



ANNUAL REPORT

2025



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Cover Photo: NY State Poet Laureate, Patricia Spears Jones,
at the Poetry Festival at Highland Park Bowl, June 2025

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

Despite challenges faced by literary nonprofits nationwide, 2025 was an important and energizing year for Writers & Books—one marked by meaningful achievement, creative momentum, and thoughtful transition.

Throughout the year, we hosted a wide range of writing workshops, creative residencies, and literary experiences for writers at every stage of their journeys. We celebrated the written word through signature community events such as Rochester Reads and the Poetry Festival, and welcomed young writers through our SummerWrite camps and yearlong workshops. Collaborating with partners such as the Monroe County Library System and local schools, we continued working toward our shared goal: supporting reading and writing as lifelong practices and strengthening the creative fabric of our community.

This year also marked a significant leadership transition. After several years of dedicated service, Alison Meyers retired as Executive Director, leaving behind a strong foundation and legacy of care, creativity, and commitment. I was honored to step into the role of Executive Director at the end of September 2025. This report reflects both the continuity of that legacy and the collective effort that carried Writers & Books forward during a moment of change.

This annual report captures only a portion of our work, and none of it would exist without our community. We are deeply grateful to our donors and supporters, whose generosity sustains this work; to our staff, board members,



consultants, and volunteers, whose time, expertise, and belief fuel our mission; and to our teaching artists, who share their craft with generosity and care while building safe spaces for creativity.

Above all, we thank the writers, readers, and participants who show up—those who take our classes, attend our events, purchase books and tickets, and support scholarships so others can do the same. Your belief in the value of creative expression is at the heart of Writers & Books. We are proud of what we accomplished together in 2025 and grateful to continue this work alongside you.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Michael Solis". The signature is fluid and cursive.

MICHAEL SOLIS

Executive Director, Writers & Books

OUR MISSION, VISION & VALUES

Mission: Founded by Joe Flaherty in 1981, Writers & Books promotes reading and writing as lifelong activities for people of all ages and backgrounds to enrich their lives and the intellectual, social, and cultural vibrancy of their communities.

Vision: To be a leading resource that celebrates diverse voices and fosters thriving communities of readers and writers.

Values: We believe in the power and importance of the written word; in celebrating the written word as a tool for communication and an art form; that storytelling is a vital aspect of the human experience that unites humanity; that reading builds empathy and brings people together; and in creating a safe space for voices of all backgrounds, beliefs, origins, and abilities.

Writers & Books commits to an antiracist philosophy and practice; to making our programs welcoming and accessible to readers and writers from all backgrounds; to continually educating ourselves; and to transforming our organization in support of justice, equity, diversity, accessibility, and inclusion.



A YEAR AT A GLANCE

6,990

people reached, including program participants, teaching artists, and audience members

3,684

adults engaged as audience members

305

adult learners engaged in creative writing workshops

376

adults engaged in the Community Writing Group

504

youth engaged in youth programs

477

artists engaged across Writers & Books programs

8

adult scholarships awarded, for a value of \$2,580

69

youth scholarships awarded, for a value of \$16,127

202

adult program activities delivered

16

writers advanced their work at Gell through residencies

3,000+

books sold at Ampersand Books

ADULT EDUCATION PROGRAMS

Adult programming at Writers & Books supports writers at every stage and income level through a wide range of learning, community, and public literary experiences. In 2025, our offerings included regular readings with local, regional, and national authors across genres; creative writing classes led by professional instructors; the annual open-air poetry festival in the Highland Park Bowl; Rochester Reads, our flagship community-wide “one-book” initiative; tailored Legacy Writing workshops for older adults; drop-in writing groups, workshops, and book clubs; and dynamic events at our Gell Creative Retreat Center.

Through our gift-economy ticket model for events and scholarship opportunities for every class, we work to ensure that high-quality creative writing education remains accessible to all. The depth and diversity of the authors and teaching artists we collaborate with reflect our ongoing commitment to inclusion and representation. We believe every person is a writer—even if they haven’t yet discovered it—and that every story has value, even if it hasn’t yet been told.



