A lot of people come to become published artists; some come because they want the creative space. It is really what you want it to be.”

— Michael Khandelwal, executive director of the Muse Writers Center

WRITING CENTER’S NEW DIGS offer more space for classrooms and readings, same old benefits in the skills, camaraderie of creativity

By Denise M. Watson
The Virginian-Pilot

The Muse Writers Center happy hour had begun, but Executive Director Michael Khandelwal couldn’t get a slip in.

Novelists, comedians and poets were filing into the A.W. Shacks bar and grill on Colonial Avenue on a recent Wednesday night, and he kept flagging people with the news.

“We’re having a grand opening on the 23rd — you should come!” Khandelwal said to a familiar face.

“I know!” the woman replied, “That’s why I’m here!"

This was the weekly Wednesday mingle. However, the group later walked across the parking lot of the Ghent Market Shoppes to see the writers’ new haven. Ten years ago, Khandelwal began in another office suite, in a borrowed room, teaching one class.

Later, as Khandelwal led the group out of the restaurant, he pointed to the darkened corner. It was a short distance between the past and the present, but so much has happened in between.

The Muse will host its grand opening Saturday with a daylong string of poetry readings, songwriting performances and a party to cap the celebration.

The Muse has moved and borrowed space during the years, and see MUSE, BACK PAGE.
Three hundred to 400 students are now taking classes each semester. The new space has five classrooms and two semi-private rooms for writer's auditories.

There's an auditorium for readings. And, finally, a space for a library.

The auditorium is a spot in theChelsea area of Norfolk. The center offers more than 20 classes and continues to add more. In its Chelsea home, the Muse had three classrooms.

The new spot, between a dance school and Mexican restaurant, of course, times three, has five classrooms and two semi-private rooms for writers, with an auditorium that seats 45.

The center opens into a spacious library, another feature the writers had lived without because of limited space. Muse organizers have collected a small collection of writing and photography books, but the center recently received a donation of more than 1,700 volumes of international poetry, with titles from Africa and Europe.

Khaneddie said it, along with the growth in students, as a sign that Chelsea college has a real chance to be creative.

"I hate to say I'm surprised," Khaneddie said. "I feel that we're reaching so many people. It's gratifying that so many people want to express themselves.""It's really cool when you see these people. He grew up in Virginia Beach and went to college in California to study filmmaking and taught classes after he graduated. When he moved back to Virginia in 2005, he realized teaching. He asked a friend with a private arts school if he could hold a poetry class.

He posed fliers. Six students responded. It was a success; the students wanted more. He created another class. He became friends with one of the writers in the class who wanted to teach memoir.

By the summer of 2006, he was teaching five classes. They were held at coffee cafes, a coffee shop in Virginia Beach Memorial Library and outside, under a table with a plastic painting of a dolphin. He called it "The Ink Cafe." He charged $25 per class.

At the conclusion of his writing courses, Khaneddie gave a public reading at a Norfolk library in front of a crowd of 20 to 40 people. It was nerve-wracking, but exhilarating. "I felt confident," Khaneddie said.

"It was a jumping-off point. Once you take advantage of it was capricious and I was able to do more outlying things." Khaneddie said he had taken an improv class at the Muse, which created an impromptu reading. Khaneddie gave a reading in front of a film student at Old Dominion University, and has a part in the upcoming "Penguin in a Tree," a popular all-women choral comedy show.

"I would never have done improv comedy but for the Muse's encouragement. It was such a positive force. Without it, I prob. wouldn't be as happy as I am now.

During the Wednesday night play tour, Khaneddie pointed out the furniture and space, all of which can be "sponsored" by individuals and groups to raise money for the center. A local attorney, for example, has sponsored money for tuition assistance for students who can't pay for classes.

"Someone in the group asked: 'What's your goal for your life from now?'

Khaneddie was quick with an answer: "More classroom space will likely need more, more library space."

Then he paused. "But my goal is to really see this place thrive."

Denise M. Webster, 757-445-2554, dawneaston@ politicelove.com

Ollison Whispers' honeyed harmonies found funky home

Whispers seems uncertain. For half a century, they toured regularly. They struggled last year at the Hampton Jazz Festival, performing with art and grace the classics that made them one of the standout R&B acts of the 1980s. The hits include "And the Beat Goes On" (not to be confused with the Sonny & Cher song; "Rock Steady" (not the Arthel Franklin Classics; "It's a Love Thing," "You Were Going Out," "This Kinda Love," and "You and Me"

When the Whispers reached their commercial peak in the 1980s, the group was one of the flagship acts at Solar Records, the Los Angeles-based label that exploded in the early 1980s and dominated R&B in the 1980s, and the label's top-selling hit was "You're the One." The group was eventually signed to the label's subsidiary, which released songs to radio stations for play. By 1980, the group was considered the number one R&B group in the world.

The Whispers were debuting, but they were too burned out. They parted ways with the label, and the group released their own album, "Whispers, the Original," in 1981. The album was released on the label's subsidiary, which was owned by the same people who owned "You're the One." The group's second album was released in 1982. The group's third album was released in 1983. The group's fourth album was released in 1984. The group's fifth album was released in 1985. The group's sixth album was released in 1986. The group's seventh album was released in 1987. The group's eighth album was released in 1988.

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