In recent years, what it means to be a UNESCO City of Literature has changed significantly. When Iowa City was first designated in November 2008, it was the first such City of Literature in the United States, the third in the world, and one of fewer than 15 Creative Cities worldwide. Today, it is part of a vast global network, one of 39 Cities of Literature, and part of the 246-member Creative Cities Network. In addition, what is asked of a Creative City is fundamentally different, as the call to promote and support the local literary sector has been joined by larger, more global charge.

Increasingly, cities are asked to bring their creativity to bear on the weightiest issues in our world: Those addressed in the United Nations’ 2030 Strategic Development Goals. In the case of the Iowa City area, this has involved macro and micro efforts. For example, at the city level in Iowa City, the government adopted a Climate Action and Adaptation Plan that outlines 35 actions to be taken by the community and City which will result in an 80 percent reduction of community-wide greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. At the City of Literature organization level, this has included efforts to raise awareness of the SDGs and to foster conversation about ways they can be addressed through individual and group efforts.

At the same time, the focus has remained on literature – its creation, its consumption, and its promotion. Our community earned its designation in large part because it is among the primary destinations for those in the United States – and increasingly, the rest of the world – who want to improve their writing.

The independent nonprofit organization formed to manage the designation on behalf of the city is a partnership among the cities of Iowa City, Coralville, and North Liberty; the University of Iowa, the Iowa City Public Library, Johnson County, and the Iowa City/Coralville Area Convention & Visitors Bureau (now known as Think Iowa City). The area business community, local foundations and charitable organizations also provide support, while thousands in the community attend events, read, write and financially support those efforts.

John Kenyon
Executive Director

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Director of Operations

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In 2016, the City of Literature organization set out five goals in a strategic plan designed to guide its operations through 2020. These included raising the profile of the city’s designation and of the organization, evaluating needs of stakeholders, resourcing the organization, serving as a leader in the literary sector, and fulfilling the requirements set out by UNESCO for membership in the Creative Cities Network. While many of the goals in this plan were accomplished, work remains on evaluating needs of stakeholders, work that is expected to be completed in 2021 and 2022 in concert with other area arts and culture organizations.

In fall 2020, the City of Literature approved a new plan to guide it through 2024. The goals are inward- and outward-facing, seeking to strengthen its own operations to better facilitate the work called for to enhance the greater cultural community.

1. Programming innovations focused on collaboration and on connecting with new communities: Explore options for increasing engagement online, within communities not currently reached by the City of Literature organization, and through collaborations with related and like-minded groups.

2. Board effectiveness enhancements: Harness more of the talent and expertise among board members in support of the organization through such means as establishing board committees, developing financial modeling tools, and formalizing processes.

3. Marketing messaging: Ensure the newly articulated mission and core values are clearly reflected in the City of Literature brand identity and messaging, and refine the website to support critical activities in a more robust manner.

As part of this work, the organization updated its Mission and Vision statements, and approved a set of Core Values:

**MISSION**
We build and support diverse communities of writers and audiences through the transformative power of story.

**VISION**
We foster collaborations with the goal of enriching local literary programs and expanding our global engagement.

**VALUES:**
Collaboration: We engage in complementary and cooperative work.
Community: We foster inclusive engagement to create connection locally and globally.
Creativity: We seek, engage, and support innovation.
Study of the Community's Arts and Culture Sector

In 2019, eight arts nonprofits housed in downtown Iowa City came together informally to create what became the Iowa City Downtown Arts Alliance. Members include a professional theatre company, an independent cinema, a performing arts theatre, an umbrella organization for music and art festivals, an independent press, and a multi-disciplinary arts center.

The goals of this group were to share information, explore the sharing of resources, and to find ways to connect and collaborate to our shared benefit. One of the goals of this organization is a broader task carried over from the City of Literature's 2016 strategic plan: to survey the community about how arts and culture needs are being met, what gaps exist, and how best to close those gaps. This would address the literary culture of the community as part of a larger effort coordinated by other organizations.