Mimi Kennedy reading from The Education of an Actress



Irizelma Robles giving a bilingual reading from The Book of Conjurations



Melissa Hart & Kayla McKeon with fans of Down Syndrome Out Loud

“Soil is an important book because it makes the connection between racial equity and our environment at a critical time.”

— Rochester Reads 2025 Attendee



Sonja Livingston's "Literary Snapshots" class



Camille T. Dungy, Rochester Reads keynote



Bart White's "Citizen Writers" workshop

In 2025, Writers & Books hosted 202 adult program activities, including readings, workshops, writing groups, book clubs, theater programs (such as 2 Pages / 2 Voices), and special events. These programs welcomed over 3,600 attendees and platformed 237 artists and instructors.

We offered 9 multi-week classes across a variety of genres, alongside 9 free poetry workshops through *Across Generations: Democratic Vistas*, a collaboration with the Academy of American Poets and New York State Poet Laureate Patricia Spears Jones. Our free Community Writing Group, held every Saturday, engaged 376 individual writers throughout the year, with support from the Melissa Dora Benjamin Colbeth Scholarship Fund. We also hosted 3 open mics, providing more than 60 writers with the opportunity to share their work onstage before a supportive audience.

Through our Visiting Authors program, which brings leading literary voices together from all over the country, and the Literary Partners series, which gives local authors the opportunity to cultivate new readers and build community, we hosted 67 readings and special events. In addition, we welcomed Rochester's own Mimi Kennedy, a Broadway and Hollywood star, back to town for a reading from her memoir, and we hosted a packed-house book launch event for local luminary Tokeya C. Graham's *The Black Healing Project*.

This year's Rochester Reads author was Camille Dungy, who visited the city in connection with the community-wide reading of her book *Soil: The Story of a Black Mother's Garden*. Rochester Reads programming served 324 participants through workshops, site visits to School of the Arts and Jennifer House, and Camille's keynote address at the Memorial Art Gallery. In addition, 21 branches of the Monroe County Library System hosted programs connected to the Rochester Reads selection, spurring *Soil* to be checked out 391 times across the system in 2025.

Our newest creative aging program, The Joe Flaherty Legacy Writing Workshops, offered 11 individual sessions at Writers & Books, Monroe County Libraries, and Jewish Family Services, serving 92 older adults.

SARAH'S STORY

Pittsford resident Sarah Schiffeler participated in the first multi-session Joe Flaherty Legacy Writing Workshop in 2025. In her late sixties, she had never written creatively before enrolling in the class.

“I think I’ve uncovered something I didn’t know I had,” she said.

Through the workshop, Sarah began writing about her family history and connection to home. Sharing a piece about the brownstone where she grew up sparked further memories, conversations, and revisions.

Months later, after continuing to meet regularly with classmates from the original workshop, Sarah read her work aloud for the first time at a Writers & Books open mic, welcomed by a warm and supportive audience. After that experience, Sarah reflected on rethinking what it means to stay active as she ages.

“I used to think activity meant only moving your body. This class reminded me that moving your mind and being creative matters too.”

On her daily bike rides, she found herself dreaming up lines for new pieces and stopping to jot them down.

“As I think about what my aging process is going to look like, I know now that it involves action, movement, and creativity. I look forward to doing more of that.”



Sarah Schiffeler workshopping a piece she wrote in her class



Sarah Schiffeler sharing a revised piece at the community open mic in December 2025

YOUTH EDUCATION PROGRAMS

For more than 40 years, Writers & Books has offered youth-centered literary programs that invite children, tweens, and teens to explore creativity, build confidence, and discover the power of their own voices. Joy, imagination, and curiosity are at the heart of our youth programming. Through creative writing workshops, literary-themed camps, and school- and community-based partnerships, we make space for young people to see learning as an adventure and self-expression as a lifelong tool.

In 2025, Writers & Books served 504 young learners through education programs and employed 25 teaching artists. Partnerships were central to our approach; we worked with 5 schools, 4 city branch libraries, and 3 major arts institutions, including the George Eastman Museum, Flower City Arts Center, and the Memorial Art Gallery, ensuring that programs reached students where they live and learn.

SummerWrite, our flagship youth program, serves children and teens—from reluctant readers to budding novelists. The program provides them with a welcoming environment where they experiment, collaborate, and grow. Across genres and formats, students develop confidence, make new friends, and tap into their creative instincts.



