



*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



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# a new home for muse

**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 sip in.

Novelists, comedians and poets were filing into the A.W. Shucks bar and grill on Colonial Avenue on a re-

cent 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

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**Above from left:** Barbara Carlson, Michael Frost and Kindra McDonald sort through books for the library at the new location of The Muse Writers Center on Colonial Avenue in Norfolk.

**Left:** Carlson, center, and Janet LaMonica listen to readings during a Muse gathering at La Bella restaurant in Norfolk. Carlson's turn to read came later.

**if you go**

**What:** The new Muse Writers Center grand opening

**When:** 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. Saturday

**Where:** 2200 Colonial Ave. Suite 3, Norfolk

**Cost:** Free

**More info:** Call 757-818-9880 or visit [www.the-muse.org](http://www.the-muse.org). In case of bad weather, check the website for updates.

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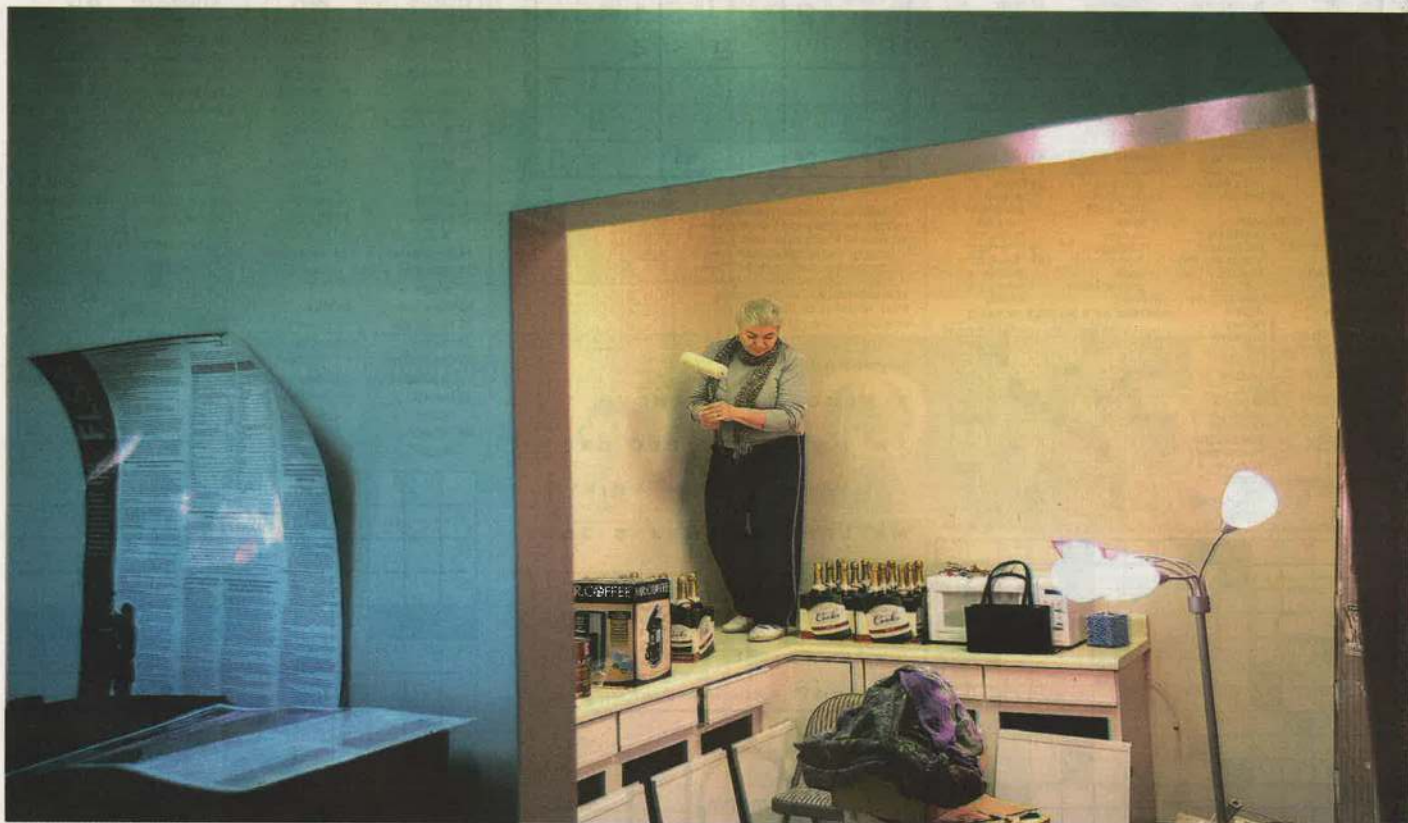
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# muse

Three hundred to 400 students are now taking classes each semester. The new space has five classrooms and two semi-private rooms for writers who need their quiet. There's an auditorium for readings. And, finally, a space for a library.



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Above: Kathryn Copeland of Norfolk touches up the paint in the kitchen of the new location in the Ghent Market Shoppes.

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outgrew its last spot in the Chelsea area of Norfolk. The center offers more than 70 classes and continues to add more. In its Chelsea home, the Muse had three classrooms.

The new spot, between a dance studio and Mexican restaurant, offers three times the real estate. It has five classrooms and two semi-private rooms for writers who need their quiet. Bigger workshops and teen readings will be held in an auditorium that seats 45.

