# Literary Homecoming as Collaboration: Eastern North Carolina Libraries Connect with the Creative Sector

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#### **Abstract**

This article describes an academic library's experience developing and sustaining a literary festival as a collaborative effort. The Eastern North Carolina Literary Homecoming (ENCLH) is a year-long program of events that celebrates the culture and literature of North Carolina. With activities in 6 counties located in the mid-coastal region of North Carolina, the program provides a rich opportunity for people of this area to learn about and meet North Carolina artists. In the past the program was restricted to artists with connections to Eastern North Carolina, but the program is expanding its coverage in 2011. The program theme for 2011 will focus on the impact of environmental literature on social change.

This event has been a successful collaboration between a number of cultural institutions, with Joyner Library at East Carolina University serving as the lead. Federal, state and private grant funding has been secured for several years. Key players in the mix include the editor and staff of the *North Carolina Literary Review*, along with staff from the local public library and members of the ECU faculty as well as librarians from other regional schools.

**Keywords:** Literary Collaboration; North Carolina Literary Review; East Carolina University; Literary Festivals

#### Introduction

East Carolina University is part of the University of North Carolina system of 17 schools and universities. ECU is the third-largest university in the system, with over 27,000 students and over 2,000 staff and faculty. ECU is considered a Doctoral/Research University in the Carnegie Classification. There is a health sciences complex which includes a medical school and a newly established dental school. Libraries include J.Y. Joyner Library and a Music Library on the main campus, and Laupus Health Sciences Library on the west campus.

In 2004, J.Y. Joyner Library at East Carolina University, Greenville, NC, held what was planned as a one-time event: a literary symposium entitled *Eastern North Carolina & Literary Inspiration: a Homecoming*. Seven years later, the celebration, now known as the *Eastern North Carolina Literary Homecoming*, is going strong, with an eighth event in the works for 2011. Throughout the years, this literary festival has remained a free event, with a modest charge for an optional luncheon program as the only cost for those participating.

How does it come to pass that our literary homecoming has retained such longevity? How can we measure what success it has had? What can we learn from the past ho-



mecomings, and what might the future hold? This essay outlines some of the basic assumptions that the organizers have operated under through the years and describes both historical and current approaches to the planning. The hope is that other libraries can benefit from hearing our story and can initiate similar community events that capture the essence of their literary culture and legacy and provide successful outreach to their region.

# The Library and the Artistic Community: A Literature Review

There are a number of articles that document efforts by libraries to connect to the community at large through artistic collaboration. It is not uncommon for libraries to sponsor events that bring in various types of author readings, art exhibits, performances of music and dance, and other cultural events.<sup>2</sup> The purpose of combining forces with the liberal and fine arts is to forge connections and appreciation for the library as a partner in the arts.<sup>3</sup> People who enjoy such programs come to the library and then hopefully remember to come back and avail themselves of the other services the library has to offer.

Howard Raskin, in describing an art exhibition developed in a science-oriented academic research library at Cornell University, quoted a faculty member there as observing, "Public spaces meet an important need for intellectual interaction outside the department boundaries and on shared territory."4 An exhibit of original art in a library is certainly not a new idea. In a 2007 article describing an art program at the library at Indiana State University, the authors refer to an article about art in libraries published in 1914.<sup>5</sup> Several articles describe programs developed to engage teens through public library events involving art competitions. In at least one case, they also suggest writing contests.6 Lecture series and author readings are also mentioned repeatedly as a way of drawing in community members who may not be traditional users of the library. Art exhibits naturally give way to the next ob-

vious step of developing a literary festival. Libraries collect books, so author readings at libraries are a logical fit. As with other arts, literature can bring together people who are interested in common creative themes. As Beth Dempsey notes, "Literary festivals offer a unique proposition to libraries; ... festivals can be the pathway for libraries to 'own' the literary niche in their community."8 Literary events can be developed from a number of angles. They may focus on appealing to a specific demographic of the population, such as showcasing writers of children's books and/or works by a particular ethnic or racial group. A genre of writing may be highlighted, such as festivals planned around National Poetry Month.9 Mystery writer workshops, science fiction conventions, or seasonal themes may bring an opportunity for a library to showcase relevant literary talent.