SummerWrite campers attending Write a Short Play, perform their original work for family and friends.



Poet Anderson Allen teaching at Rochester Academy

In 2025, SummerWrite welcomed 190 campers across 18 camps. This includes 46 campers participating in tuition-free SummerWrite in the Branches programs hosted at four Rochester Public Library locations. We awarded 21 needs-based scholarships, with 35% of all SummerWrite participants supported by scholarship funding.

In addition to SummerWrite, Writers & Books offered sustained, in-depth youth programming throughout the school year. During the 2024–25 academic year, we launched new year-long creative writing programs at Rochester Academy Charter Middle School and Rochester Prep High School, providing 38 middle and high school students with weekly workshops across the full school year. Participants produced original creative work culminating in published anthologies, deepening both skill and ownership of their writing.

YOUTH EDUCATION PROGRAMS

“My son, who does not enjoy writing, really enjoyed this camp. He said, ‘It’s like English class, but fun.’”

— Parent, D&D Camp



Campers attending It Could Happen Here, a SummerWrite in the Branches camp, explore the Lincoln Library



Percy Jackson's Magic Pen campers embody the Greek gods in an original performance for family and friends



Poetry, Pottery, & Paper camper carves a poem into her clay book at Flower City Arts Center

Our Image Meets Word program, in partnership with the George Eastman Museum, continued to thrive in 2025. Fifth- and sixth-grade students from two Rochester City School District schools participated in a five-week visual and textual literacy experience, combining museum visits with instruction from Writers & Books teaching artists and professional photographers.

Through Authors in the Schools, Writers & Books connected students directly with professional writers. In 2025, 40 creative writing majors at the School of the Arts participated in a master class with Rochester Reads author Camille Dungy, while 48 students at Wilson High School attended author presentations designed to deepen engagement with literature and lived experience.

Impact of Youth Programs

Youth participants develop a wide range of creative writing skills, including character development, world-building, plot structure, suspense, and collaboration. Many students also explore graphic storytelling, learning how images, pacing, and visual elements work alongside text.

Among SummerWrite participants:

- The percentage of campers who reported feeling confident or very confident in their writing abilities increased from 65% pre-camp to 90% post-camp.
- The number of campers who reported knowing more than half, or nearly all, of the subject matter rose from 67% pre-camp to 92% post-camp.

Parents and students consistently report that our programs offer a rare combination of rigor, warmth, and joy.

JASHUA'S STORY

When Jashua's mother, Ronieka, spoke about her nine-year-old son, she smiled and said, "He's a different kind of kid."

Jashua spends hours sketching and writing his own comic book series, Dino Boy. His imagination is expansive, but finding programs that nurtured that creativity wasn't always easy.

"Most summer programs focus on sports," Ronieka explained. "It's hard to find spaces for kids who love art and writing—and even harder to find programs that feel welcoming for children of color."

Through a youth scholarship, Jashua enrolled in Writers & Books' young magicals camp at SummerWrite. At first, he was nervous—unsure if he would fit in or keep up. Those concerns faded quickly. From the first day, he felt welcomed, encouraged, and free to be himself.

"He opened up," Ronieka said. "He felt accepted."

Ronieka describes Jashua as a "COVID kid," part of a generation that missed critical early social experiences. For Jashua, SummerWrite became a place of belonging—a setting where imagination wasn't just allowed, but celebrated.

"Not every kid goes for sports," Ronieka reflected. "Programs like this remind us there are spaces for all kinds of kids."

Jashua agreed.

"We got to make our own wands," he said. "And the counselors were kind every day. Thank you for the scholarship, Writers & Books!"



Jashua creating potions at the young magicals camp



GELL CREATIVE RETREAT CENTER



Novelist Nishant Batsha with Alison Meyers at Gleason Lodge



Poet Ariana Benson reading at Gell; Kathy Engel & Marta Lucia Vargas in residence at Gell cottage



YA novelist Francesca Padilla leading "Craft & Beyond" at Gleason Lodge

In 2025, more than 20 groups and individuals stayed at Gell through Lodge rentals and Cottage residencies. This level of activity was notable given that Gell did not receive its short-term rental certification until late spring 2025.

