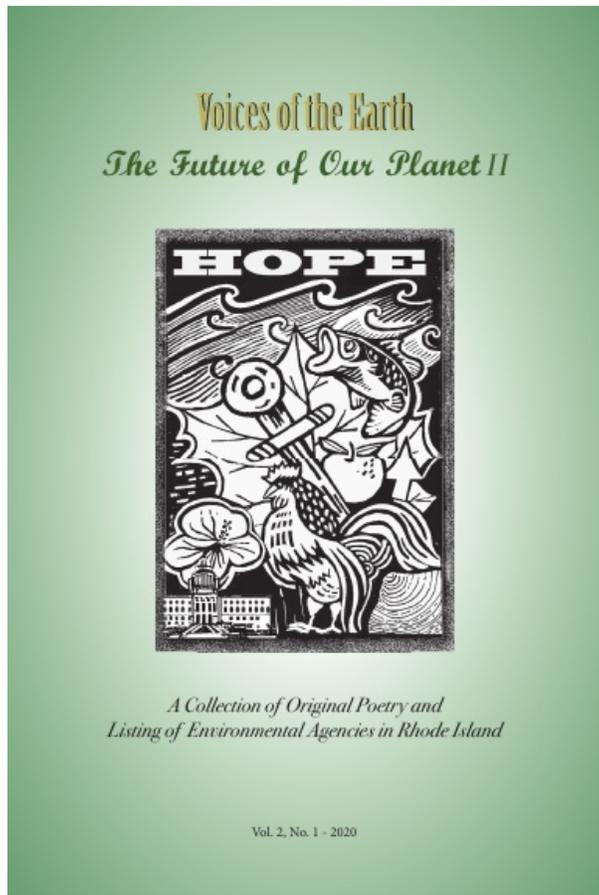


Voices of the Earth: The Future of Our Planet II



This collection of 67 environmentally themed poems can be depressing and uncomfortable to read at times, which is exactly the point publisher Notable Works set out to make with this release. Local authors all contributed work inspired by our current natural world, which is, unfortunately, a disaster (to put it nicely). The poets don't paint a positive picture of the environment we live in, instead leaving a grim reminder of the impact of our carbon footprint.

Aubrey Atwater's "On the Changing World" sets the tone for the collection, serving as a call to action for everyone or risk losing the things we often take for granted. It's a request for a united front to prevent the obvious (to most) dire consequences. The rest of the poems follow Atwater's lead, focusing on where the world is, where it is inevitably going and the work that needs to be done to cause change.

Because *Voices of the Earth* was released in 2020, a portion of poems discuss COVID-19. Two mention it

in the title, a few allude to the virus and a couple others discuss it in depth. While they were some of the most emotionally difficult to read, they will serve to be an important part of history down the line.

While this collection is full of strong writing, two poems really stuck with me. "Beyond Recycling" by Shalissa Coutoulakis is more of a guide than a poem, but it may be the most important in the book. It discusses the correct way to recycle and (especially relevant) what not to put in the recycling bin. Coutoulakis should send this to every school to start educating the young (and hopefully teaching parents something in the process). The other poem, "Don't Stop Me When I Say I've Had Enough" by M. Neil, tops out at only five lines long, but paints an amazing visual of the incoming doom and change that is about to happen to the narrator. The last two lines of the poem, when read together, may be the best ending to a poem I've ever read. It's striking and powerful; one I make sure to read often.

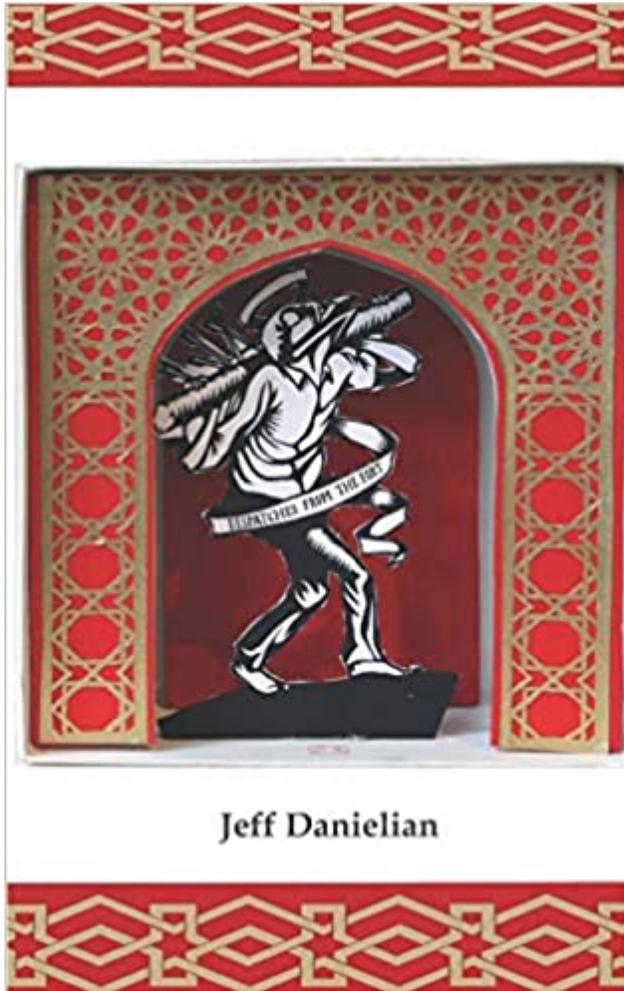
Voices of the Earth is more than a collection of poetry. It's also a resource for people who are looking for ways they can help change the world for the better. There is a thoughtful introduction written by Lauren Parmelee, senior director of education at the Audubon Society of Rhode Island. Most importantly, there is a list of local resources via environmental agencies. The list of 53 agencies are broken down into four categories: advocacy and education; coalitions; conservation, perseverance and restoration and government agencies. All of the agencies list either their mission statement or give a description of their values and/or ways to help, as well as their contact information.

