



**Ensuring a More Literate Future for All
Excerpted PubWest 2020 Keynote Session
Recorded February 23, 2020
Portland, Oregon**

with

- **Laura Brief, 826 National**
- **Andrew Proctor, Literary Arts**
- **Guy LeCharles Gonzalez, The Panorama Project**

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KENNEALLY: Access to and engagement with literature is critical to inspiring creativity, fostering literacy, and strengthening communities.

At last month's annual PubWest conference, three of today's leading literary advocates shared how they are helping to shape a more literate future for readers, writers, and publishers.

In an excerpt from the PubWest session recorded in Portland, Oregon, the keynote speakers describe their projects and elaborate on how diversity, inclusion, and community engagement all play critical roles in nurturing new readers and writers, while expanding the current – and future – audiences for books.

As CEO of 826 National, Laura Brief, works with the largest youth writing network in the country, serving over 80,000 students ages 6 to 18 years.

Andrew Proctor is Executive Director of Literary Arts, based in Portland, Oregon. From 2000 to 2004, he worked as an editor for HarperCollins in New York City and then as the Membership and Operations Director of the PEN American Center.

Guy LeCharles Gonzalez is chief strategist at Free Verse Media and project lead for the Panorama Project. Previously, he was publisher and marketing director for Writer's Digest.

To listen to a complete recording of the PubWest 2020 keynote session, go to this episode's page on beyondthebook.com and click on the link.



BRIEF: First, I'm so excited to be here. It is not often that you get to be at a conference that is full of people who believe in the power of writing. So being in this room with all of you all is so tremendous, and I'm so excited about it and really look forward to the day when 826 students are sitting in those seats and having a huge impact on the publishing industry themselves. So thanks so much for having us.

And over the last – I've learned so much in the last day, but the one thing that kept – a quote that kept coming to my mind is Toni Morrison's famous saying that – and I hope I don't butcher – maybe I'll look at – if there's a book you really want to read, but it hasn't been written yet, then you must write it. That's something that is on the walls of all of our 826 centers and that really guides our work. 826 was built on the premise that brings you to this room. It was built on the concept that writing changes the course of lives, the course of communities, and can change the course of our nation. How many people in this room had ever heard of 826 before you opened your program? All right. And has anyone in the room actually volunteered with 826? Awesome, thank you. That's great. That's great.

So this is a refresher for most of you in the room – or many of you in the room – but I'll tell you just a little bit. And if you have questions about our program, I'm happy to answer them later. But we were founded in 2002 at 826 Valencia Street in San Francisco by the author Dave Eggers and the educator Ninivé Calegari. And it was built on the idea – this idea that writing is a powerful tool for transforming your relationship to self, for advocating for yourself, for your community, and for – of course, a tool for creative expression and a tool that can really change the professional trajectory and the academic trajectory of lives.

So from 2002, from that one storefront in San Francisco, we've grown to be, as Jake said, the largest youth writing network in the country. We currently serve 80,000 students around the nation. And we do that through our nine chapters and through 826 Digital, which is a teacher-facing platform that takes our tried and true method of teaching writing and provides it to teachers in classrooms everywhere for free. Each of our chapters has an imaginative storefront. It sounds like many of you have walked through them. They serve as a nontraditional entrée for our students and for our community. They're things like a pirate supply shop or a secret agent supply company, or in Brooklyn, it's a superhero supply company. In New Orleans – my favorite concept – it's a haunting supply company, so that all the resident ghosts can get their supplies.

And those storefronts, like I said, act as a gateway, but they do something far more important than that. We publish about 1,000 books of student writing a year. And



what happens in these storefronts is students get to walk in, and they get to see their work on the shelf next to the work of their favorite authors, which is pretty tremendous. So that's what we do.

Let me tell you what we believe. We think a lot about the question of who gets to learn to write in this country and who doesn't. And what we know, and what you know, is that writing changes lives. The data tells us so. Our experience working with young people tells us so. But what we also know is that this tool is not equitably distributed across the United States.