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

Khandelwal sees it, along with the growth in students, as a sign that people really crave a safe spot to be creative.

"I hate to say I'm surprised. I'm excited about it," he said. "I feel that we're reaching so many people. ... It's gratifying that so many people want to express themselves."

Khandelwal, 45, is one of those 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 2000, he missed teaching. He asked a friend with a private arts school if he could hold a poetry workshop there.

He passed out 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 2005, he was teaching three classes. They were soon sketching the center's lightning bolt logo on a restaurant napkin and, by 2006, had attained non-profit status.

The center eventually moved to Chelsea and offered more classes as professional writers and college

**Khandelwal stacks tables in preparation for Saturday's grand opening. The furniture and spaces can be "sponsored" to help raise money for the center and tuition.**



professors came forward to teach — fiction and nonfiction, grammar and punctuation, songwriting and improvisational theater. The center held unusual workshops, such as having a detective come in and discuss police procedures for writers working on crime stories.

**Three hundred to 400 students** are now taking classes each semester.

"A lot of people come to become published artists; some come because they want the creative space," Khandelwal said.

"It is really what you want it to be. ... People come to the classes and what you put into it is what you get out of it."

Evan Hartley, 19, took a teen writing workshop at Muse five years ago after seeing some of the center's fliers around the area.

The Chesapeake student had been writing short stories since she was 9, and had been active in sports and in taking art classes. But the shy, homeschooled student hadn't met a tribe of creative people quite like herself until she got to the Muse.

At the conclusion of her writing course, Hartley gave a public reading at a Norfolk library in front of a crowd of 30 to 40 people. It was nerve-racking, but exhilarating.

"I felt confident," Hartley said.

"It was a jumping-off point. Once you take a plunge, it was enjoyable and I was able to do more outgoing things."

She had taken an improv class at the Muse, which created an interest for her in theater. Hartley is now a film student at Old Dominion University, and has a part in the upcoming "Panties in a Twist," a popular, all-women sketch comedy show.

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

During the Wednesday night tour, Khandelwal pointed out the furniture and spaces, all of which can be "sponsored" by individuals and groups to raise money for the center. The group also puts aside money for tuition assistance for students who can't pay for classes.

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

Khandelwal was quick with an answer: "More classroom space will likely be needed, more library space."

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

Denise M. Watson, 757-446-2504, denise.watson@pilotonline.com



Left: Michael Khandelwal, executive director of The Muse Writers Center, leads a tour of the new location. "I'm excited about it," he said. "I feel that we're reaching so many people. ... It's gratifying that so many people want to express themselves."

## OLLISON | *Whispers' honeyed harmonies found funky home*

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Whispers seems uncertain. For half a century, the guys toured regularly. They headlined last year at the Hampton Jazz Festival, performing with grit and grace the classics that made them one of the standout R&B groups of their generation. The hits include "And the Beat Goes On" (not to be confused with the Sonny & Cher song), "Rock Steady" (not the Aretha Franklin classic), "It's a Love Thing," "Olivia (Lost and Turned Out)," "This Kinda Lovin'" and "In the Mood."

When the Whispers reached their commercial peak in the 1980s, the guys were one of the flagship acts at SOLAR Records, the Los Angeles-based label founded by music industry vet Dick Griffey. The fledgling quintet spent most of the previous decade in search of a style. Their sophisticated harmonies were silken and breezy, hence the group's name. The interlocking vocals of the Scott brothers revealed deep jazz influences as Hutson, Degree and Caldwell shadowed with harmonies dipped in doo wop.

The Whispers were debonair, but they weren't too buttoned-up. Paired with the slick, aggressive productions of Leon Sylvers III, the man behind that distinctive SOLAR sound, the Whispers' honeyed harmonies found a funky home. Hip-hop was still a fringe culture during that time but was edging its way into the mainstream via much younger, unabashedly streetwise acts. And there were the Whispers in the midst of it all, decked out in sweaters, slacks and loafers, gliding around the stage singing sprightly funk hits that spurred platinum sales.

They looked liked five church deacons in a youthful urban-pop field dominated by the likes of New Edition, Teena Marie and Evelyn "Champagne" King. The guys looked awkward

in some of those early videos. But there was no denying the deftness of the music, the often brilliant way Sylvers wove their assured harmonies through a web of flashy synthesizer lines and insistent club beats.

The Whispers also excelled at balladry. Their albums — including the platinum sellers "Love is Where You Find It" (1981) and "Just Gets Better with Time" (1987) — were divided between a "dancin'" side and a "romancin'" side. Despite the trendiness of the group's productions, the Whispers' style remained steeped in the jazz and doo wop they loved as teenagers. Those influences shine on "Lady" and "Say Yes," gorgeous ballads Caldwell wrote for the group.

As hip-hop infiltrated R&B in the 1990s, hardening the genre and searing it with explicit material, the gentlemenly approach of the Whispers fell out of favor. But by then, the group had an impressive catalog studded with gems and a large, loyal fan base. As senior citizens, noticeably heavier and grayer, they still performed with the same enthusiasm of their heyday, and the harmonies remained a marvel.

Now, two of the guys who were part of the formula from the start are gone. As the others grieve and consider their options, we still have the classics — those irresistible "Jheri curl" jams — to bring back a flood of sweet memories.

Rashod Ollison, 757-446-2732, rashod.ollison@pilotonline.com