

A Year Full of Literacy

by Annie Herrington & Mat McKenzie

The Center for Literary Arts (CLA) was founded in 1986 by Alan Soldovsky with the intention for the south bay to have a “premier literary reading series” in hopes of “fostering an appreciation” for literature in a culturally and socially diverse population. Thirty-three years later the goal of this non-profit organization remains the same—inclusivity throughout the community.

In 2018, then director Kathy Miller went on sabbatical, leading to the assistant director, Selena Anderson, to be in charge of the Center for Literary Arts during this past academic year.

Meeting with Dr. Anderson about this program’s past and its hopeful future, one can see the excitement and optimism she and previous directors have held for this organization. When speaking with Anderson about the goals of this non-profit, she states CLA’s purpose is “to spread influence and interest in the literary arts within a very diverse region. We want our reading list and author lineup to reflect the interests of San Joseans, of all walks of life, and to engage people who may not otherwise see themselves in canonical literature.”

She mentions reading the “classics” like Steinbeck and Hemingway being well and good, but within San Jose and its diverse population, it can be difficult for one to see themselves in those works. Accordingly, Anderson strives to find various authors—authors of color, LGBTQ+, female, senior authors and more—so that this community can have a wide range of literature, created by and for all kinds of people.

One of the larger scale goals of this organization is to become nationally recognized, and as a Texas native, it has given Anderson an “appreciation of the political history of San Jose. The local authors...just the raw talent that’s in San Jose.” Part of that local, raw talent for CLA comes from San Jose State University’s own English department. The graduate students act as volunteers and student-assistants for the program while the undergraduate students attend the events and “bust-out” free poems of an individual’s choosing on demand for them to take home.

So far during the ‘18-’19 school year, CLA has expanded the number of total events from 4 to 7. These extra events are meant to support and collaborate with more local authors, with the intent to offer bilingual poetry and community workshops in its future. Another opportunity CLA wants to provide is bringing writers, readings, and workshops into senior centers, offering senior memoir writing to further expand the organization and its literary influence. CLA wants to partner with other organizations within the community in hopes to engage the public to get involved. A main objective seen through this past academic year is to get local people interested and better acquainted with who and what they are, in order to gain community inclusivity within its diversity.

This public outreach is not just directed to students, as Anderson remarks that she “always wants to lift local writers whenever I can,” and has teetered with finding a connection to CLA and the less-fortunate members of the San Jose community. Speaking further around this narrative, Anderson goes on to say, “I think there’s a lot of people who are interested in writing poems, for example, but they’ve never done a workshop. I think they’d be interested in doing it, and it’s something I want to be able to provide for people.” Steps have already been put into place to cater towards this, as more than 50% of CLA events are free to the public, making them easily accessible to all.

Among these events is the Analicia Sotelo reading, which Anderson regards as her “favorite” of this year. Taking place back on February 7th at the San Jose Museum of Arts, guests enjoyed a flourish of treats such as a spoken word performance from Asha Sudra, the aforementioned free personal poem booth, and a live reading from Sotelo’s novel ‘Virgin.’ Incredible CLA productions such as these have Anderson excited for the variety of events already in line, and the growth of the organization this past year.

CLA’s social media presence has grown with the organization simultaneously, and has been instrumental in drawing a younger audience. They have redesigned the website, with a scheduled update later this year. Active Facebook and Twitter accounts, coupled with a newly created Instagram account, have proven pivotal in attracting more people to CLA.

Under the guidance of Selena Anderson and countless others, the Center for Literary Arts’ growth has been substantial this past year. With a great reception from the community it holds dear, CLA is poised to deliver on these expectations and more for not only itself, but for the city.