There is an aura of hope in each poem. The doom and gloom of what currently is serves as an inspiration to change. The poems serve as a blueprint as to what needs to be different and how it could potentially be done. This is a wake-up call to every reader to take a look at what they should be doing differently and why taking care of our Earth is so extremely important. Let *Voices of the Earth* be the first step.

To learn more about "Voices of the Earth," check out publisher Notable Works' website: notableworks.org or Email info@notableworks.org.

Dispatches From the Fort: Jeff Danielian publishes his fourth volume of poetry and it's

about time



Jeff Danielian is back with his fourth volume of poetry (to go along with four works of non-fiction geared toward educating youth), featuring his introduction, 56 poems and what he describes as “a short non-fiction adventure.” Danielian doesn’t pull any surprises with his writing style, keeping things humble and to the point.

My favorite poem of the collection is “17,” seemingly written about Danielian’s daughter before she starts her independent journey in the world. It’s emotional, powerful and caring. The poem is clearly full of love and is one that many parents can identify with.

My favorite line comes from “Life as a Stone,” and he uses it to both begin and end the poem. “The beginning is the end is the beginning” showcases the constant circle we attempt to maneuver through in hopes of reaching something. The line serves as a reminder that there is always work to be done, no

matter how hard we strive for satisfaction.

Time is the theme of this collection. Danielian seemed inspired by the atmosphere and his observations of his friend and artist William Schaff's home/work space, dubbed Fort Foreclosure. It's either a sign of maturity or just the inevitable growing up in general, but there is a lot of reflection written into each poem. This serves to be his most impressive work.

Danielian ends the collection with a short non-fiction adventure to Prudence Island, featuring photography by Michael Cevoli, simply titled "The Writer and The Photographer." The two head out on an early morning in the spring to start their adventure. Danielian does a great job describing their day. The best part of this writing is that he didn't set out to create an intriguing story, instead letting the day itself navigate his words. He is a simple narrator, putting his observations into prose. Cevoli's eight black and white pictures add an extra layer to Danielian's descriptions. This makes for a nice book end to his introduction, in which he discusses his love and appreciation for Rhode Island, and especially his close knit town of Warren and the impact it's had on his life.

Danielian writes with simple realism, and his poems all have a comfortable familiarity. It's akin to listening to a new album by AC/DC or the Ramones: You know what you're going to expect and anything different would be infuriating.

*You can purchase **Dispatches From the Fort** and all other of Danielian's work on his Amazon author page: [amazon.com/Jeff-Danielian/e/B00HMTH4M4%3Fref=db_s_a_mng_rwt_scns_share](https://www.amazon.com/Jeff-Danielian/e/B00HMTH4M4%3Fref=db_s_a_mng_rwt_scns_share).*

Making Sure Larders Aren't Bare: When Rhode Islanders struggle, the RI Food Bank steps in

These have been brutal times for nearly everyone (with maybe the exception of big box stores, which are seeing record profits). Citizens worldwide have been hit mercilessly with the combination of a physical and mental health crisis and a financial crisis. There are people struggling in all facets of day-to-day life, such as work, bills, keeping the home and utilities up to date, food and education. But there are some putting aside their own concerns in an attempt to help those in need, proving that humanity has the ability to bring positivity, even in the worst of times.

The Rhode Island Community Food Bank has a statewide network of 159 member agencies, which includes food pantries, meal sites, shelters, youth programs and senior centers throughout the state. The COVID-19 pandemic has caused them to ramp up their distribution, donating to 30% more than the usual 68,000 people they serve each month to keep up with the increased demand of the community. The food bank, which opened in 1982, is a first-hand witness to the struggles of the community.

