point.

Some activists take a role to be the voices for the voiceless. June Jordan gives voice to the poets and artists formerly voiceless. June Jordan is the best example of the brilliance that results from the fusion of poetry, politics, and community activism.

— Junichi Samitsu, student-mentor, University of California-Berkeley

I hold my head up, prone to walk through any storm
I am proud of me.

— Magnolia Jackson, participant, Poetry for the People, Glide Memorial Church

When she was eleven years old, Lee Smith published a hand-lettered newspaper—circulation of twelve copies—filled with observations and commentary on her neighbors in Grundy, Virginia. More than one dozen novels and short story collections later, Smith is still spreading the news with compassion and eloquence; her ear tuned to the colorful cadences of Appalachian storytelling. Her first novel, The Last Day The Dog Bushes Bloomed, started as a senior thesis at Hollins College. Smith’s novels and short stories have received many awards, including the Award in Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters; the Robert Penn Warren Prize for Fiction; two O. Henry Awards; the North Carolina Award for Fiction; and the Sir Walter Raleigh Award. Her novels and short stories have received many awards, including the Award in Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters; the Robert Penn Warren Prize for Fiction; two O. Henry Awards; and the Sir Walter Raleigh Award. Her novels Oral History and Fair and Tender Ladies, a short-story collection, Nuns of the Spirit, were published during the period of her Writers’ Award.

For her community affiliation, Lee Smith elected to work at the Hindman Settlement School. Established in 1902, the Hindman School is located in Knott County, Kentucky, one of the state’s poorest and most isolated areas.

Through the period of the grant, Smith took a sabbatical from university teaching and expanded her residencies at the Hindman School, visiting three times annually. During her visits, she established workshops for adult learners in Hindman’s literacy and GED programs. In addition to her classroom work, Smith pursued an active schedule of readings at local schools, churches, and community centers in the Knott County area. Lee Smith’s residencies drew national attention to the Hindman School and its programs, with stories on National Public Radio and CBS “Sunday Morning,” as well as her own op-ed article for the New York Times.

Smith’s experience at the Hindman School not only enriched the participants in the class, but became the catalyst for change in her own career. In 1999, she retired from North Carolina State University to devote her time to writing and continued community outreach, primarily at the Hindman Settlement School, where she now serves on the board of directors.

Lee Smith

"The Writers’ Award changed my life in a way that completely surprised me. The timing was perfect. The award came at a point when I was becoming disenchanted with academic life. My graduate students were talking about agents and advances and all those kinds of things, but that’s not what writing is about. I decided to take an extended sabbatical. For three years I didn’t teach, and I was busier than I had ever been. Then I wrote a whole lot of writing and a whole lot of reading. The grant also gave me the chance to evaluate my writing and the notion of career. It gave me enough leisure to reflect a little, which is something I really hadn’t had. And, after..."
The residencies I did at the Hindman School turned out to be refreshing in ways I hadn’t at all expected. The work took me back to the roots of language, and reminded me all over again how thrilling it is simply to communicate. Working with the men and women in the literacy and GED classes, I saw the empowerment that comes through reading and writing. The experience of learning to read and write as an adult is vastly different from the experience of learning to read and write as a small child. It is filled with so many pitfalls, fears, and terror, years of low self-esteem, years of hiding the fact of illiteracy, and being unable to advance in a job or a career. Those of us who learned to read as children can never begin to understand these concerns.

“Until I worked at Hindman, I never truly understood the gulf that exists between the literate and illiterate. People who are illiterate are very isolated. They become fearful and, over time, lose their social skills. I couldn’t understand that isolation at first. Many of the students in the Hindman programs were smart, attractive, fairly young women. However, when they began writing about their lives, I learned that most of them had gotten pregnant at 14 or 15 or 16; they had left school and never returned. Telling their stories became very important.

“Usually in literacy workshops, the participants are so occupied with mastering linguistic skills that they never have a chance to tell their own stories. Most of them don’t think that their own lives are important enough to be told. They don’t understand that their own language is beautiful, that their own stories really are important. But if the person who is encouraging this process is interested and appreciative, then they just write more and more. I was there to make that possible and to work one-to-one with people who wanted to get their stories down.

“During my residencies, I took each day’s writing back to my room, and I typed it up. Whenever possible, I gave a copy to everyone in the group. It was important to see that their writing was real writing. One man wrote about how he was illiterate and then got up the nerve to go to classes. Now he’s an apostle for people who want to learn to read. I was there to make that possible and to work one-to-one with people who wanted to get their stories down.