With this information in hand, the organization can better determine scale and scope of the sector, its economic impact, and, by setting this as a benchmark, its growth. Policy as it relates to the promotion and support of those in this sector can then be addressed, as well as ways to direct resources. This also will reveal ways these organizations can find ways to collaborate and partner across disciplines.

Conversations in recent years have focused in part on the infrastructure in the area that exists to support artists, including housing, office space, performance and gallery space, funding sources, and commercial opportunities. These topics will be surveyed and will be addressed in subsequent policy discussions with city, culture and business leaders.

Response to Black Lives Matter/Freedom Riders calls for action

The killing of George Floyd in May of 2020 by police in Minneapolis sparked protests throughout the world, and Iowa City saw the rise of groups that protested both police actions and cultural shortcomings in our community as they relate to race. One group, calling itself the Freedom Riders, issued a list of demands that included items related to how African Americans are represented and given opportunities to participate in the arts in the Iowa City-area.

The City of Literature organization issued a statement of support for these efforts in June:

The Iowa City UNESCO City of Literature's mission is to connect readers and writers through the power of story. We are listening to the powerful stories and testaments of Black people and other people of color in our community and in our country, and we are working to amplify BIPOC voices to educate, build empathy, and pursue equity and justice. We know we have a lot of work to do, and listening and amplifying voices is not enough. We pledge to do more, to be a resource in our community, and to address areas where we have fallen short. This includes immediate steps to increase diversity and representation in our organization, on our board of directors, and in all aspects of our festivals and programs. Where we are now is a beginning, not an end.

The immediate impact has been changes in our board of directors and a greater awareness of how we program our events, and this work will continue as staff seek training to better understand the issues
and seek new partners and collaborators to broaden our perspectives. The organization is crafting a statement related to diversity, equity, and inclusion that will provide further guidance.

**Work with area communities on ways to use literature in pursuing climate action plan goals**

As the City of Literature organization has learned more about the UN’s 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, it has become clear that people and governmental agencies in our area already are pursuing action on many that are relevant to our community. As we look for ways to use literature in our efforts to educate residents about the SDGs, we will look for ways to work with these groups to use these tools help achieve its climate goals.

The City of Literature will work to harness the transformative power of story to assist organizations in communicating goals and the strategies to employ to meet these goals. This can take the form of enhancing programming related to climate and sustainability, such as promoting authors and their work in these areas, or tailoring children's programming so our young writers are addressing these issues in their own work. Collaboration with other arts organizations, businesses, or governmental agencies -- which is at the core of nearly all of our programs -- can lead to innovative solutions to these challenges locally, and the results can be shared with the rest of the Creative Cities Network.

**Collaboration with other Cities of Literature**

With the continued growth of the Creative Cities Network, opportunities for collaboration with other member cities has grown exponentially. The influx of proposed programs is often overwhelming, and the staff must select only the handful of opportunities that are possible given limits in funding and time. To better address this, the organization has created a staff position with the express purpose of gathering, organizing, and promoting these opportunities to our community, with the goal of a greater level of participation from Iowa City-area writers and others in the literary sector.

**Addressing SDGs**

In accordance with the directive from UNESCO to address the United Nations' 2030 Strategic Development Goals when undertaking projects and programming, the Iowa City UNESCO City of Literature undertaken projects like the "#I7BooksFor17SDGs" project on social media to raise awareness of the SDGs using books related to Cities of Literature, and has has identified progress toward the following SDGs in its programming portfolio:

- Quality Education
- Gender Equality
- Clean Water and Sanitation
- Affordable and Clean Energy
- Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure
- Sustainable Cities and Communities
- Climate Action
- Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions
- Partnerships for the Goals
As the first COVID-19 cases were reported in the U.S., the City of Literature organization was launching its One Book Two Book Children’s Literature Festival. The precautions at the time involved having extra hand sanitizer throughout the space. Within two weeks, the office, like those across the city and throughout the country, closed and people began to work from home. This led to the eventual cancellation of dozens of cultural events over the final nine months of 2020, including all in-person programs scheduled for our MusicIC festival and Iowa City Book Festival, and other events and festivals in the community. International collaborations also were put on hold. Iowa City was to be the guest City of Literature at the Granada Book Fair, but this was postponed due to travel restrictions.