“So many Rhode Islanders are out of work and struggling to make ends meet,” director of communications Hugh Minor said. “We continue to serve people seeking food assistance at some of the highest levels we’ve seen in decades.”

The food bank relies on the help of others to support their mission of alleviating hunger. This has been a struggle for some people, as they relied on locally sponsored food drives to make their donations. Businesses and schools haven’t been able to hold their regular food drives due to the buildings being closed for distanced working/learning. This has led to an inspiring number of people stepping up and starting their own food drives.

“I got the idea to start my own food drive because, under normal circumstances, my middle school [Park View Middle School] does a food drive around Thanksgiving,” explains 12-year-old Cranston resident Grace Michaelson. “Due to the pandemic and distance learning, I was not able to participate this year, so I decided to start my own.”

Michaelson typed up flyers about her food drive and stuck them in the doors of the 20 homes on her dead-end street. She collected an impressive amount of donations, mostly beans, soups, pasta and canned vegetables, which she brought to the Rhode Island Community Food Bank.

“We are fortunate that so many generous Rhode Islanders give to the Food Bank to support our mission,” Minor boasts. “Without them, we would not be able to respond to the increased need in our community.” Minor is encouraged by the amount of support they have received thus far and hopes it continues throughout the crisis and beyond, as there will always be people who need assistance and support.

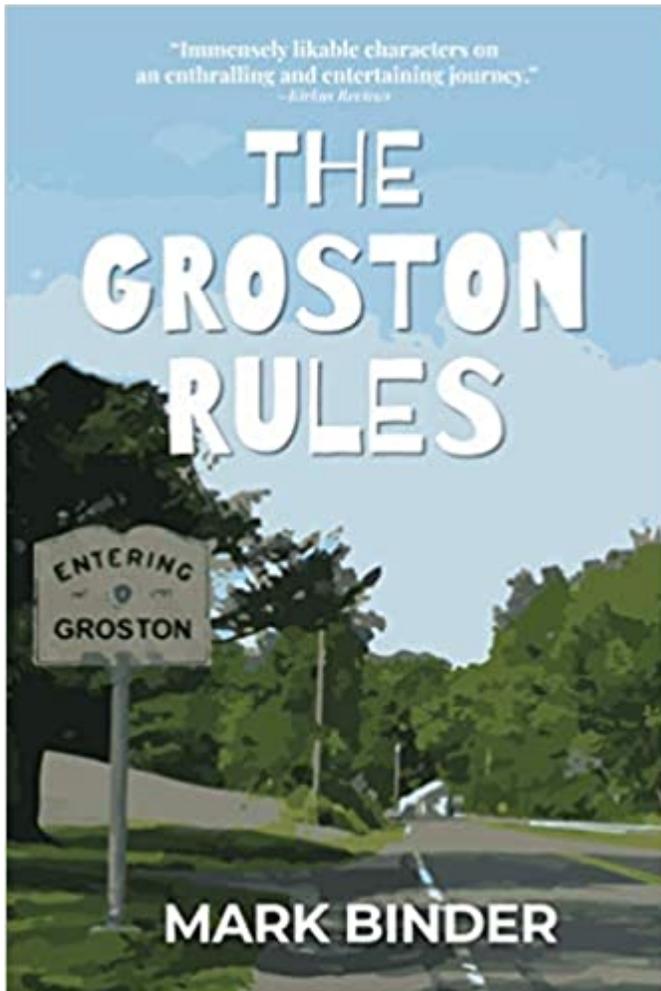
The Food Bank has multiple ways that people can provide assistance to their community that goes beyond a food donation, including making a financial donation, donating your car, purchasing a Mr. Potato Head license plate (\$20 goes to RI Food Bank), planned giving and donating stocks. Local businesses also do their part to give back as best they can by donating a portion of their sales to the Food Bank.

“We are so thankful for the generous support of so many Rhode Islanders who help us feed our neighbors in need,” Minor says.

“The RI Community Food Bank has actually been receiving fewer donations since the pandemic, even while more people are in need of food. I think that it’s really important to help others in my community because I want everyone to be able to have food,” Michaelson says of the severity of the current situation and the impact of helping others. “During the pandemic, a lot of people have lost their jobs and their source of income, so they can’t have the dinner that they usually do. Even if they can’t have a huge meal, I want to help people be able to have enough food to eat.”

Go to www.rifoodbank.org to donate. If you are in need of assistance, call United Way by dialing 2-1-1 to be directed to nearby a pantry or meal site or click the “Find Food” link on the RI Food Bank website for a list of member agencies.

