

**A**fter Barbara Carlson retired from teaching several years ago, she craved a creative outlet for her literary endeavors. She soon found the perfect second home – The Muse Writers Center. The

Norfolk hangout is dedicated to people of all ages who love the written word and want to pen poetry, short stories, memoirs and other creative works.

“I’m happy being here,” Barbara, age 85, says of the nonprofit center located in Norfolk’s Ghent Business District. “I love the work. I’ve met interesting people. What more could I ask for?”

Barbara primarily writes poetry but is learning to write short stories. She is among the 9,600 Muse participants each year who range from teenagers to retirees. They take advantage of at least 10 events each week and the 100 classes taught annually by working writers and published authors. Barbara has taken at least a dozen classes and workshops and also enjoys coming to The Muse for open mic nights, book launches and other events. Spending time at The Muse makes her “feel like a part of a community.”

In 2018, The Muse connected in two ways with the Hampton Roads Community Foundation to amplify its work:

- It received a \$7,000 grant from The Thistle Fund, a donor-advised fund the community foundation manages, to help support Muse operations.
- The Muse’s board of directors donated \$25,000 to create an organizational endowment managed by the Hampton Roads Community Foundation to grow over time and benefit The Muse.

Photo by Glen McClure



Muse executive director Michael Khandelwal connects with poet Barbara Carlson.

“We want to ensure our long-term viability to make sure we stick around no matter the ups and downs of the economy,” says Michael Khandelwal, executive director. Partnering with the community foundation “seemed like the easiest and best-managed way to do that.”

Michael co-founded The Muse in 2006 to fill a creative niche missing in Hampton Roads. One of his goals was creating a community where people of all ages and backgrounds celebrate the written word. Muse writers are constantly learning new techniques during classes that range from a

single day to eight-week sessions. They also learn from hearing others read their works and from batting around ideas and getting feedback from other Muse participants.

With its classrooms, collaboration areas, small auditorium and library, the 2,700-square-foot center in the Ghent business district is a fulcrum for creativity. Among the regulars at The Muse is David Cascio, a retired Navy SEAL. He comes there to ponder the plot of a military-science fiction novel he’s writing and to concentrate on his book. “This is an excellent space,” he says.