“One day, I took a workshop with a man who had been left at the age of five. His family had moved away and they had left him behind. He was very isolated and had not written a word in 40 years. He didn’t know how to begin. I helped him learn how to spell his name, and it was wonderful.

“I really love the rhythm and dialect and idiom of the mountain language. I grew up around people who were good storytellers, and the first stories I ever heard were people who spoke in the mountain language. Going to Hindman immersed me again in that culture. I had been gone a long time, and it was wonderful to be back with my own roots. Being at Hindman also reminded me how much I love to work with people. Helping these people express themselves in writing for the first time was like watching them fall in love.

“There was Florida Stone, who was famous in her community for making up songs. For years she had sung about what was happening in her family, in her home, and in her church. She would sing her songs in public, but she didn’t know how to read or write. She had never gone to school. Her mother had been sickly, so she had stayed home to take care of the children. Then she was married very young, to an older man who felt a woman didn’t need to read and write. She had six children, who all went to school, but it wasn’t until her husband’s death that she marched down to the adult learning center. When I got to Hindman, she was just dying to write her songs down. We worked together every day. On the last night of my visit, she came in and presented me with twenty songs she had written out. Each one had taken a long time, and she had stayed up all night to finish. It was wonderful.

“I didn’t know learning to read would change my life so much. It has made me have more confidence in myself. Before, I always had my wife with me. Now, I’ll go anywhere. Also, me and my wife leave notes for each other. Now that’s something!

—Ike Mullins, executive director, Hindman Settlement School

Last night I sat and watched the clouds go by
I heard whippoorwills call from the mountains so high

Seems like death is a secret nobody knows.

— excerpted from “Last Night,” A Garden of Songs, by Florida Stone

Lee Smith | Hindman Settlement School | Hindman, Kentucky

I’ve never seen anything like the impact Lee Smith has had on the students here. Her compassion and willingness to become part of the group, and the confidence she gave them were beautiful to behold. Not one person knew that Lee was a nationally known author; they just knew she was interested in their lives.

— Mike Mullins, executive director, Hindman Settlement School
Over the years, I had done workshops in all sorts of places: homeless shelters, juvenile facilities, schools, prisons. But I had always thought it would be good to do a workshop that would combine writing with mentoring youth. The Writers’ Award made that possible.

“We started the Prism Writers Workshop by approaching all kinds of local organizations and asking them to recommend kids to us—from honor students to drop-outs, from kids with no risk factors to those who are more dangerous—more firepower in the streets, a more pervasive lack of economic means, and what seems to be a stronger cultural push against young people. But the kids themselves aren’t that different. They’re just as lost and confused—and they have just as much ability to make something of themselves, which will always be there for them if they tap into it and are disciplined about the writing.

“The Prism Writers Workshop turned out to be much more successful than we anticipated. I was afraid the kids would get stuck, but they just got better. One student wrote a poem that she called ‘The Call,’ the only poem she ever wrote, which went on to win a high school poetry contest. When you hear someone recite a line or a verse that gets close to the truth in a way that no one ever has before.

“As for myself, I can say without equivocation that the Writers’ Award provided the most fruitful time of my writing life. Even with all the work I do with youth and The Guild Complex, the award made it possible for me to write like crazy. Over the course of three years, I finished a short story collection, a collection of essays, and a book on how to work with youth and violence. There’s definitely a connection. The more fulfilled I am in my social relationships, the more fulfilled I am as a writer. I’m most prolific when I’m engaged in the world around me."

Luis Rodriguez has spent the past 25 years encouraging the powers of expression in young people who are struggling with the same disadvantages and dangers that nearly claimed him. In Chicago, where he has lived since 1985, Rodriguez was instrumental in founding Young Struggling for Survival, an organization that develops alternatives to gang membership. In 1989, Rodriguez helped to found the Guild Complex, a literary arts and performance center. The Chopin Theater, the Guild’s performance space, is located in Wicker Park, a largely Mexican and Puerto Rican community. Considered neutral territory by local gang members, the Chopin Theater serves as a year-round venue for literary readings, workshops, discussions and “open mike” events.

When Rodriguez envisioned a series of workshops for young writers as his Writers’ Award community affiliation, it was natural that he would turn to the Guild Complex, where he sits on the board and is the founder of Ta Chuacha Press, the center’s publishing arm. The Guild Complex and the Chopin Theater offer a safe and supportive environment for young writers to discover their voices.

