

Bonnie Culver

Biographical Information

Bonnie Culver is the co-founder and Director of the Wilkes University Low Residency Master of Arts and Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing. She is an Associate Professor of English at Wilkes where she has assumed various roles over the past twenty years—faculty member, college dean, and program director. She is a playwright, screenwriter, and hopeful novelist. Her twenty plus plays have been produced by community theatres, regional, university, and equity companies from NY to LA. In 2004, her play SNIPER won the New Jersey Arts Council Perry Award for Excellence in the Production of an Original Play. SNIPER completed a first class equity showcase at Center Stage, NYC and in 2006 SNIPER was included in the Richard and Betty Burdick National Play reading series at Florida Studio Theatres that “showcases the best in contemporary American theatre.” Other Culver plays that received equity productions were ACCIDENT, LIFELINES, and GROUP S.O.S. (male and female versions). HAVESCRIPTS.COM published GROUP S.O.S. (both versions) in 2006. The film version of SNIPER was a finalist in the Sundance Institute’s Film Development Program. Marlee Martlin’s production company Solo One optioned her fourth film RAINING RAINBOWS. Currently, her film, I DO, starring Robert Wagner and Jill St. John is in pre-production. Bonnie Culver was born in Western Pennsylvania where she graduated from Waynesburg College, majoring in English and Theatre. She received her Master of English from Binghamton University where she studied fiction with Larry Woiwode and playwriting with Loftin Mitchell. In 1990, she received her Ph.D. in English from Binghamton University and began teaching at Wilkes. She has received individual and institutional grants and awards from the NY State Council on the Arts, the PA Humanities Council, and the Maslow Foundation among others. She has served on several not-for-profit and for-profit Advisory Boards.

Campaign Statement:

The first AWP conference I attended was in Norfolk, VA when ODU housed the AWP offices. The gathering that year was so small that the attendees followed each other like joyful lemmings from member meeting to readings to panels to the all-conference banquet—there were few to none concurrent sessions. But like most of you, I felt I had come home, home to an organization that cared about writing and writers. To a place where writers could voice their special concerns in the world of academe and celebrate individual writerly achievements in and out of the academy. When I searched the AWP archives to find the date of that long ago time in Norfolk, I came across Ron Tanner’s 1991 CHRONICLE article, “Defense is the Best Offense When Offenses Abound: How to be an Artist in the Anthill of Academe.” Eerily, Ron’s recent presidential letter to the membership reflects many of the same issues, concerns, and harsh realities writers and writing programs still face today. Fortunately, AWP has continued to grow and to morph from a tiny group into a large, multifaceted organization equipped to serve its membership in many ways. The extraordinary growth in its membership numbers and annual conference attendees, and the rich diversity of activities and sessions demonstrate that fact.

My own writing journey began at Waynesburg College in the 1970s when I couldn't decide between being an English or a theatre major. I pursued both. Such a duality has followed me my entire career. At Binghamton University while studying fiction with Larry Woiwode, I studied playwriting with Lofton Mitchell. My Master of Arts from Binghamton was in English with a creative thesis (a novel and a play); my Ph.D. was an academic dissertation, *THE DIE-HARD DAD: KILLING HIM IN THE LITERATURE OF VIETNAM*. As an assistant professor at Wilkes, I immediately found myself straddling the academic line between creative writer and academic scholar when my four-course load per term included everything from composition to literature to creative writing. Like many of you, I was the lone creative writer.

After gaining tenure at Wilkes, I was named dean. This appointment was not one that I sought, nor ever truly considered. Because of enrollment declines at Wilkes, four schools were collapsed into one college. For six years, I served as the Dean of the College of Arts, Sciences, and Professional Studies, a messy mix of arts, engineering, nursing, business, and graduate studies. In those years, there were two academic deans—the dean of Pharmacy and me, the dean of “everything else, not pharmacy.”

I learned about budgets, business plans, faculty evaluations, grant-writing, project management, advancement, staff and faculty compensation, shared governance, curriculum/program reviews, strategic planning, and accreditation. I served on several not-for-profit and for-profit Advisory Boards then and now. More importantly, I relearned the value of listening and programmatic research. I worked with faculty and department chairs on tasks as diverse as ABET accreditation for engineering, national CCNE application for nursing, or a Middle States Commission's report. As a dean and later a program director, I often referred to the AWP Hallmarks for a successful program. Twice, as dean, I defended the MFA as a terminal degree for theatre and visual artists seeking tenure by quoting from AWP's pages. I learned that much of my job—the problem-solving side—used many of the same creative skills writers use to draft, to dream, and to revise their novels, plays, screenplays, or chapbooks.

In 2003, I returned to the faculty. It was time to stop riding the split rails of administrator and teacher. Time to return to my own writing. J. Michael Lennon, the program co-founder, and I began developing the Wilkes low residency programs in creative writing. As Norman Mailer's official archivist and biographer, Mike had resources within the NYC publishing industry, from agents to editors to heads of publishing houses. Most of my writing connections were, well, writers. We pulled together thirty writers, agents, editors, publishers, directors, and producers and spent two years building a writing community that became the bedrock of the Wilkes program. In 2010, the program celebrated its fifth year and currently has 125 full-time students in poetry, playwriting, fiction, nonfiction, and screenwriting.

My playwriting mentor, Lofton Mitchell, often talked about his experiences as a young playwright in the Rose McClendon Players in Harlem that included: Langston Hughes, Lena Horne, Lorraine Hansberry, Ossie Davis, and Ruby Dee. “We all made it because we supported each other,” he told his students each semester. “There's enough room for everyone to succeed. Writers should never kill writers. The world does its best to do that.” The “world” is certainly upon us all, as writers and administrators of writing programs.

Now, more than ever, artists and arts organizations need to support each other so that we can not only survive, but also flourish. If elected, I bring with me the perspective of a playwright/screenwriter. I am a program director of a low residency program having finally found a comfortable way to wear two hats. In 2003, being the director of a low-residency program was unusual, if not exotic. This is no longer true. In 2003, there were only five such programs. At this year's Denver Conference, there were over forty directors attending the Low Residency MFA Director Caucus meeting. Another dozen guests attended that meeting, gathering information to begin their own programs. Kathleen Driskell and now Stan Rubin have done a tremendous job in organizing the low-res directors, and making AWP aware of the special issues and concerns these MFA programs have.

Lastly, I hope I would bring all of my past dualities—all combinations of theatre-English, writer-teacher, administrator-faculty, director-colleague and, program director-writer—to the table and use my experience to listen. AWP has not only survived, but has also flourished because it has staked its claim in the writing world and the Academy as advocate, supporter, defender, and spokesperson for the individual writer (in and out of academe) and academic programs. I hope and trust that the new strategic plan will be as inclusive as the former one. I believe AWP must continue to expand its leadership role to sustain the art, business, and life of writing and writers. If elected, I will do my best to be a part of that critical work and ongoing dialogue by serving the AWP individual membership.