



The one-on-one tutoring Porter Brown receives from Cameron Ludwick has helped the middle-schooler improve his learning skills and confidence.



Entering and winning a Carnegie Center writing contest helped Sarah Combs become a published author.

# A LITERATE LEXINGTON



CARNEGIE CENTER CELEBRATES  
25 YEARS OF PROMOTING  
LITERACY AND LEARNING

By William Bowden  
Photos by Mark Mahan



Porter and Ludwick have worked together for five years and developed a deep bond. "The relationship he has with Cameron is priceless," according to Porter's mother. They are shown working on his science fair project.

At first glance a 12-year-old middle school student and a published author would appear to have little in common, but in one particular case they share a significant bond — their relationship with Lexington's Carnegie Center for Literacy and Learning.

Porter Brown comes to the center to take advantage of the after-school tutoring program and has become a more confident reader as a result. Sarah Combs has enjoyed more than two decades of association with Carnegie, where she has progressed from student to writing instructor while also publishing two successful young adult novels.

Taken together, they illustrate the range of opportunities envisioned in the center's founding mandate: "To promote literacy, in its broadest sense, to all

residents of Fayette County."

Now celebrating its 25th anniversary, the center has soared far beyond its modest beginnings of 12 students in the tutoring program and three writing classes. Today, about 300 Fayette County students each year attend tutoring sessions delivered by a like number of community volunteers. Professional-track writers can choose from numerous classes, workshops, and seminars found among the more than 180 programs listed in the winter/spring 2017 catalog. There are classes in six languages, as well as English as a Second Language for immigrants and refugees.

"All of us who work or volunteer here have the sense of doing something valuable for our community, either in terms of basic literacy or in the celebration of the craft that is the epitome of that value, the art of writing," said Neil Chethik, the center's executive director.

### The cycle of literacy

The center uses the phrase "the cycle of literacy" to refer to its overall philosophy and operating method. It begins with toddlers in the early learners program, extends through tutoring for school-age children and classes for aspiring writers, reaches literary heights with published authors, then comes full circle when the most literate and accomplished "graduates" of the center return to help those at the beginning of the cycle.

"Lexington is invested in its citizens from a very early age all the way to the peak of a writing career," said Jessica Mohler, marketing and communications director. "As kids and youth come to us, they're learning to read and write at the most basic level, and they need that to function in our society. We complete the cycle of literacy by showing them examples of prolific writers who have taken this necessity and turned it into an art form."

The intensely personal after-school tutoring and mentoring program offered to students from kindergarten through high school comes near the beginning of the cycle. In many ways it has always been the heart and soul of the Carnegie Center.

Ever since the fall of 1992 when those first dozen students sat down with their tutors, the program has sought to help students succeed in school while fostering a love of reading and learning that will serve

of Kentucky, who, like all other tutors, volunteers her time. They meet at the center once a week during the school year for an hour to work on sharpening his reading, writing, fluency, and math abilities.

Even at 12 Porter is wise enough to appreciate what that means to his development. “At school, they can’t pay attention to just you,” he said. “They have to teach every student. But here I have a personal tutor. She can help me.”

Ludwick, who took writing classes at

Academy coordinator. “We have police officers, lawyers, firefighters, high school and college students — they come from virtually all walks of life,” she said.

Phillip Rowe is a retired special education teacher in the Fayette County Public Schools who, remarkably, is in his 18th year of tutoring at the center. He often has more than one student at a time, including three this year. “The thing that keeps me coming back is that I keep seeing students who, wherever they’re at, go up because of being here,” he said.

Rowe echoes Jordan’s thought that tutors gain many rewards from volunteering at the center. “I think the Carnegie Center is a place where people can really learn, and I’m not talking about the students — I’m talking about the people who are tutoring,” he said. “This is your greatest opportunity to see what goes on in the minds of kids. The learning is definitely a two-way street.”

“The Carnegie Center has contributed significantly to my life as a writer.”

—FRANK X WALKER, KENTUCKY’S POET LAUREATE FROM 2013-2015

them throughout their lives. The program strikes at the root of barriers of illiteracy too often related to poverty or race.

Porter Brown is a sixth-grader at Carter G. Woodson Academy, which was designed by Fayette County Public Schools to help boys improve their academic achievement. Even in this highly specialized setting, individual attention may not always be plentiful. The gift of the Carnegie Center to students such as Porter is the transformative power inherent in a one-on-one tutoring session with an adult who cares about them.

