

## Midwest Writing Center Opens Its Doors ... Sort of

Written by Jeff Ignatius

Tuesday, 24 September 2002 18:00

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The Midwest Writing Center was once an idea and an organization without a place. It's definitely a place now, but one with a door that might or might not be open if you stop by. The facility, which held several programs over the summer, will make its presence official this weekend with a grand-opening celebration on Sunday, September 29, from 2 to 4 p. m. The event will feature a ribbon-cutting ceremony and a poem in memory of the center's founder, David R. Collins. The center is next to ArtFX and MidCoast Gallery West in The District of Rock Island.

"This is an official way of saying we're opening," said Bj Elsner, program chair of the center, "but we don't have any set hours. I'm the only staff person."

People have donated books, furniture, and two new computers to the new center. The facility has held open poetry readings and an evening dedicated to self-expression on the anniversary of the September 11 terrorist attacks, along with workshops and other literary events.

But something's still missing. "Now what we need is people to volunteer their time," Elsner said. Unfortunately, she said, some people are under the impression that one must be a writer to support the facility. She hopes to draw staff from readers and patrons of the literary arts. "You don't have to be a writer to be part of this writing center," she said.

Still, the center's primary mission is to assist working writers. That's even reflected in the name; Elsner said that organizers wanted to avoid the group or the facility being pigeonholed as a club. "There's a reason we called it Midwest Writing Center and not Midwest Writers Center," she said. "We're really about writing."

The organization has three decades of history, with the annual poetry contest and Mississippi Valley Writers Conference dating back to the early 1970s. "The Writing Center is an extension of that one-week conference," Elsner said.

The vision for the physical Midwest Writing Center is one full of excitement and promise – a place where authors can research and write, a resource to learn how best to submit, distribute, and market one's work, a forum to test out new material, an environment for honest but encouraging critiques, a home for engaging discussion about writers and writing.

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The challenge at this point is gathering enough volunteers to have the doors open on a regular schedule. In the short term, Elsner said, the center plans to be open Saturday and a couple days during the week. By the first of the year, she wants to “be able to be open week-long.”

The center includes a private studio that members can reserve for interruption-free writing, a space for small groups to meet, a private room for workshops, and an area for literary-themed events. The computers have Internet access, and Elsner hopes to build a library of books useful to writers – from basic texts such as *The Elements of Style* to style manuals to inspirational works such as Ray Bradbury’s *Zen in the Art of Writing*.

The center’s opening fulfills a longtime dream of David R. Collins, a founder of the organization who died last year.

Although the names of Collins and Evelyn Witter are typically mentioned as inspirational forces behind the creation of the physical Midwest Writing Center, “I don’t think it’ll ever be what they imagined,” Elsner said.

But she’s not suggesting that they wouldn’t be pleased. She’s merely saying that without their energy, it’s not quite the same. She also says the Writing Center will have an “organic growth” that comes from all its participants. “Each person who walks in the door to that facility brings something to what it is,” Elsner said. “Had David Collins been alive, it might have been a whole different thing.”

Collins’ original dream for the Midwest Writing Center was a house – a literal “home for writers” – but the storefront in The District makes sense. Elsner said it’s a good thing to be “among other artists”: “They do appreciate the creative process.”

The Midwest Writing Center’s journey to a home has been long. The organization has found temporary homes and many locations to hold its events. But nothing lasted, and places that might be generally well-suited to literary functions have not been ideal.

“Every place where we had a home, the landlord’s needs would change, and we’d be kicked out,” Elsner said. Libraries have served as venues for various literary events, but the organization needed a place with more flexibility. “We need our own place where people don’t turn out the lights on us.”

Elsner stressed that the Midwest Writing Center isn’t just a facility for published or polished authors.

“Not everybody is a great writer, and certainly not everybody is even a good writer,” she said. But “everyone has a story to tell.”

And the Midwest Writing Center is targeting writers of all skill levels. “It’s okay to be wherever you are with your writing,” Elsner said.

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But at this point, she's issuing a call to all of the Quad Cities, not just writers: "I'm begging the community: Please be a part of this."

*The Midwest Writing Center is located at 1629 Second Avenue in The District of Rock Island. For more information about the Midwest Writing Center, call (309)788-2711 or visit (<http://www.midwestwritingcenter.org>). Memberships to the Midwest Writing Center start at \$25.*

*In addition to the grand opening on Sunday, the center is hosting a Poets Out Loud program at 7 p.m. on Thursday and a book discussion of Road to Perdition on Tuesday.*