We think about – just to say a little about how we think about writing additionally is we think about reading as access but writing as power. And we believe who gets to learn to write in this country is a pretty important and pretty profound question. It influences whose voices are represented in our newspapers, whose voices are represented in our books, whose voices are represented in the boardroom, at policymaking tables. So the vision we work towards is a United States in which every student gets to have the opportunity to experience the power and the joy of writing. And I'll pause there. I hope that gives you a little context.

PROCTOR: Hey, I'm Andrew. Thanks for being here. It's fun to have this in our hometown again. How many people know about Literary Arts? Awesome. So we are a literary center. We're 35 years old. And we're unusual, maybe because we have a big part of our work as very public programs-based and very public- and reader-facing, and a big part of our work is with the industry and with writers. We actually have our own endowment that funds both independent publishers and independent – and writers themselves. And we also teach writing to about 4,000 kids in the Portland public school district.

We have a space downtown, but we very much work on a hub-and-spoke system, which means that we work in architectures throughout the city and the county and the state. So we go to places in rural parts of Oregon that are considered arts deserts. They have no libraries, they have no cultural services whatsoever. So that's kind of the basis of our work.

We reach about 30,000 Oregonians a year in person and hundreds of thousands – we have our own NPR show here in the Pacific Northwest called *The Archive Project*. And we work in concert halls. We have a giant book festival. We tour the state, and we just try to continue to adapt the organization to serve as many people as we possibly can with the limited resources that we have here in the state. We'll probably talk about how we get to that later, but that's kind of the broad overview of the organization.



I've been with the organization about 10 years. And in the last sort of while, it's gone through some significant changes in terms of trying to be a more inclusive place and really trying to change the structures within our organization and trying to change the structures outside of our organization such as we can to make the organization – and really arts and culture in the city – a lot more welcoming. And some of that work's been successful, and some of it has not been successful, but it's been a really interesting journey.

And the upside is – I'll show you a slide later – is that we, in a very short period of time, doubled the number of people we serve in person. But what's important about that number is that we've doubled the number of unique individuals. In other words, we're not serving the same people over and over and again. We added a whole 100% more people we serve who are entirely new to our organization. We can talk about who they are and how that happened, but that was the sort of – for me, that was the big, big headline for us. So thanks for being here.

GONZALEZ: All right. So how many people have heard of the Panorama Project? A lot less. I thought so. How many of you have heard about the Macmillan library battle? OK. So the Panorama Project – I joined last summer. But basically, it was initially conceived in an attempt to gather and analyze data to really measure the impact of public libraries. There's a general sense of few people will debate public libraries' importance to both the local culture and communities that they support, but particularly in the context of this – the growth of literacy, the nurturing and development of readers through various writing programs, the nurturing and development of future writers – most libraries either have their own writing programs or partner with organizations like this to offer them space to produce those writing programs.

So Panorama Project initially was trying to – data-driven – it's a term I hate, because it's kind of been dumbed down, and it actually doesn't mean anything anymore. GPS was data-driven – it'd drive you off a cliff if you don't pay attention to where you're going. What we quickly realized is publishers weren't really that willing to share data with each other, and in a lot of cases, they didn't have the data to share, because a little company called Amazon captures a lot of consumer sales data and, oddly enough, doesn't like to share it either.

So we made a pivot last summer, when I joined, to really focus on advocacy and engagement. How many public libraries are in the United States? Anybody know? Over 16,000. How many independent bookstores are in the United States? Allegedly, around 2,500. ABA doesn't break out those numbers, because what



most publishers don't like to know is a lot of those independent bookstores are also secondhand, used booksellers, which publishers love less than libraries. (laughter)

So libraries are a critical part of the publishing ecosystem, both for the readers who engage those books through libraries, but more importantly, the kids. The most prominent users of libraries right now are women, mothers of kids. So they're coming into the libraries through the children's services that libraries offer, whether it's story time, access to books, and they're often becoming library users again themselves through those engagements. So two of the biggest populations of current and future readers libraries are there on the ground floor working with, and there are big publishers who are antagonizing libraries right now.

This group – what I think you have a unique opportunity is to engage with libraries, particularly in your relevant regions, to not just sell more books and get more readers, but to really contribute to this more literate future for all. And we'll get into that a little more as we go.

(applause)

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