“We’re offering a student the chance to have a relationship and a mentorship with an adult outside their parents and their school, a chance to cultivate something special,” said Carol Jordan, tutoring coordinator. “Having adults give a child an hour of their undivided attention is rare. The child knows that here is someone who comes to see only them every week.”

Porter is in his fifth year of being tutored by Cameron Ludwick, publicity and direct promotions manager at University Press

the center as a youngster, enjoys her role assisting in Porter’s development. “We always have a really great time,” she said. “As a second-grader, he was not a confident reader, but now he has learned to speak up and speak out.”

Mary Porter has been very pleased with the changes she has seen in her son. “Coming to the Carnegie Center and working with Cameron has helped him develop his skills, especially in fluency,” she said. “The relationship he has with Cameron is priceless.”

Sometimes tutors support their students in situations beyond the center. Ludwick helped Porter with the text of his science fair project last year and showed up at the regional competition. “It was held at Tates Creek, my old high school,” she said. “We had worked so hard on what he would say to the judges that I had to be there to see Porter present it.” She did the same this year.

Tutors such as Ludwick come to the center from a variety of backgrounds, said Marcia Jones, tutoring associate and Author

## Inspiration for professionals

At the other end of the learning spectrum at the Carnegie Center are the professional-track writers for whom the Center offers a rich variety of classes, workshops, and mentoring programs as well as a spiritual home where they can draw inspiration from one another. If a primary goal of tutoring is success in school, the aim of the writing program is publication. “An important part of our mission is raising the profile of Kentucky authors,” Mohler said.

Subject matter includes fiction and nonfiction, poetry, multi-genre, getting published, querying agents, and proof-reading. The Writer Mentoring Service pairs students with published writers for one-on-one sessions, and the Author Academy is a nine-month writing-certificate program that includes 75 hours of mentoring with a published author. A Writing Critique Night at Joseph-Beth

Booksellers and a Books-in-Progress conference are popular events.

Sarah Combs, author of two published young adult novels — *Breakfast Served Anytime* and *The Light Fantastic* — first came to the center in 1995 as a first-year student in the writing program at the University of Kentucky. From then to now, she has found the center to be a constant source of literary inspiration.

“I submitted my work to the center’s contests very early in my life as a writer when I wasn’t even taking myself seriously,” Combs said. “Winning one of those gave me such a confidence boost, to have your work taken seriously by members of a writing community.”

Beginning as a tutor, she also enrolled in

the Young Women Writer Project for those in their 20s, which today is for high school students. She is now an instructor in that program — “My favorite part about teaching here” — and even served a year as assistant director of the center.

In 2012, Combs won the Young Adult Novel Discovery Contest, an international event sponsored by the Serendipity Literary Agency in New York City. The prize was an audience with an agent, who later helped her get published.

The center’s director is another example of the effect of the organization on a writer’s career. Chethik arrived in Lexington in 1997 “looking for a writing community” and became a writer-in-residence before being named director in 2011. In his two books, *VoiceMale* and *FatherLoss*, he focuses on men’s lives and family issues.

“Writers need community,” Chethik said. “When I left my newspaper work, I wanted another group that would help me. Coming to Lexington, I found that group at the Carnegie Center, and they nurtured me through the writing and publication of two books.”

Frank X Walker has been a student

and teacher at the center and is the author of five volumes of poetry, including *Buffalo Dance: The Journey of York*, which won the 2004 Lillian Smith Book Award. The UK English professor was Kentucky’s Poet Laureate from 2013-15, becoming the first African-American to earn that honor. He coined the term “Affrilachia” to identify the African-American presence in Appalachia and is a founding member of the Affrilachian Poets.

“The Carnegie Center has contributed significantly to my life as a writer,” Walker said. “The high quality and standing-room-only literary programs at the center that give significance to the notion that it means something to be a Kentucky writer are signature events. Teaching here has been a great way to stay connected to that community and the next generation of writers.”

An important symbol of the community that is the Carnegie Center is the Kentucky Writers Hall of Fame, created in 2012 to honor the state’s rich literary heritage. The hall, with its large photos and bios of members, occupies a prominent place on the main floor, where students and writers

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Internationally acclaimed author Barbara Kingsolver was inducted into the Kentucky Writers Hall of Fame in a February 2017 ceremony.



Formerly the home of the Lexington Public Library, the Carnegie Center celebrates its 25th anniversary this year.

of all levels can be inspired by the achievements of Kentuckians in the literary arts. Living inductees are Wendell Berry, Bobbie Ann Mason, Gayl Jones, and Barbara Kingsolver, while posthumous honorees include Robert Penn Warren, Harriette Arnow, and Jesse Stuart, among others.