The Groston Rules: Latest release from Mark Binder captures adolescence



Senior year of high school can be a defining moment in a person's life — it's both a jumpstart into the future and a further sculpting of the previous 17 years. In Mark Binder's novel *The Groston Rules*, Isaac Cohen and his six friends who make up "Team Bombshelter" appeared to have a more memorable (for better or worse) year than most.

The story is a first person account from Cohen, written as an assignment from school, though each of his friends has a dedicated chapter that develops their character. He is a typical senior with a potentially bright future, though he is the least successful of the group. The friends all have their own strengths that they bring to the table, each taking lead when their skills and ideas are needed most. Cohen usually stays in the background, feeling inferior to his friends, until he has a great idea for a senior prank that impresses his friends and gets the entire class involved.

The seniors of Groston are written as they would for most movies or television. The jocks (especially the star quarterback and his offensive lineman) and homecoming queen have minor but significant roles. Instead, Binder focuses on the often overlooked, average students and showcases their issues in a way that is mostly relatable. Many of their trials and tribulations could happen anywhere at any time, which

is refreshing.

Binder effectively brings back high school memories. While some of their adventures are a bit outlandish, common emotions, friendships and insecurity all run rampant throughout this book. The reader can identify with Cohen as a sympathetic protagonist and wants to root for him. He is self aware and tells the story in a way that makes it clear he might have made different decisions if given a second chance, which is an experience I share often.

My only issue with the story is an admittedly selfish one involving the senior prank. While well written and the ultimate climax to the story, the end result is something that should have been visual instead of written. It is well described, but the description doesn't quite work for me, as I'm not quite familiar with the parody of their prank. This description would work much better in a movie, which is something I would love to see.

The Groston Rules is a throwback to adolescence. Everything is understandable and nostalgic, with parts that will hit close to home for many people. It's a pre coming-of-age tale, as there is a lot more growth to be done. Most importantly, it's real, because Cohen's or his friends' emotions could have been experienced by nearly anyone.

The Groston Rules will be released on November 8. For more information, go to markbinder.com

Gone But Not Forgotten: RHD-RI participants reflect on the program's legacy

After opening in a mill building in Pawtucket in 2004, RHD-RI quickly became a beacon in the local arts community. Artists with developmental disabilities used the space to work on their pieces, write music and discuss ideas. Creativity ran rampant throughout each room. The organization moved to a second mill building in Pawtucket in 2014 and then to a facility in Cranston in 2019 before closing their doors for good on September 30, devastating individuals, but leaving a positive lasting legacy.

RHD-RI's demise was brought about by years of being underfunded by the state, which is a challenge many day programs face. The underfunding led to staff shortages, and it forced management to

scramble to use their limited resources to provide quality services. COVID-19, which left them closed for months, sealed their fate. I spoke with many of the individuals impacted by the program, and this is what they had to say:

“RHD to me stood for a creative environment for people to express their feelings,” said Amy-Eva DeCosta. “I have seen people who live with a disability create something dark only to have staff suggest adding glitter (or other happy elements). RHD encouraged people to express happy and sad feelings through art.”

It was impossible to fit RHD-RI into a category, and they embraced the “outsider” mentality. Many staff members came from the local punk and alternative scene (including members of well-known RI bands), and RHD-RI served as a place where everyone fit in even though the outside world didn’t quite understand them.

“RHD-RI was a place where everyone felt they belonged and could be themselves,” Jess Angelone said. “It was always filled with creativity and love.”

“I liked the art shows,” participant Rikki Demelo said of the various showcases where artists could sell their work, including RHD-RI’s annual Bizarre Bazaar. Pieces from RHD-RI artists have been sold throughout the country. Some artists’ work will continue to be on display at the Outsider Collective in Pawtucket.

“I would not trade my four years there for anything,” Josh Hurst said about his time at RHD. “Those years taught me to be a kinder, more outgoing, patient person. I also learned more about art and music in four years than in my previous 42 years.”

“The 5-plus years I spent as an employee gave me new ideas and perspectives on what it what it means to collaborate, create, care for and contribute to a community,” Melanie Fuest said. “Being a part of something bigger than myself to fight for.”

At its peak, RHD-RI served between 100 and 125 individuals in day- and community-supports. It provided an opportunity for people to create, express, discover and have fun through their own unique artistic vision. They’d showcase their talents at art galleries, craft fairs, concerts, self-produced plays and any other place that would have them, all with impressive results and smiling faces. RHD-RI was the model program in RI.

“Everyone was in the right place at the right time and the result was something greater than its parts,” Ray Memery reminisced. “People found purpose and identity in the art. Some created a legacy. We worked hard and the work was good. There was an undeniable sense of possibility there. You could feel it when you walked in the door.”

It’s important to remember how RHD-RI existed instead of how it ended. In this time of uncertainty for all those involved, it is okay to be angry and anxious about the future, but it’s crucial to remember the positive impact that they had on their community, the art world and each other.

