



Illinois Humanities | October 2020

GRANTEE SPOTLIGHT

Three Questions: Q&A with Andrea Change, executive director, Guild Literary Complex



The Illinois Humanities Spotlight

Bi-monthly Illinois Humanities highlights the work of our Community Grants program partners through our "Grantee Spotlight." It shines the light on our grantee partner's work, offering details about the organization and the funded project, as well as a Q&A with a team member of the organization. More: ILHumanities.org/Spotlight

Project

"Press Room" is a new series from the Guild that asks what the first-person literary voice can add to important contemporary conversations in politics and current events. "Press Room" is a series of live events, held quarterly, each organized around a widely discussed topic in the press at the time that directly impacts community members. Each event invites participants to tell a story or read a piece of writing that relates to the given topic from a first-person perspective.



Location

Chicago, IL

Organization

Founded in 1989, Guild Literary Complex (the Guild) is a grassroots literary arts organization creating performance-based events in and around Chicago. It partners and collaborates with other community groups on social and restorative justice issues, providing arts and advocacy programming for marginalized voices. Guild programs offer opportunities for a range of voices throughout Chicago to be heard, engaging people from all neighborhoods and all backgrounds.

Q1

How do you see the arts/culture/humanities as being essential?

Andrea Change: This work is a form of documentation of the times. This quote is posted on the home page of our website — "An artist's duty, as far as I'm concerned, is to reflect the times," Nina Simone.

There has to be something, some groundwork for future generations. Everybody can feel. That is the great part about the literary arts and the work that we do at the Guild, sharing the voices of the marginalized. Using this craft to convey a message or help tell someone's story. Whether we're talking about what's happening right now, or what happens in 30 years, or happened 30 years before, it's important for our understanding, especially in this moment. People can access their empathy through the literary arts. And we need that right now in the world, more empathy.

Q2

What is the most important thing people should know about your work?

Andrea Change: You know, a couple things. One is that the Guild, for a number of years, has been a nomadic organization, in the sense that it always served communities but never stayed in one place. We've had places that we called home in the past, but a lot of the Guild's programs travel to where they are needed. For example, "Palabra Pura" has always had a home in a Hispanic community. It was in Pilsen when it started, now it's in Humboldt Park. We have held programming all over the city.

The other thing is that the Guild has believed in the literary arts as a way of giving voice to various social justice platforms. This has always been the work that we do, starting with the old Guild bookstore. Over these 30 years, we held a women's conference for 10 years, have had events organized around the labor movement, May Day, events around housing and homelessness, Each Other's Harvest. And then "Palabra Pura," which was always meant to be bilingual. It features writers of Latin descent, though not necessarily. Now the idea of focusing on social justice has become trendy, but for us, for 30 years this has simply always been our work.

One challenge is that when we go to funders, since we've been doing social justice work all along, they sometimes have trouble seeing what our specific focus is. In other words, we are not focused on one niche topic, the Guild has always covered this topic. Sometimes they confuse our being nomadic as a sign that we are not focused. It's never been appropriate for us to stop.

Q3

Who makes your work possible?

Andrea Change: Volunteers, staff, funders, stakeholders of other kinds, they all help. Chicago Community Trust, Donnelly, MacArthur, Bloomberg, other private funders. We also rely on individual donors to help us keep going. We will be into our annual appeal by the time this is published. Last year was our 30th, and we raised \$30,000 over the course of the year. Our founding executive director, Michael Warr, was in an interview and he said something really cool. He said "The Guild was born 'woke'" — since our inception, it's been in our DNA to do that good work. Never because it was trendy. It's always been our challenge, to help give voice to those folks who are not heard. And partnerships are critical; partnering with other organizations helps us to expand our audience, our reach. The Guild is now sort of an elder statesman in the literary arts community. Always grassroots, always with a small budget, a 'can do' type of group.

Q

Anything else you'd like to add?

Andrea Change: One of the differences from when the Guild started and now; when we started, we were the only kid in town. I mean there were other places, other organizations, but you could count them on both hands. Now there is so much — the independent bookstores, other community groups and organizations who do similar work. The niche has become so niche, so segmented, that some voices get lost. We did an event for "Press Room." We learned of a transgender person, that had stabbed their lover, found them with a cisgender woman. Sixteen years later, they are released from prison, go through rehab. I thought this is an interesting story, needs to be told. Then, by chance, I meet a corrections officer who had worked in Wisconsin, and was writing a memoir about working in the prison system. So, you have a white male, transgender, former inmate, and a woman who is African-American, also gay. So, we put these people together, to tell their story. I was worried, because beforehand the one had said how much they hated cops. I almost expected they would argue and fight. But they shared this commonality, both from the LGBTQ community, both shared their marginalized experience from different perspectives. They hugged it out. It was so genuine; they really understood each other. And we had literally met each other so casually, but there was purpose in this meeting, kismet. That's what the Guild does. And it's not always about drawing a large audience; sometimes it is just about giving someone a chance to share their story. Understanding what we have in common. Why not make the world smaller rather than bigger?

For more information:

 GuildComplex.org |  [@GuildLiteraryComplex](https://www.facebook.com/GuildLiteraryComplex) |  [@Guild.Literary.Complex](https://www.instagram.com/Guild.Literary.Complex) |  [@GuildLITComplex](https://twitter.com/GuildLITComplex)