Rodriguez created the Prism Writers Workshop, an eight-week summer program that coaxes out of its participants a diversity of writing: fiction, poetry, nonfiction, and journalism. More than 70 percent of the young people who enrolled in the Prism Writers Workshop completed the program, a remarkable record given the considerable challenges they faced, including work, parenting, transportation and gang affiliations. At the end of the program, family, friends and community members were invited to the Chopin Theater for a tearful and exhilarating public performance showcasing the work of the Prism Writers. In addition, some of the young writers’ work was included in Power Lines, a ten-year anthology of poetry from the Guild Complex.

Luis Rodriguez  >  “There is a Spanish word — poderes. It means ‘powers’—powers that everyone possesses. Powers of expression, powers of story, powers of being attentive, powers of relationship. When you tap into these powers with writing, you are tapping into your humanity. That’s a beautiful concept to bring to young writers. They learn that everything they need to be right in this world is in their own nature."

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“We started the Prism Writers Workshop by approaching all kinds of local organizations and asking them to recommend kids to us—from honor students to drop-outs, homeless kids to wealthy kids, gang kids and non-gang kids. We especially wanted to reach young people who were dealing with violence, addiction, and abuse. Life for young people is very different, even from the life I knew. It’s different because there are more dangers—more firepower in the streets, a more pervasive lack of economic means, and what seems to be a stronger cultural push against young people. But the kids themselves aren’t that different. They’re just as lost and confused—and they have just as much ability to make something of themselves, which will always be there for them if they tap into it and are disciplined about the writing.

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The work I’m doing with young people doesn’t just help them, it helps me to be a better writer.”
Sharon Olds has published poetry for the past twenty years that has been praised for its directness, honesty and humanity—and hailed as “Whitmanesque.” Satan Says, the first of her eight volumes of poems, was the winner of the inaugural San Francisco Poetry Center Award. Her second book, The Dead and the Living, was the Lamont Poetry Selection from the Academy of American Poets and the winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award. The Wellspring, completed during the tenure of Olds’ Writers’ Award, has been cited as a Recommended Book by the Poetry Book Society of England. Her most recent book, Blood, Tin, Straw, was published in 1999. Olds, who teaches in the Graduate Creative Writing Program at New York University, currently serves as Poet Laureate for New York State.

For the community affiliate portion of her Writers’ Award, Olds expanded the writing program she founded at Goldwater Hospital, a 900-bed hospital for the severely physically disabled on New York City’s Roosevelt Island. The program brings graduate writing students from New York University to work with Goldwater residents who, overcome by accident or disease, have severely limited means of communication. Some can “speak” only by laboriously spell out words with a mouth stick and typewriter, or by waving a laser wand over a light-sensitive computer keyboard.

During the three-year award period, Olds experimented with ways to expand and enhance this program. Each year, six student poets and fiction writers were selected to work with the Goldwater residents. In addition to directing workshops, the student teachers served as tutors, advisors, and writing companions to residents. Despite their limitations, Goldwater residents developed individual and eloquent voices. Annual readings of their work were well attended and received with tremendous enthusiasm.

The Goldwater Hospital affiliation is now a permanent part of the New York University’s Creative Writing Program. Fund support made it possible for Sharon Olds and Goldwater Hospital to develop and disseminate newsletters about the program to writers, occupational therapists, and writing programs nationwide. As a result, the Goldwater Hospital program has become not only a literary lifeline for its participants, but a model of literary outreach to an underserved community.

"When I found out that my Writers’ Award also included a grant for the Goldwater Hospital program, I started sobbing like a baby. Those first few years at Goldwater had taken an unbelievable amount of time — licking envelopes, seeking grants and individual donations, doing benefit readings and, in an impassioned bake-sale way, doing everything we could to keep the program going. The grant from the Lila Wallace-Reader’s Digest Fund meant that the program would be safe for three years. "Those of us involved in the writing program at Goldwater have learned that we all have disabilities, but that writing both transcends and addresses them. All I can do is write one poem at a time, in one sitting, very often on buses or trains — wherever an idea comes to me. But for poets living under the most adverse..."
Have you ever seen a beautiful sunset lingering and when it is about to disappear it has a soft hint of purple trail behind it. It is like a lingering love affair. Passion is only a small part of the whole picture.

— Vanessa Cole, Goldwater Hospital resident

From our Lila Wallace-Reader’s Digest Fund grant, we have been able to get other support and turn the workshops into a permanent part of the graduate writing program at New York University. The students get such an enormous amount from going in and working with the writers at Goldwater, but the program has also helped raise the consciousness of the larger writing community about what can be done with literary outreach. This program has been an important part of a movement that is now nationwide.