“I think RHD-RI’s legacy is the overwhelmingly positive role we were able to play in the lives of the individuals we were entrusted to support,” Mark Stone commented. “I’d like to think that most of our participants and their families/residential providers feel similarly.”

“I will look back on my 13 years there with great admiration for those who I worked for and with,” Aaron Leidecker said. “They can shut us down, but they can’t shut us out. We will always be RHD-RI family. Everyone still has magic to share.”

Lending an Ear: During Suicide Prevention Month, the Samaritans of Rhode Island continue to help

There is no shame in feeling the need to reach out for help or needing to talk through personal issues, regardless of how big or small they may seem to others. There are always people willing to help, whether they be a friend or an anonymous stranger.

The Samaritans of Rhode Island have been providing an ear for citizens in need since 1977. Originally founded in 1953 in London by a vicar named Chad Varah, the concept was brought to the United States (Boston, MA) in 1974 by author Monica Dickens, a prolific author and social worker. Rhode Island was home to the third Samaritans to open in the country. Since that time, the Samaritans of Rhode Island have received nearly a million calls, been assisted by 1,672 volunteers and built up a strong internet base.

“We know we are reaching people and there will always be a need,” said executive director Denise Panichas.

The Samaritans of Rhode Island are volunteer based, with the largest percentage of volunteers being students at Brown University. They currently have more than 75 volunteers. Though they are not recruiting volunteers at this time due to the COVID-19 pandemic, volunteers are an important piece to the services they provide and don't have to pay for.

“Because we are volunteer based, we are recognized by the public as having no agenda relating to market share,” Panichas says. “We can provide support and education without regard to health/mental health status, third party reimbursements or ability to pay.”

Programs the Samaritans of Rhode Island offer include a Safe Place Grief Support Group, Youth and Teen Education, Lifeline Prison Program (a weekly newsletter at this time with possible plans of opening a Lifeline at the ACI), community education programs and their crisis hotline/listening line, which is available 24/7 (based on volunteer availability). They strive to be a beacon of support for the community and has become the state's most trusted name in suicide prevention education.

The number to the Listen Line is 401-272-4044 (or 1-800-365-4044). Manned by “befrienders,” it is there to give those struggling an avenue to vent without having to worry about being judged. Befrienders go through approximately 24 hours of training and commit to volunteer for at least 200 hours.

Each call is different, all centered on what the caller wants to discuss. Experts have said that a suicidal person doesn't want to die, per say, but they want the pain they're going through, whether it be physical, emotional or both, to end. Befrienders are there to listen and offer support as best they can, though the hotline is not a substitute for professional medical help.

Panichas has noticed that access to professional services has been a challenge for struggling individuals, more so than the stigma of being judged.

“The largest barrier to care is the huge medical and behavioral health bureaucracy, which is terribly difficult to navigate and unaffordable,” she opines. “In my experience, one of the most difficult challenges is convincing people to give professional care another chance.”

Not spared from the pandemic, The Samaritans of Rhode Island have worked hard to continue to provide their important public service. They have relied on social media to continue to educate the public and have expanded the training for Befrienders to include knowledge of COVID-19 and how that could impact callers. They have updated the technology for the Listen Line to include call forwarding so Befrienders can work from home. The Listen Line is also being used currently for their grief support services and there is a “Teen Talk Thursdays.”

The interior renovations to their home, the historic Baker-Hanley House in Pawtucket, has been temporarily halted due to social distancing requirements, as has their Forget-Me-Not gallery and gift shop. They purchased the home as a way for people to support them without becoming Befrienders. Their use of small business contractors and vendors has been important both to their sustainability as well as the current economic climate. They plan to apply for additional funding to renovate and restore the outside of the building, as they plan to continue the great work they have done for Rhode Island.

“What is significant, not only for the past 43 years, but most especially during the COVID-19 crisis, is that while SAMSRI trained, nonjudgmental befrienders provide crisis and daily support when family, friends and professionals are not available, one of the most important services we do is offer emotional support for the disenfranchised — those for whom care is not adequate, not responsive, no longer available or will never be available.”

Education is key for suicide prevention. September is Suicide Prevention Awareness Month, and Panichas urges people to read their website to learn about what to do in a suicide emergency.

“The more people know, learn and share the more we can all make a difference in suicide prevention.”