### An anniversary celebration

Scotty Baesler was mayor of Lexington in 1992 when he prompted conversation about what to do with the Carnegie building, vacated in 1989 by the Lexington Public Library. As the center celebrates its 25th anniversary, he's gratified and a little astonished at the center's progress.

"It has succeeded far beyond what I ever thought it could be," he said. "We've had a lot of good people along the road that have kept it on course. My theory is that people just need a little encouragement, and that's what the center has provided."

## A PLACE WHERE LEARNING IS PERMANENT

Neil Chethik, executive director of the Carnegie Center, loves having the organization housed in a former library building with historic roots in Lexington.

"It gives you a sense of a place where learning is permanent," he said. "We've got beautiful marble on the interior and a spacious feeling in the architecture. Even though the library is gone, we have continued the learning mission that was Andrew Carnegie's vision."

The building was known as the Carnegie Library, or the Lexington Public Library, when it opened in 1905. It's one of 1,689 Carnegie Library buildings in America funded by the Scottish-American industrialist from 1883 to 1929, a philanthropic gesture that went a long way toward establishing the nation's system of free public libraries.

Carnegie donated \$60,000 toward the \$75,000 cost of Lexington's version, a neoclassical design built of Bedford limestone and located at the south end of Gratz Park in the downtown area. Its site goes back in Lexington history to 1793 when Gratz Park was the campus of Transylvania University.

The Lexington Public Library, which left in 1989 for its new home on Main Street, leases the building to the Carnegie Center at no cost. The center is an independent nonprofit institution that draws its funding from fees for some of its programs, donations from Lexington-area individuals and businesses, and local and state governments.



Executive director Neil Chethik, with portraits and biographies of Kentucky Writers Hall of Fame members in the background

# making a difference

CARNEGIE CENTER

Janet Holloway, founder and former director of Women Leading Kentucky, is chair of the center's board of trustees. Since 2011, when she started taking writing classes at the center, she has become a published author — *Leaving Sarah Ann*, a memoir — and feels the organization is more than living up to its mission, “Empowering people to explore and express their voices through imaginative learning and the literary arts.”

“Our public events are drawing more and more people in,” she said. “It’s so exciting to be a part of it. It feels like a blessing every time I go there. I’ve never been in a more creative space.”

National and state recognition have come the center’s way, including the MetLife

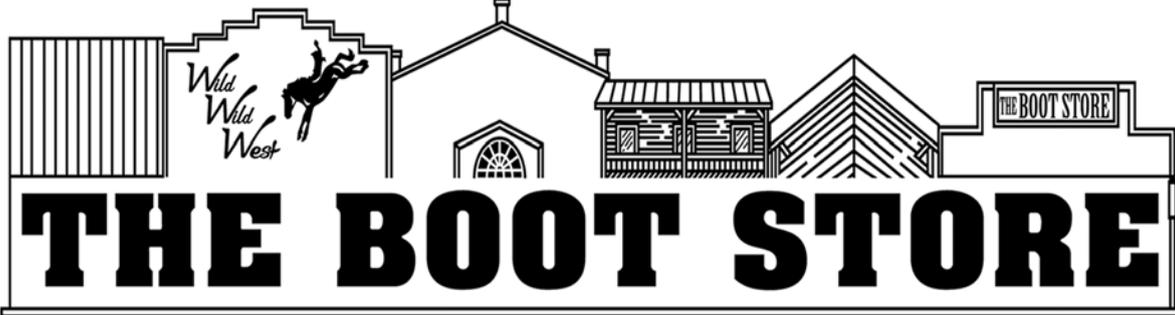
Foundation Innovative Space Award, the 2014 Kentucky Governor’s Award in the Arts-Education, and the 2016 Kentucky Innovative Nonprofit Award from the Kentucky Nonprofit Network.

Jim Gray, mayor of the Lexington-Fayette Urban County Government, put an exclamation point on all of that when he proclaimed February 2, 2017, as Carnegie Center Day in Lexington.

“Congratulations to the Carnegie Center on 25 years of promoting literacy in Lexington,” he said. “The center’s work has made an enormous difference in our community. Lexington is one of the most highly educated cities in the country, and one of the reasons for that is the Carnegie Center.” **KM**



Lexington Mayor Jim Gray lauded the center for promoting literacy.



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