— Melissa Hammerle, director, Creative Writing Programs, New York University

Meanwhile, my dream is to see outreach programs like Goldwater in hospitals, prisons, hospices, grammar schools, and high schools. With the help of the Lila Wallace-Reader’s Digest Fund, we were able to send newsletters to every graduate writing program in the country; we want every one of them to start something like the Goldwater program. Working at Goldwater deepens my sense of the place of the arts in the world — to make art may not be a luxury for an individual or a society, but a necessity.

— Melissa Hammerle, director, Creative Writing Programs, New York University

Sharon Olds | Goldwater Hospital | New York, New York

The award allowed me to increase the time I needed to write. I’ve entered a pattern of working so that I’ll never be ten years behind again.

— Sharon Olds, Goldwater Hospital resident

The Writers’ Award made me feel like a ‘real writer.’ It’s hard for me to say what I mean by that. I’ve been writing for so long, why wouldn’t I think I was a real writer? But sometimes people who are doing creative work feel a little bit like fakes. The recognition from the Lila Wallace-Reader’s Digest Fund gave me heart. The award also allowed me to reduce my readings and travel, increasing the amount of time I needed to write and revise poems and to gather them into book form. I was far behind in putting poems together into collections. I had kept up with fundraising for Goldwater better than I had kept up with my own work. During the period of the grant, I wrote many new poems, and I completed the manuscript of a long-delayed book, The Wellspring. The grant also gave me time to make preparations for the next collection of poems, Blood, Tin, Straw. I’ve now entered into a pattern of working so that I’ll never be ten years behind again.

— Sharon Olds, Goldwater Hospital resident

The Goldwater writers have taught us, by example, about humor and realism and the ability to live in an unimaginable state of challenge. Accidents and illnesses have paralyzed them, but not in spirit. These are exceptional people of unusual strength, knowing them educates one’s vision of human nature. For everyone involved, the work done there is a precious part of life.

The students in the NYU writing program are exceptional people, some of the finest writers in graduate school in this country. Many of them apply for jobs at Goldwater — so many that there aren’t enough jobs to go around. Each semester’s group of teachers brings a fresh perspective to the hospital. And the teaching goes both ways. When they come to Goldwater, the students meet people who are extremely wise and compassionate and highly developed as emotional and moral beings.

— Melissa Hammerle, director, Creative Writing Programs, New York University

“The difference between the poems written at Goldwater and the poems written by graduate students in their first semesters is that the Goldwater poems have no self-pity. Self-pity, we learn, is a luxury that people can only indulge when they aren’t up against the emergency that is life.

There are such wonderful poems and stories being written in the workshops. The Goldwater writers have taught us, by example, about humor and realism and the ability to live in an unimaginable state of challenge. Accidents and illnesses have paralyzed them, but not in spirit. These are exceptional people of unusual strength, knowing them educates one’s vision of human nature. For everyone involved, the work done there is a precious part of life.

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Meanwhile, my dream is to see outreach programs like Goldwater in hospitals, prisons, hospices, grammar schools, and high schools. With the help of the Lila Wallace-Reader’s Digest Fund, we were able to send newsletters to every graduate writing program in the country; we want every one of them to start something like the Goldwater program. Working at Goldwater deepens my sense of the place of the arts in the world — to make art may not be a luxury for an individual or a society, but a necessity.

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LILA WALLACE-READER’S DIGEST WRITERS’ AWARDS
RECIPIENTS AND AFFILIATE ORGANIZATIONS • 1990-1999

WALTER ARISH, novel (1992)
Copper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art, New York, NY
Conducted annual six-week seminars for students and neighborhood residents that explored the cross-disciplinary use of language and creativity.

SHERMAN ALEXIES, poet, novel (1994)
Unidad Indians of AZ Tribal Foundation, Seattle, WA
Organized the Seattle Native American Writers Outreach Program, which included a series of residencies that paired well-known Native American writers with local writers in readings, performances and writing workshops for High School preschooleers, homeless, runaway juveniles.

RICHARD BAUSCH, novelist, short story writer (1992)
Lindenburgh Public Library, Wheeling, WV
Presented a Series of “Writers’ Evening” in area public libraries.

CHARLES BAXTER, novelist, short story writer (1991)
Wheaton Council for the Arts, Ann Arbor, MI

FRANK BIDART, poet, novelist (1998)
New England Foundation for the Arts, Cambridge, MA
Gave public readings and conducted discussions throughout New England about the role of poetry and poets in today’s world.