Considering these examples, it is possible for a library to develop cultural programs in order to connect with a myriad of artistic expressions. Art exhibits, various types of performances including dramatic, musical and dance, and literary and other types of readings are all possible with the right amount of planning and arrangement of appropriate spaces.

In many cases, libraries can go beyond the traditional exhibit case in a corner and actually provide gallery space and other open spaces conducive to various types of performance within the library itself. When such space is not available, the library can still serve as host or collaborator if the event is held in a nearby venue.

In the case of the Eastern North Carolina Literary Homecoming, we've used a combination of approaches over the years, and continue to do so as the program evolves. We also take advantage of new venues around the community as we discover them and/or as they become available, though the main event is always held in Joyner Library itself.



# How the Concept of "Homecoming" Made This Event a Successful Repeat Performance

As mentioned earlier, the symposium was not intended to be a continuing phenomenon. However, due to the initial positive reception, it was repeated and eventually took on a life of its own. Successful grant management and creative planning over the years has had much to do with its success. The theme of a "homecoming" and the goal of community outreach aided organizers in being successful in obtaining grant support. Also, bringing in community and campus units as co-sponsors established enough funding to continue a sustainable event.

Homecoming is a powerful theme in the land of the South. The football-based homecoming is certainly an American tradition, but in the South, there is much more complexity surrounding the idea (akin to the family reunion) and its roots come from a unique history. As John Shelton Reed observed in his groundbreaking sociological study entitled *The Enduring South*, "Although census data show Southerners to be about as likely as any other Americans to leave their home states and region, there is abundant qualitative evidence from every juke box that they are much more likely to complain about having left." <sup>10</sup>

Southern writers mine this mother lode again and again. The theme resonates with North Carolina authors, from Thomas Wolfe's You Can't Go Home Again to Jill McCorkle's Tending to Virginia. Dorothy Spruill Redford's book, Somerset Homecoming, captures the essence of African-American explorations into family heritage. The diversity of homecoming experiences in the South (and particularly in rural eastern North Carolina) creates a rich backdrop for literary expression. Family reunions, church-based homecomings and the like find themselves woven into the plots of Southern fiction over and over, although not always overtly. As Sue Matt observes: " ... heritage festivals, living history museums, and historical reenactments have gained

popularity in the late twentieth century because many rely on them to assuage feelings that David Lowenthal described—'isolation and dislocation of self from family, family from neighborhood, neighborhood from nation, and even oneself from ones former selves.'"11

## 2004-2006: The Early Years

The Eastern North Carolina Literary Homecoming (ENCLH) was inspired by a significant donation to Joyner Library's Verona Joyner Langford North Carolina Collection. The Snow L. and B.W.C. Roberts Collection was given to Joyner Library in May 2001. It contains "a unique collection of fiction set wholly or partially in North Carolina" and "contains more than 1,200 fictional works, covering the period 1720 to the present." <sup>12</sup>

The collection was built lovingly by Mr. and Mrs. Roberts using *North Carolina Fiction*, 1734-1957, a bibliography edited by William S. Powell, as a basis for the books purchased. The Roberts' decision to give the collection to East Carolina University was in part driven by their confidence in ECU's commitment to the study of North Carolina literature. A highly acclaimed peerreviewed literature journal, the *North Carolina Literary Review (NCLR)*, makes its home at ECU and the ECU English Department also offers a specific class in North Carolina literature.

In 2003 Maurice C. York, then head of Joyner Library's North Carolina Collection, proposed the idea of a literary symposium to the library's administration and his colleagues after discussing various approaches with Dr. Margaret Bauer, editor of the NCLR and a professor of Southern literature at ECU.<sup>13</sup> York and Bauer developed the original idea, with plenty of early support from a variety of colleagues. Carroll Varner, then Library Director at Joyner Library, urged them to start the planning. Alex Albright, founding editor of NCLR and coordinator of creative writing at ECU, suggested the "homecoming" theme and continues to be a vital part of the planning committee. June



Parker from Sheppard Memorial Library (the Greenville, NC public library), has been a guiding force throughout the years. Numerous other employees at Joyner Library and ECU and other individuals from around the region have assisted along the way.