The Samaritans of Rhode Island Forget-Me-Not Gallery is located at 67 Park Place in Pawtucket. The Listen Line number is 401-272-4044 or 1-800-365-4044. Visit their website at samaritansri.org and like them on Facebook: facebook.com/The-Samaritans-of-Rhode-Island-135146746614916

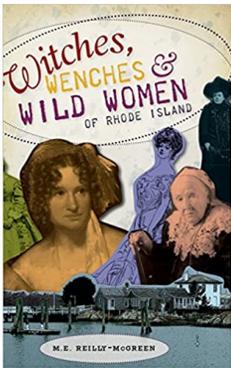
Now Read This!: Local authors to stash in your beach bag this summer

Some people will feel safe venturing out to the old haunts of last summer, while others will continue to

be cautious and stay close to home. Here are some book options by local authors to add to your summer reading list, regardless of where you plan to read them:



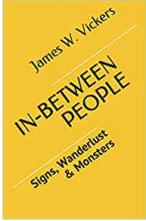
***Dispatches From the Fort*, by Jeff Danielian:** This is Danielian's fourth volume of poetry. He has a simple style to writing that is both uplifting and thought provoking. This collection includes 58 poems and a short nonfiction piece.



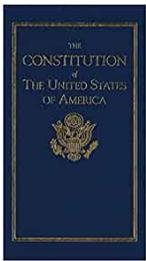
***Witches, Wenchies and Wild Women of Rhode Island*, by M.E. Reilly-McGreen:** Our state is full of forgotten history and fascinating tidbits; this book highlights Rhode Island's many powerful and influential women. Each tale is short but insightful, giving plenty of interesting information. Homework: Go the extra mile and visit the monuments and markers mentioned in the book.



***I Gotta Tell You Something*, by B. Lucy Stevens:** Stevens collected these poems from a class that she taught to a group of 12 adults back in 2016. Each poem provides a magnified glimpse into the author's thought process, life and soul. There are moments of success, struggle and heartbreak with every word full of power and meaning.



***In-Between People*, by James Vickers:** This semi autobiographical tale about a freelance writer who travels the country on his own accord is a great read for those worried about traveling, but who want to vicariously take a trip.



***The Constitution of the United States of America*:** This should be required reading for every American this summer (myself included). Education is the key to progress.

Tell Your Truth: A popular poetry open mic moves online



Damont Combs, aka Mr. Orange; photo credit: James Lastowski

Damont Combs has been writing since an early age, after a desire to improve his handwriting sparked his creativity. As he grew up in Southside Jamaica Queens, NY, Combs would write stories, songs and poems to improve his script. While it ultimately didn't help his handwriting, it did bring out his love of writing, especially the short form of storytelling and the wordplay of poetry. He studied the medium and worked his way from the bottom, eventually releasing books of poetry: *My Poem...My Riddle* in 2015 and *A Touch of Orange* in 2016. This all led to Combs becoming 2018 poet of the year and 2019 RI mentor of the year in Rhode Island.

Combs started sharing his work at local open mic nights while attending college at Johnson & Wales.

"I needed to connect with community," Combs explained. "I didn't know anyone, so poetry became a way for me to connect with a form of community."

It was at the open mic nights that Combs networked and improved his craft. He watched the events grow until all 13 strangely died out when their venues closed. He wanted to keep the community going, so Combs started hosting his own open mic nights. This was a difficult task at first, and every one of them failed, but Combs looked at them as lessons learned and figured out ways to make improvements.

“It became my mission to revitalize the open mic scene,” Combs said of his decision to keep trying.

Combs eventually became the host for Lively Literati, an event presented by the Association of Rhode Island Authors (ARIA). He had some worries about hosting, but it became a success. This led to him create the Tell Your Truth open mic night in 2019 at Skye Art Gallery in PVD. Tell Your Truth is an open mic that encourages open dialogue on many of the topics providence residences have on their hearts and minds. it features New England artist and local community members.

“The event went from a simple open mic to having one feature to multiple features while still keeping the intimate setting,” Combs said.

Combs worked to build an audience and gained multiple sponsors. He received a RISCA grant in 2020, which gave him additional funds to pay featured authors, book a venue and market the event. All of this allowed Combs to keep the event free to the audience.

Tell Your Truth had its momentum stopped short by the COVID-19 pandemic that has wreaked havoc on the world. Undeterred, Combs used this as an opportunity to move the event online. He posted a link that readers could submit their work to and went to work building an online community. Combs said that the online open mic has been just as challenging as if it were live, with him still needing to manage all aspects, including audience attention, the list, proper equipment usage, flow of performance, reader introductions and the overall energy of the room.

With readers performing from their home, most perform live on the spot, though Combs did allow for readers to submit previous work if they didn't have the technology to read live. Combs kept the rules the same and is planning themed events, contests and videos to create a lasting experience. One difference was that Combs was able to feature readers from all over the country as opposed to just local or touring readers.

“It has gone just as well as the regular open mic has. A huge success,” Combs boasts proudly. “I had my poetry mentor, Pawtucket poet laureate Jay Chattelle, call me before I started this online open mic and he let me know that anything I do, especially now, I have to give it my all and to not sleep on the opportunity. He gave me the idea to bring people on live via Zoom and other platforms before Zoom was as popular.”