SVEN BIRKERTS, poet (1998)
The Threepenny Review, San Francisco, CA
Curated a series of literary readings in the San Francisco Bay Area.

BRUCE DUFFY, novelist (1992)
Washington DC Leopard Press, Washington, DC
Coordinated panel discussions with local residents that explored change in several neighborhoods from a historical and contemporary perspective.

JOY HARJO, poet, critic (1990)
Historic Trust of Santa Fe, Santa Fe, NM
Presented a series of interdisciplinary arts events featuring contemporary Native American artists.

EDIANNA DANTICAT, novelist, short story writer (1996)
National Coalition for Haiti Rights, New York, NY
Presented a series of interdisciplinary arts events featuring contemporary Haitian-American artists.

LYDIA DIAMS, short story writer, translator (1997)
Town of Espano Port Ewen Public Library, Port Ewen, NY
Promoting local interest in contemporary literature in general and in the town’s Ulmian’s literary tradition in particular, through a series of talks by writers from the Hudson Valley region.

THULANI DAVIS, novelist (1996)
New Day for Women, New York, NY
Directed three plays by young Hispanic playwrights and conducted workshops for emerging playwrights.

IARA FRAZIER, nonfiction writer (1994)
Church of the Holy Apostles, New York, NY
Provided homeless people with professional guidance in writing about their experiences, which were followed by participants giving readings of their work.

JAMES GAULIN, poet, nonfiction writer (1995)
Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN
Conducted poetry workshops for inmates that focus on the ideals of assimilation and multiculturalism; two particularly potent themes in Qiues, the most ethnically diverse county in Vermont.

MARK HALLIDAY, poet, translator (1996)
The Threepenny Review, San Francisco, CA
Created a series of public forums that explore the theme “Writers and Film” in conjunction with the New York Public Library.

KIMIKO HAHN, poet, critic (1990)
Marylhurst University, East W est Players, Los Angeles, CA
Helped forge links between contemporary Asian American theaters and other ethnic and minority theater communities through the development of original performance pieces.

ROBERT COHEN, novelist, short story writer (1995)
National Endowment for the Arts, Washington DC
Helped graduate writing students from the University of California, Berkeley conduct writing workshops for residents of the city’s Tenderloin District who receive an array of social services from the church.

LILIANA KINCAID, poet, novelist (1994)
Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL
Presented several renowned writers to audiences of all ages who had little exposure to the arts as well as a series of public forums that brought together artists and scholars to discuss political and cultural issues related to the festival’s programs.

LARRY BROWN, novelist (1996)
Oxford Public Library, Oxford, MS
Presented a series of public readings and talks by well-known authors.

LORNA DE ELMER, poet, essayist (1990)
Queens Borough Public Library, Jamaica, NY
Promoted local interest in contemporary literature in general and in the town’s Ulmian’s literary tradition in particular, through a series of talks by writers from the Hudson Valley region.

MARGARET GORDON, poet, critic (1992)
Eulen SharwhelArts, Brooklyn, NY
Worked with elderly people in New York City to translate their life stories into creative writing.

ELIZABETH EGGLESTON, poet, essayist (1993)
University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ
Created a series of interdisciplinary arts events featuring contemporary Asian American artists.

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MARIA INES FORNES, poet, critic (1991)
Vermont Reading Project, Chester, VT
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PHILIP KANGOTANDA, playwright (1992)
Eastern Players, Los Angeles, CA
Helped forge links between contemporary Asian American theaters and other ethnic and minority theater communities through the development of original performance pieces.

JIM GRIMSEY, poet, critic (1996)
Seven Stages Theater, Atlanta, GA
Leading a series of conversations between theatergoers and playwrights.

DON D’NOLLO, poet, critic (1994)
Alzheimer’s Association, Westchester Community College, White Plains, NY
Led writing workshops for caregivers of Alzheimer’s patients and patients in the early stages of the disease.

JOHN ROLF EGARDIN, poet, critic (1998)
University of Montana, Missoula, MT
Gave public readings and conducted discussions of her play-in-development, Mad With Joy.

LILIANA KINCAID, poet, novelist (1994)
Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL
Presented several renowned writers to audiences of all ages who had little exposure to the arts as well as a series of public forums that brought together artists and scholars to discuss political and cultural issues related to the festival’s programs.