The first event was held on a single day, Saturday, October 24, 2004, at the Mendenhall Student Center at ECU. Quoting from that event's brochure, "The symposium will feature seven well-known juvenile and adult fiction writers whose works have been inspired and influenced by eastern North Carolina. The authors will read from their works and discuss how the region affected their writing." <sup>14</sup>

The authors included Sue Ellen Bridgers, Elizabeth McDavid Jones, Randall Kenan, Michael Parker, Bland Simpson, Carole Boston Weatherford, and keynote speaker Allan Gurganus. Gurganus's keynote address at the first symposium set a standard for the future. "He really poured his heart out--it was simply marvelous and really set the right tone for the whole event," York recollected. This keynote was later published in the 2007 issue of *NCLR* in the special feature section "100 Years of Writers and Writing at ECU." 16

The original granting agency was the North Carolina Humanities Council (http://www.nchumanities.org/). York served as the principle investigator (PI) for the grant for the first several years. The North Carolina Humanities Council's policy limits the number of repeat grants issued to a single entity in order to seed new programs, so after the third year, it was necessary to pursue other grant sources to help fund the event.

The second Eastern North Carolina Literary Homecoming took place October 14-15, 2005. The keynote speaker for the second event, the first to be called the Eastern North Carolina Literary Homecoming, was Jill McCorkle. For this second homecoming, the planners experimented with different spaces around campus for the various sessions.

This time, the event spanned a day and a half. The additional half-day of programming was designed to include students in Friday afternoon sessions and to accommodate an awards ceremony and reception on Friday evening. Starting in 2005, an annual award in honor of Mr. and Mrs. Roberts named the Roberts Award for Literary Inspiration was given to an individual "whose work has significantly influenced the literature of North Carolina." The first recipient of this award was David Stick, whose writings and scholarship about the North Carolina coast, particularly the Outer Banks area, has been significant.

As part of the ceremony for the Roberts award, a special hand-carved wooden plaque was created. ECU art professor and 2010 recipient of the North Carolina Award for the Fine Arts, Robert Ebendorf, recommended art students to design the plaque. Art students Judd Snapp and Vicky Sawyers developed the design based on themes derived from books in the Roberts Collection. The flowers on the plaque are inspired by *A* Wreath from the Woods of Carolina by Mary Ann Bryan Mason (1859), the first children's book written by a North Carolinian. A sword and trailing vine are carved in basrelief on the face of the plaque. These symbols are taken from the following two books, respectively: The Story of Jack Ballister's Fortunes by Howard Pyle (1895); and Virginia *Dare; a Romance of the Sixteenth Century* by Miss E.A.B. Shackelford (1892). The cherry wood of the plaque was selected to match the furniture in the North Carolina Collection reading room. The plaque also includes thirty name plates, which are in the shape of books, stacked up on top of one another as you might find books stacked on a table. 18 Roberts Award recipients' names will be engraved on these plates for years to come. (See figure 1.)

The third Literary Homecoming, held September 29-30, 2006, honored Dr. William Powell with the Roberts Award, a fitting tribute and well timed, as Powell's *Encyclopedia of North Carolina* was soon to be published. The 2006 keynote speaker was Mi-





Figure 1. Joe Barricella, photo credit, used with permission

chael Parker, who received the North Carolina Award for Literature that year (the North Carolina Awards being the highest civilian honors given by the state governor). A children's writer, Elisa Carbone, and illustrator James Ransome visited students at a local elementary school on the first day, thus continuing the tradition of student sessions, but this time branching out into the community to reach younger students. Mr. Ran-

some also talked with ECU School of Art students and Art Professor Joan Mansfield during lunch on Friday.

It was after the third Literary Homecoming that a major transition occurred. The number of hours devoted to the event planning was becoming a significant part of three people's jobs, with an estimated 400 hours spent on the planning, so more help was



needed. Also, a new granting agency needed to be identified for funding, and with it, someone who was adept at writing and managing grants. The scope of additional supporting agencies and campus entities had changed, and it was important to secure and maintain a stable set of commitments, since the grant funding only provided about half the funds needed. In addition, Dr. Larry Boyer, the new Dean of Joyner Library, arrived shortly after the 2006 event and getting him up to speed on future plans was critical. Fortunately, Blythe Tennent had been hired as Director of Library Project Development at Joyner Library, which put her in a position to assist taking the Literary Homecoming to the next level.