Combs will continue the online Tell Your Truth events for as long as necessary, and may continue an online version once businesses open back up. He has big artistic plans in his future.

“I will be working with the Invisible Veteran to produce a podcast that brings awareness to disabled veterans and families of the help that is available to them that they may not know about. I will continue to host my open mic tell your truth and use the grant I got from RISCA to continue doing what I do best. I have my work accepted into a film festival in New York City and in Chelmsford, Massachusetts. The biggest thing I’m doing right now is waiting on my official swearing in to a three-year term for the advisory commission on arts and culture in Pawtucket.”

Combs stresses the importance of supporting local artists at a time like this.

“Art keeps communities connected,” Combs said when discussing the value of art. “Art provides healing. Art is not only entertainment, but community.”

Tell Your Truth goes live every Thursday from 6 - 8pm. Visit facebook.com/tellyourtruthRI for rules and other information. Interested readers can submit their work to mrorangelive@gmail.com

A Hub of Hope: The Autism Project discusses autism awareness month



The Autism Project launched in 1997 with the plan of becoming a “Hub of Hope” for people and their families on the autism spectrum and other developmental disabilities, providing resources, education and connection that help individuals lead meaningful and purposeful lives. The Autism Project has classes, trainings, workshops and support groups. They provide respite for families and have a brief summer camp, Camp Wannagoagain. They also host various events throughout the community.

The Autism Project is a 501 (c) (3) organization that relies on fundraising to help achieve their mission. There are many ways a person can give to the organization, with their greatest being the annual Imagine Walk and Family Fun Day, which takes place in April of each year. This year promises to be a unique event, as a safety decision was made to make the walk virtual due to the COVID-19 pandemic. They are asking for teams to continue fundraising and also create a platform showcasing what The Autism Project means to them, whether it be a video, photos or a story. The Autism Project plans to post these on their social media pages, filling them all with great stories of positivity.

I spoke with Joanne Quinn, executive director of The Autism Project. We discussed the virtual walk, Autism Awareness Month and some helpful ideas for families adjusting to our current reality.

Bobby Forand (Motif): Please discuss the services you provide, particularly the services you currently provide during this pandemic.

Joanne Quinn: TAP (The Autism Project) offers support to many different groups. During the pandemic, we continue to provide online support for family members as well as phone support for family members and community partners looking for specific resources unique to the state of the world today. TAP staff created a survival kit for our families that includes 11 of the most common visual supports used in classrooms and at home to help structure a child’s day. We also posted the visuals on our website for the public at large to access. We are working to provide support to the schools and families working to keep up their child’s education at home.

BF: What suggestions do you have for families trying to explain the pandemic to their loved ones with disabilities?

JQ: This is a difficult one. Each person’s understanding of the events is different. For some we are focusing more on the fact that things are very different. We are working and learning from home to keep everyone safe. Safety is the core message. Families know best how much their child can understand and process. It’s the same for everyone. We encourage our families to create as much of a routine as they can and stick to it. The structure and information of what’s next is crucial for autistic people. That’s the hardest part of this. We can’t circle a date on a calendar to show when this will end and we’ll get back to normal. I think this is the most anxiety producing item for everyone.

BF: What suggestions do you have for families to keep their loved ones occupied/in routine at this time?

JQ: Set up as much structure as you can. Start with a simple schedule of the day's activities. If that's too much for everyone, start with a first/then schedule. Make it visual and accessible to all. Let your child choose some of the activities and times for them if possible. This returns the feeling of control to the person. Most important, don't beat yourself up if you aren't as structured as a classroom. Nobody can do that! Also, reach out for help. We are all in this together and learning the new landscape as we do. We all need help!

BF: Please discuss the Imagine Walk and what people can expect with it going virtual.

JQ: The Imagine Walk is our largest event and fundraiser. It's also a day our community looks forward to because we come together and experience a time of support and community with no judgment. Many feel we are raising our children in a fish bowl. So, the walk has grown into a wonderful, safe environment for the entire family to come to and to enjoy each other and feel supported.

The Virtual Walk continues to be a fundraiser and we will be promoting our community and individuals all month. We want to focus on victories this year. We understand things are hard day-to-day for our families, and we work to help them. We'd like to take April to focus on the positive. We will have a Facebook live event from our office, Kellen will be singing the National Anthem and we hope to have more surprises to bring us together.

BF: What are things that people can do right now to help The Autism Project?