Our organization addressed this in three primary ways. The first was to solidify connections with other entities in the local arts and culture scene. An informal group of leaders from eight downtown Iowa City arts organizations was formalized as the Iowa City Downtown Arts Alliance. This group met weekly in the first months of the pandemic, sharing information about mitigation strategies, funding possibilities, and programming ideas.

The second was to build on that work by serving as an information clearinghouse for the literary community. While this is a large part of the organization’s efforts in normal times, it was enhanced over the past several months as we sought to serve as a line of communication within and without this sector. We shared information about when book stores would be open, whether they were offering curbside pickup, and what their protocols involved when they did open. We offered information to local writers and artists about writing and funding opportunities. And we kept our community apprised of programming changes and offerings.

The third was to offer our own projects and programs. With so many projects moving online, we sought to provide opportunities for people to stay off of their computers. This began with simple things like creating reading lists of local books with a sports focus to offer those missing out on the opportunity to attend or watch sporting events a chance to indulge that passion in other ways.

We took one of our more recent projects, the LITtalks author series, online. This occasional series, which features authors discussing new books that deal with political or social engagement, was held twice, once with Jesse Wegman discussing his book, *Let the People Pick the President: The Case for Abolishing the Electoral College*; and another with W. Joseph Campbell, author of *Lost in a Gallup: Polling Failure in U.S. Presidential Elections*. Both were held online, with the latter also rebroadcast on the C-SPAN television network. Both events emulated their in-person precedents with discussion of timely issues, sharing of...
ways for people to get involved, and a robust back-and-forth between presenters and audience.

Another endeavor was a series of community reading projects led by University of Iowa Assistant Adjunct Professor Anna Barker. Barker, also a City of Literature board member, led programs where participants read *The Decameron*, *Paradise Lost*, and *Gilgamesh*. In each, Barker led more than 300 members through daily readings and discussions, drawing participants from throughout our community and around the world. These have continued in 2021 with a project to read *War and Peace*, with nearly 900 people on four continents participating in this daily program.

Two of the organization’s three major festivals also moved online during the pandemic year. MusicIC, which celebrates the intersection between literature and music, offered unique performances that brought new musicians into the festival and expanded the geographic reach with viewers from around the country. A partnership with the children’s department at the Iowa City Public Library led to a multi-disciplinary project that blended music, singing and storytelling for young viewers.

The Iowa City Book Festival, the organization’s largest annual event, moved online in October 2020. This program, featured a dozen live events that maintained the usual robust discussion via chat as well as interaction with the authors through moderated Q&A. The programs, all available free of charge, were recorded and are hosted on the organization’s YouTube channel, where they continue to be viewed. A partnership with Prairie Lights Books and the Iowa City Downtown District allowed participants to order book boxes that brought the festival experience to their homes.

One highlight of the annual festival is the awarding of the organization’s Paul Engle Prize. Named for the longtime director of the Iowa Writers’ Workshop and co-founder of the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa, the prize seeks to recognize writers who, like Engle, “represent a pioneering spirit in the world of literature through writing, editing, publishing, or teaching, and whose active participation in the larger issues of the day contribute to the betterment of the world through the literary arts.”

This year’s winner, Dr. Eve L. Ewing, took part in the award ceremony from her home in Chicago. Though she was unable to accept the award in person, Dr. Ewing undertook tasks similar to those of her fellow winners from prior years, which includes leading a writing workshop for students in the Iowa Youth Writing Project. Keeping these connections intact while we await the return of in-person programming has been an important part of the organization’s efforts.

While programming will remain virtual through at least the first half of 2021, the organization is poised -- and eager -- to return to in-person programming as soon as it is prudent, while learning lessons from this past year about keeping our events more accessible.
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