#### 2007-2008: Transition Years

Planning for the fourth ENCLH event began almost immediately after the third Literary Homecoming weekend came to a close. The most pressing challenge was to secure the support of a new grant source. In December 2006, Tennent and Bauer attended a workshop hosted by the North Carolina Arts Council (NCAC). This agency had established a grant category that would fund literary festivals. The grant guidelines required that events include "active audience participation ... to deepen the participant's experience."19 Event planners were also encouraged to develop activities that would prepare and educate the target audience. This looked like a good fit for our event.20

A newly constituted ENCLH planning committee met in January 2007. While York, Bauer, and others from ECU and Sheppard Memorial Library remained integral to the planning committee, a number of other individuals from the region were invited to serve in order to increase the diversity of the planning process. Debbie McGill from the NCAC also attended the first planning meeting. One of the major goals of the new planning approach was to increase the diversity of the audience. In order to know whether or not goals were achieved, more in-depth evaluation methods needed to be employed. Tennent, the project coordinator,

developed new ways to assess audience response. Through the years, different methods for tracking the audience demographics and collecting evaluations have been used. It has become clear that good assessment is crucial to sustaining reliable grant funding.

The fourth (2007) ENCLH's theme was "Creating Story Out of Family and History," which showcased the homecoming aspect of the event. The community events included a panel discussion about recording family and local history and several genealogy workshops at Sheppard Memorial Library and the Onslow County Public Library. A community-wide reading program sponsored by the Sheppard Memorial Library in Greenville featured Dorothy Spruill Redford's Somerset Homecoming. A genealogy workshop was also held in Greenville. A local church hosted a reading of the play Home, written by the 2007 ENCLH keynote speaker, Samm-Art Williams.

The 2007 Roberts Award was given to Alex Albright, Eva Roberts, and Dr. W. Keats Sparrow for their contribution to the creation of the *North Carolina Literary Review*. As noted in Bauer's tribute to the trio, it was fitting to recognize them during the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of ECU, especially since the magazine is now considered the "state's literary journal of record." <sup>21</sup> Eight artists (poets, historical writers and novelists) participated in panel discussions. Phillip Gerard also provided music for the Friday evening program.

The fifth Literary Homecoming, held September 26-28, 2008, focused on "Raising Awareness: Expressions for Social Change." Doris Betts received the Roberts Award and eight artists including mystery writers, gay/lesbian writers and children's writers were involved in panels and workshops. This was the first year that the program design was expanded to offer workshops in addition to panels and a luncheon speaker, giving audience members a greater variety of program format. Clyde Edgerton served



as the keynote speaker, attracting a large and enthusiastic audience.

After the fifth event in 2008, the number of local sponsors was pared down. Managing a multitude of donors and gifts-in-kind (such as donated refreshments) was time-consuming. The planners instead focused on relying on fewer donors who were willing to maintain an established relationship over time. For example, Krispy Kreme (the local franchise owned by an ECU English Department alumnus) has donated coffee and donuts every year.

During these later years we also learned some lessons about managing "the talent." The ENCLH takes pride in providing care for all the artists including making travel arrangements, meeting them at the airport, providing van transport from the hotel to the venue and providing a special evening "author" supper prior to the Friday night event. In some cases students are assigned to authors who need special assistance. Feedback from authors is unanimously positive. They feel included in the program and enjoy their interactions with one another and audience members. The ENCLH has over the years collected a mix of authors and artists for its programming, drawing upon both newly published and/or lesser-known authors along with "stars" in the field. We learned that the amount authors expect to get paid is not always equal to the amount of effort or unique contribution they may be willing to expend energy on for our program. Although some artists were well prepared and well received by the audience, in some cases the planning committee was disappointed that the "high-price" talent relied on their reputation and did not create a presentation related to the program theme. Also, some writers require a great deal of support and may not be worth the time it takes to involve them in the program. Planners need to research the artists' reputations carefully to make an informed decision before extending invitations.