The Lodge welcomed a wide range of organizations and community groups, including the Sacred Merkaba meditation group, St. John Fisher University's School of Arts and Sciences leadership team, and networking events hosted by both United Way and the Ontario County Chamber of Commerce.

The Cottage hosted writers and creatives from across the Rochester and Finger Lakes region, as well as visitors from outside New York State. Some of the writers who completed residencies included Anderson Allen, Nishant Batsha, Kathy Engel, Francesca Padilla, Angelique Stevens, and Marta Lucía Vargas.

The past year also brought several important infrastructure and operational improvements. Our most significant development was the hiring of on-site caretakers Curt and Nani Nehring Bliss, longtime Naples residents whose local knowledge, relationships, and attention to detail have been invaluable. Their presence allows for efficient coordination with contractors, vendors, inspectors, and renters, freeing staff capacity for programming and strategic work.

"To be here in this beautiful place, with my dear poet sister, has been rich, so welcome, and deeply important for me."

—poet Kathy Engel, resident at Gell

AMPERSAND BOOKS

Ampersand Books, the independent bookstore of Writers & Books, opened in late 2019. It exists not only as a retail space, but as an extension of Writers & Books' mission to uplift writers, readers, and community storytelling.

Impacting Readers

In 2025, Ampersand sold over 3,000 books across in-store sales, pop-up events, bulk orders, and online platforms. More than 650 unique customers shopped at Ampersand, with many first-time visitors returning for events, workshops, and community programs.

Sales of donated secondhand books helped fund daily operations, while special collections directly supported youth scholarships and Joe Flaherty Legacy Writing Workshops.

Ampersand also facilitated bulk orders for institutional partners, including Rochester Institute of Technology and other local organizations, reinforcing our role as a trusted literary partner for educational and civic groups.

Impacting Writers

Titles were available for all author readings and literary events. Ampersand sold approximately 120 books during Visiting Authors and Literary Partners events and 124 books during the Poetry Festival. Ampersand maintains consignment relationships with 110 local authors, featuring their work throughout the store to ensure visibility and access.

Through Rochester Reads, Ampersand played a key role in connecting readers to Camille Dungy's *Soil: The Story of a Black Mother's Garden*.

Community Impact

Ampersand continued its commitment to social impact bookselling. Sales tied to Black Lives Matter and Indigenous-led initiatives generated direct donations to Arnett Library's Readings on Justice Collection and Ganondagan, ensuring that book purchases supported broader cultural and educational work.

Throughout the year, Ampersand staffed pop-up bookstores and partnered with organizations including the University of Rochester, RIT, the Little Theatre, Visit Rochester, the JCC, and numerous festivals and conferences. These partnerships expanded access to books while introducing new audiences to Writers & Books.

"It's a joy to support Ampersand and Writers & Books. Even from afar, I appreciate the thoughtful curation and the friendly, knowledgeable staff."