TOM HIN, poet, translator (1996)
The World Bank, New York, NY
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ADRIENNE KENNEDY, playwright (1993)
Crafts/WriteInternational Projects, Adrienne Kennedy Society, Cleveland, OH
Conducted residencies with young people from the fifth and sixth grade of Cleveland’s magnet school for low-income and minority students.

JAMAICA KINCAID, novelist (1994)
Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL
Presented several renowned writers to audiences of all ages who had little exposure to the arts as well as a series of public forums that brought together artists and scholars to discuss political and cultural issues related to the festival’s programs.

MAXINE HONG KINSTON, novelist (1992)
Center for Mindful Living, Berkeley, CA
Helped forge links between contemporary Asian American theaters and other ethnic and minority theater communities through the development of original performance pieces.

JIM GRIMSEY, poet, critic (1996)
Seven Stages Theater, Atlanta, GA
Leading a series of conversations between theatergoers and playwrights.
VERLYN KLINKENBERG, essayist, historian (1991) University of Nebraska, Lincoln, NE. Organized a series of public discussions involving hundreds of local health care professionals working with the local Indian Health Service. Developed a poetry program for adult literacy students that featured three annual readings by visiting poets. Collected materials for teaching poetry.

LISA WALLACE-READER'S DIGEST WRITERS' AWARDS


WES. MERWIN, poet, essayist (1994) Environmentalist/author, Vail, CO. Planned three conferences for the public about the health of water in his Hawaiian community.

JANE MILLER, journalist (1991) University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ. Worked with graduates of writing workshops through The Poetry Center at the university to present poetry workshops for senior citizens in the Tucson area.

DAVID MURA, poet, memoirist (1996) Asian American Renaissance St. Paul, MN. Offered an annual workshop called Writer's Bloc to young people of Asian American heritage to build a sense of community through writing and reading, culminating in one year in a reading by all involved participants.


SHON ORTIZ, poet, short story writer (1996) Tekakwitha Institute Tonoleo CO. Created art-form residencies for Native Americans in urban areas such as Tucson and Denver.


ADRIAN C. LOUIS, poet, novelist (1995) Oglala Lakota College Kyle, SD. Conducted an annual writing program for members of the community that culminated in the publication of participants' writing in the college's literary magazine and a day-long literature festival for the entire tribal community.

HEATHER MCWHUI, essayist, historian (1995) The Multicultural Collaborative, Eastport, ME. Conceived a multicultural residency with the Eastport elementary school in which she taught poetry and also engaged their students in writing activities.


AKSOLO MELNYCK, poet, novelist (1996) Boston University, Boston, MA. Developed residencies for professional writers in Boston's public schools.

ANTON SHAMAS, novelist, poet (1992) Asian Writers Workshop, Cleveland, OH. Conducted annual residencies with adult literacy students who have left school and whose work was edited for a series of anthologies and radio broadcast.

NWAIKIE SHANGRA, playwright, poet, novelist (1992) Freedom Theater, Philadelphia, PA. Presented a series of workshops and readings throughout the African American community in Philadelphia schools, business organizations, church groups and teachers explored the relationship of poetry to contemporary life.

BAPU SIRDARO, novelist (1993) Asian Society, Houston, TX. Conceived a series of four public readings and discussions through the "Indo-Pak Friendship Forum," which was designed to promote greater cultural understanding of South Asia and its cultures and religions of South Asia among segments of this community and the general public.

LESLIE MANNIM SILKO, novelist, poet (1993) Ohio State University, Columbus, OH. Worked with graduate writing students through The Poetry Center at the university to present poetry workshops for senior citizens in the Tucson area and young people at a local high school.

ISHMAEL REED, novelist, poet, playwright (1997) Oaklands Public Library, Oakland, CA. Conducted discussions of plays and playwriting with adult literacy students and accompanying them to performances of the works they have discussed.

ED ROBBERSON, poet (1998) Good News House/Homeroom VM, Farrington, NJ. Conducted workshops with graduate writing students for the severity physically disabled at the hospital.


LILAWALLACE-READER'SDIGITWRITERS'AWARDS

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TERRY TEMPEST WILLIAMS, nonfiction writer (1999) PEN American Center, New York, NY. Led writing workshops and hosting "Caring Home Community Conversations and Stories," a program developed by the Grand County Public Library in southern Utah.

TOBAS WOLFE, novelist, nonfiction writer (1996) Onondaga County Public Library, Syracuse, NY. Conceived an annual series of panel discussions involving such writers as Keri Auletta and Carl Barnhill.