A practice that helps to avoid misunderstandings with presenters is to have a clearly

written contract that spells out exactly what is expected from them in terms of their part of the program. Even with this, presenters often don't read the details unless and until they absolutely need to do so (and some seem not to read them at all). Therefore, it is critical to supplement the contract with repeated emails and other communications, including telephone conversations, in order to make very clear to presenters where and when they need to be for the event.

An aspect of business that often causes headaches is the form and timing of payment to guest speakers. One of the most frustrating aspects of event planning is when reimbursements are delayed due to some kind of bureaucratic snafu. When grant money is involved, the paperwork can be complicated, so it is helpful to have someone on staff to assist with this. Many professional speakers now require payment on site before they leave as a condition of the contract. From the writer's point of view, it makes perfect sense since the delays otherwise can be months in the making, but universities often prohibit payment until services are rendered. Advance planning allows time to figure out how to accommodate the requirements of both parties.

# 2009-2010: More Recent Times

The sixth (2009) ENCLH theme was "Evolving Expressions: Shaping the Written Word." The Roberts Award recipient was Reynolds Price. Presenting the award to Price was a challenge since he was too ill to travel, and although originally we planned a live video feed of him receiving his award at Duke University, even that turned out not to be possible. We did, however, have a play based on one of his novels performed in his honor by the ECU School of Theatre and Dance, and there were several pre-events that were related to his fiction. Nine artists participated in panels, workshops and musical presentations.

This was the third year we incorporated community events into the program and they were beginning to take on a much larg-



er role in the overall program design. Instead of using them to draw in an audience to the main program, they became outreach events to the community. Eastern North Carolina is primarily rural with limited transportation between and inside communities. By holding events such as writers' workshops, book presentations and readers' theatres in surrounding counties, we were able to introduce the writers and their works to a larger geographic area and more diverse population. In order to ensure participation in these programs, planners partnered with local organizations, which brought participants from their membership and regular programming. Currently, attendees at community events make up half the total audience served each year.

By this point it became necessary to appoint someone to manage volunteers for the main event. The annual Literary Homecoming requires the services of approximately twenty people drawn from the community, the university and the library. Library personnel and student assistants provide the majority of this force, but a number of key players from the university and the community provide helpful services of all types. These jobs range from making sure that someone picks up a speaker from the airport to sitting at the registration desk to decorating the tables for the Friday night awards ceremony. A particularly important job involves distributing paper evaluations and making sure they are completed and turned in. While many kinds of events lend themselves to follow-up surveys on the web, we prefer to get immediate feedback at the point of contact when people's impressions are fresh. The quality of the comments we get is also much better using paper evaluations. This method gives us a chance to provide the participants with an additional motivation to complete them: at the end of the day we hold a raffle and give away nice door prizes. Those who fill out multiple evaluations get an increased chance to win a prize.

In 2009, artistic programming was stretched once again with a musical revue as the finale of the event. The Coastal Cohorts (Bland

Simpson, Don Dixon, and Jamie Hoover standing in for Jim Wann) provided a selection of songs from the delightful musical play *King Mackerel and the Blues are Running*. This was not the first time a musical component had been part of the programming, but it was the most ambitious and complicated musical piece we had ever attempted. Making sure the stage was outfitted and constructed properly, the piano was moved and tuned in the correct fashion, and that other elements of the theatrical details were attended to all made the planning more complex.

In 2010, the seventh theme was "Contrasting Cultural Expression: Perceptions of Place and Self," with Josephine Humphreys as the keynote speaker. Nancy Olson, owner of Quail Ridge Books and Music located in Raleigh, NC, was awarded the Roberts Award for her support to North Carolina writers, with remarks and readings by writers Jill McCorkle and Michael Malone at the Friday evening ceremony.