— Jeffrey, frequent customer

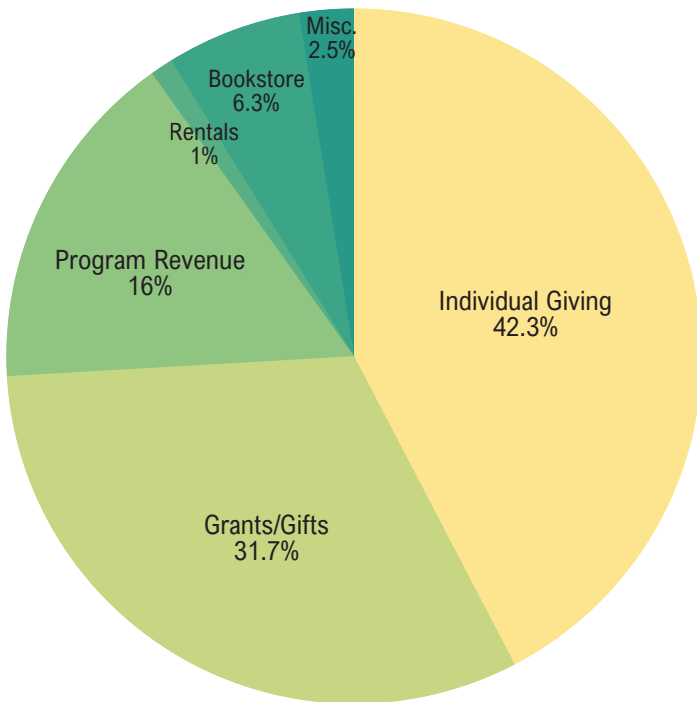


Lily Brunner, staff of Writers & Books

FINANCIAL REPORT

Support and Revenue	USD
Individuals	\$ 330,504
Foundations	178,882
Government	49,077
Corporations	19,701
Workshops and Readings	125,218
Membership Dues	4,700
Rental Income	8,127
Contracted Services	7,200
Bookstore Sales	49,061
Less: Purchases	(29,570)
Other Income	<u>7,942</u>
Total Support and Revenue	750,842

Expenses	USD
Salaries and Wages	\$ 366,660
Payroll Taxes and Benefits	54,342
Artistic Fees	65,384
Depreciation and Amortization	54,842
Occupancy	53,515
Professional Fees	47,200
Scholarships	33,507
Bookstore Purchases	29,570
Office Expenses	25,340
Insurance	21,030
Advertising	18,300
Dues, Fees, and Licenses	16,911
Travel and Entertainment	10,500
Information Technology	9,036
Other Expenses	<u>7,438</u>
Subtotal Expenses	813,575
Less expenses included with revenues	(29,570)
Total Expenses	784,005
Change in Net Assets	(33,163)



Income by Source (2025)

Note: The organization reported a modest net loss driven primarily by depreciation related to long-term investments in facilities and infrastructure. Core operations remained stable.

GOVERNANCE, STAFF & COMMUNITY

Writers & Books' work is sustained by a broad and dedicated community of people who believe in the power of storytelling and creative expression. We extend our sincere thanks to everyone whose leadership, service, and generosity made this year's programs and initiatives possible.

Staff (2025)

Alison Meyers, Executive Director (former); Michael Solis, Executive Director (current); Chris Fanning, Deputy Director; Tyler Barton, Artistic Director; Sally Bittner Bonn, Youth Education Director; Clara O'Connor, Program Associate; Lily Brunner, Bookstore Coordinator & Development Associate; Ren Tyler, Bookstore Assistant; Curt and Nani Nehring Bliss, Gell Caretakers.

Board of Directors (2025)

Christine Eichelberger (President); Tim Schmid (Vice President); Bill Grande (Vice President & Secretary); Mark Boylan (Treasurer); Sydney Bell; John Bouchard; Alexandra Carmichael; Kevin Connell; Eric Cook; Ann Marie Fallon; Lester Friedman; Beverly Gold; Celeste Kier; Nicole Magats; David Shakes; Angelique Stevens.

Honorary Board (2025)

Adrian Neil; James M. Quinn; Omar El Akkad; Jean Gordon Ryon; Mary Widger.

Consultants:

Lydia Kaluzny-Welnicki (Finance), Alison Meyers (Development), and William Sledge (Information Technology).



Christine Eichelberger, W&B Board President, and Seleta Jordan at Rochester Reads

GRATITUDE FOR OUR SUPPORTERS

Writers & Books would like to thank the institutional partners, foundations, and scholarship funds whose support made our work possible:

- Ames Amzalak Memorial Trust
- Canandaigua National Bank & Trust
- City of Rochester
- Claire Allen Memorial Scholarship Fund
- County of Monroe
- Daisy Marquis Jones Foundation
- Farash Foundation
- Genesee Valley Council on the Arts
- Greater Rochester Afterschool Summer Alliance
- Guido & Ellen Palma Foundation
- Honeoye Falls Foundation
- John F. Wegman Fund
- Kitty Jospé Youth Scholarship Fund
- KMT Foundation
- Konar Properties
- LitNYS
- Mardy Mohammed Youth Scholarship Fund
- Mary S. Mulligan Charitable Trust
- Melissa Dora Benjamin Colbeth Scholarship Fund
- Mumford Family Foundation
- New York State Council on the Arts
- Paychex
- Pike
- Rochester Education Justice Initiative
- The Rochester Community Foundation
- 7Crest Financial Partnerships

And many thanks to the individual contributors who made our work possible too. We could not do this without you!





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**writers
& BOOKS**

bringing readers and writers together