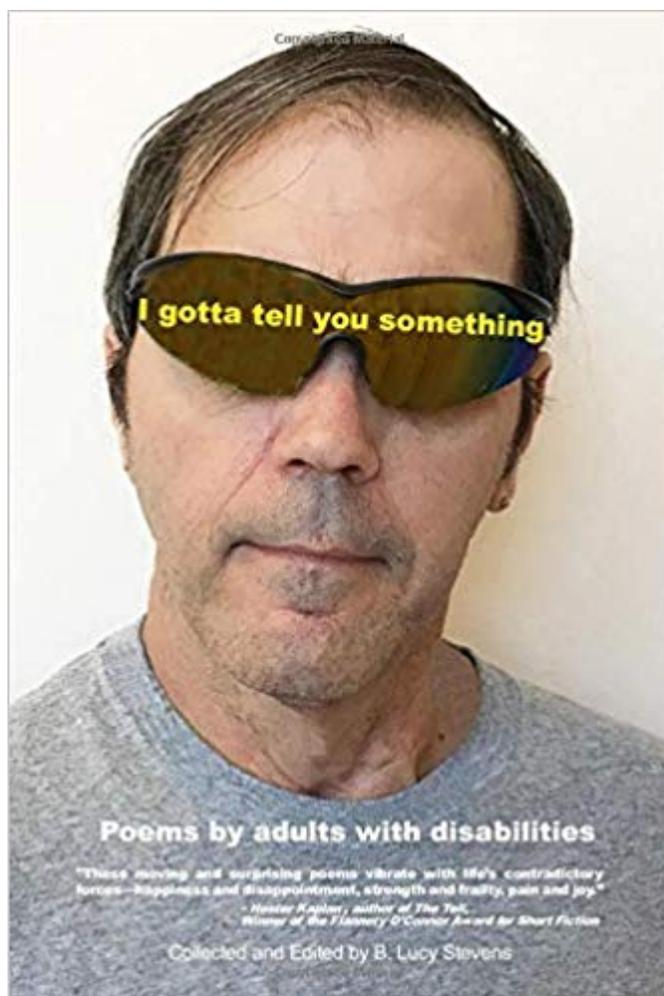
JQ: We need our community to continue to fund raise as they would for our traditional walk. We weren't able to secure a different date to postpone the walk and Goddard Park is the only space large enough for our event. The money raised at this event and from our work in schools is more than 40% of our budget. With the move to a virtual walk and the closing of schools, we are experiencing considerable financial drain. If people create a fundraising page and send it out to their network of family and friends and ask for any donation, it will all add up. TAP does well with grassroots fundraising, and we hope to continue with a lot of people giving what they can during these hard times so we can continue our important work.

BF: What are things people do/can do to highlight April being Autism Awareness month?

JQ: We want people to share their stories this month — the good and the challenges. Post videos or stories on what The Autism Project means to you. How have we helped? Let the community know what your journey has been and still is. What are your hopes and dreams for your child's future? What are you afraid of?

Please visit theautismproject.org for more information on the Virtual Imagine Walk and services The Autism Project provides. Check their Facebook page for helpful activities and tips.

Book Review: I Gotta Tell You Something showcases novice poets



The 34 poems in *I Gotta Tell You Something* are the result of a three-year-long creative writing workshop run by award winning writer, B Lucy Stevens. The workshop, which consisted of 13 participants between the ages of 18 and 60, met weekly. The participants didn't have much writing experience, so Stevens got their creativity and confidence flowing by using various warm-up exercises. What resulted was beyond anything Stevens could have imagined, so she published their work to share it with the world.

Each author writes what they know, and the poems are honest takes, ranging from funny to heartbreaking that give a view of their personality and a glimpse into how they became who they are. Some sound like free-flowing conversations while others have a poetic flow.

The authors all bring something unique to their writing. Wayne Rankin and Gabe Mouradjian write about their childhood and accidents that changed the course of their lives. Nick LeBlanc describes feelings with an honest wit. Wil Valcourt lets the reader in on one of his fears while adding a smile-inducing ending. Carol Gable's poems pour emotion. Benvinda Gomes writes about misunderstanding and others' view of her. Tom Fiori and Jahnoy Skerrit talk about traveling, adding a humorous spin. Victoria Rossi and Nissah Armstrong write about being happy and free. Tyler St. Vincent puts the reader into the head of a species that is being bullied. Amber Tariela writes about her love for her dog. Edna Maniche describes a hilarious interaction with Jesus that also features the most beautiful imagery:

"There were angels outside
They looked like butterflies"

There are themes throughout the books. Animals are written about often, whether it be a pet or a type of animal that they identify with. Growing up and family are themes that come up repeatedly, as are happiness, sadness, hopes and dreams. The biggest theme is the desire to be accepted for who they are. This adds an extra layer of power to the book as a whole.

The rawness is the best part of the poetry. The words are simple, but the content is real. The authors open a window, giving the reader a quick glimpse into part of their soul. The vivid imagery puts you right there in the thick of what is happening in each poem. Their message lies in the title. These authors all have something important to say, and the readers are lucky enough to have been invited into their world.