## 2011 and Beyond

After seven years of successful Literary Homecomings, we are concerned about sustaining the quality of authors and artists by limiting the selection to individuals who have a connection to the region. We've already had several repeat visits from favorite Eastern North Carolina authors, which is not a bad thing, but the region is only so big and we need to find a way to expand the pool of possible authors without compromising the event's brand. It is very important to maintain the successful identity we've developed. Margaret Bauer came up with the idea of tying the annual literary homecoming to a theme from an issue of NCLR, and in that way we can utilize authors featured in that issue of the journal (regardless of their origins), mixing them in along with Eastern North Carolina authors as appropriate. The issue themes lend themselves well to this treatment. NCLR has regularly sold subscriptions at the ENCLH, so audience members who subscribe will hopefully come to the next year's event with



more awareness of who the writers are since *NCLR*'s annual issues are published midsummer.

Although the planners are continually pressured to increase audience size, we have resisted creating a program to mimic other popular literary festivals that draw large crowds and use multiple venues located throughout the community. Instead we have stayed true to the focus of a single-venue program and scholarly exploration of artistic expression. This means limiting the number of invited artists and asking them to participate in several different program formats. The smaller program prototype creates an intimacy that encourages meaningful interaction between the audience and the artists. We also focus discussion around a specific theme each year, asking artists to relate their presentations to questions generated by the planners.

The eighth Literary Homecoming's theme will be focused on environmental writing, drawing from the special feature section of the 2010 issue of *NCLR*, which is due out in July 2011. Fittingly, regular ENCLH visiting writer/musician Bland Simpson will be the Roberts Award recipient for 2011. *NCLR* readers may read about Simpson in the 2011 issue, as well as read an essay by him, and then come to see him honored for his numerous literary contributions, including his regular participation in the ENCLH.

# Additional Lessons Learned through the Years of Planning

The points below are smaller details that may or may not be at issue for others planning such events, but they are worth mentioning:

 Though we always hold the main event in the library, for auxiliary events, some venues worked well and some did not.
 For example, holding certain activities outside on the campus "quad" was not a good idea due to weather concerns and the need to rent tents, which can be very expensive. It's useful to experiment with

- various meeting spaces, but settle on those that have enough flexibility to work from year to year and accommodate your audience comfortably. An auditorium that is too large can be just as unsatisfactory as a venue that is too cramped.
- If at all possible, schedule during a time period when there are no significant sporting events or other major campus or community events that will create audience competition. Even if you are not competing with the sports crowd directly, obtaining hotel rooms for your out-of-town guests may be more problematic.
- The quality and logistics of meal events do make a difference. Pay attention to the details in terms of crowd management and traffic flow, food variety and accommodation for different dietary needs, and the timing of author readings during a meal function.
- Plan for a variety of publicity outlets. Aside from typical flyers, posters, brochures, press releases and the like, be sure to tap into social media as appropriate. ENCLH has a Facebook page and registration for the event is available through Joyner Library's web site. Be sure to connect to local and regional newspapers, radio stations, and magazines that focus on either regional activities or topics of relevance.
- If applying for grants, keep trying if first attempts are not successful. Ask for advice and listen carefully to grant agencies' suggestions for improvement, which can lead to later acceptance.

## Conclusion

Managing events of any kind requires a planning group that works well together, with a mix of "big picture thinking" and attention to detail. Over the years, though the membership of the ENCLH planning committee has ebbed and flowed, there have been several consistent members who have been able to contribute their corporate memory as needed. Having a diversity of community members, campus representa-



tives, university professors, and library personnel involved has brought more creativity and innovation to the mix of ideas for programming. Also, carefully reviewing evaluations from participants and granting agencies each year has helped us bring fresh approaches to planning when the next year's activities are to be developed.

Sharing the load is another theme of our success. Grant development requires expertise that cannot be gained overnight. After the first few years we split the PI responsibility between more than one person. This brought Bauer's expertise with North Carolina literature together with Tennent's experience with grant-writing. Others also were included in the process, which helped give them experience for the future. Sharing the load financially has also made a huge difference for the success of event. Fully half the cost of the program is funded by three separate units on campus, with strong support from the Provost and other administrators.

While it is a significant commitment of staff time and resources to repeatedly plan an event of this magnitude, the good will and recognition that the Library and the cosponsoring units receive in return are worth every minute. We are always looking forward to discovering emerging authors and artists who want to "come home." It is our hope that the Eastern North Carolina Literary Homecoming will continue to be a celebration to look forward to for a long time to come.

# **Endnotes**

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