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University of Big Shoulders

DePaul’s Big Shoulders Books is a small press with a big mission ... and they’re giving the books away for free. By Abigail Pickus
It could have been just another senseless murder in Chicago that made headline news, but this time, one creative writing professor at DePaul was unable to look away.

“Before Derrion Albert’s murder, I viewed youth violence as someone else’s problem, but now I wondered how such carnage could happen in my city and what I could do about it,” says Miles Harvey, associate professor of English, about the 2009 incident.

Maybe it was the way Albert—an honor student who happened upon a street fight—was brutally killed. Or maybe it was the fact that a whole crowd of bystanders did not intervene, including the person who shot the video of the assault that went viral and who was recorded laughing throughout like it was a “wrestling match,” says Harvey.

All Harvey knows for sure is that soon after the incident, at coffee with his good friend Hallie Gordon, an artistic director at Steppenwolf Theatre, their conversation turned to the incident. Similarly traumatized, Gordon was thinking of producing a play for young adults featuring real stories of Chicagoans touched by violence. The only problem? She didn’t have the human power to go out and gather the stories. “That’s when the light bulb went on in my head,” says Harvey. “What if my students tried this?”

**Big Shoulders Books**

For two years beginning in 2011, Harvey’s students fanned out across the city’s South and West sides, interviewing everyone from a mother whose young son was murdered to a former gang member. Fine-tuned into compelling narratives, many of the stories were crafted into the play “How Long Will I Cry? Voices of Youth Violence,” which premiered at Steppenwolf Theatre in 2013 and then toured across the city the following year.

But what to do with the rest of the “amazing, heartbreaking, brutal, beautiful stories” that didn’t make it into the play, Harvey wondered. How could they turn them into something lasting that could be shared with an even larger audience? After he joined forces with two other DePaul English faculty, Michele Morano and Chris Green, the trio came up with a unique publishing venture run by DePaul whose debut volume would be the oral histories collected by Harvey’s students, titled “How Long Will I Cry?” And just like that, Big Shoulders Books was born.

“Michele, Chris and I thought, ‘What if we try to do this thing, Big Shoulders Books?’ It was wildly ambitious right from the start, but why launch [a publishing house] at all if we are not ambitious?” says Harvey.

The press, whose name is a nod to the Carl Sandburg poem “Chicago,” which dubs Chicago the “city of big shoulders,” only publishes titles by or about Chicagoans whose voices might not otherwise be heard. Vincentian in its mission, the press focuses on issues of social justice, and its books are distributed free of charge. Lastly, while there are professionals at the helm, it is really students—undergraduates and graduates from DePaul’s Master of Arts in Writing and Publishing—who work intimately on every stage of the manuscripts, from editing and design to publicity.

Since its launch in 2011, Big Shoulders Books has published four books. In addition to “How Long Will I Cry?” there is a collection of teen narratives about relationships, an anthology of writing by students in partnership with a nonprofit called 826CHI and a poetic collection of memories by Chicago war veterans.

**The press is Vincentian at its core because of its commitment to disseminating all books for free and its focus on social justice.**
Go Out and Listen

Jacob Sabolo (LAS ’12) remembers one of his first creative writing classes with Harvey back in 2011.

“He greeted us with this big map of Chicago divided into neighborhoods, and he said to us, ‘Here’s Lincoln Park. Can anybody point out where Englewood is?’ No one could. I think that pretty much highlights what he was saying about seeing these awful crimes on the news but seeming so distant because we’re each in our own bubbles,” says Sabolo, who at the time was a junior majoring in English.

The concept of bubbles is a source of frustration for Harvey. “I think all of us Chicagoans—black, white, Hispanic and Asian—tend to live in bubbles. It is a fact that our city is one of those most diverse in the U.S. and also one of the most segregated, and it is hard for us to be shaken out of our bubbles,” he says.

Since DePaul, with its focus on community-based service learning, already had long-standing relationships with service organizations in underprivileged neighborhoods in Chicago through the Steans Center, the groundwork for establishing trust was already done.

So Harvey sent his students out with the directive, “Go out and listen.” For Sabolo, that meant establishing a rapport with a woman whose 13-year-old son had been beaten to death on the streets. “I was so nervous wondering if the interview would be too invasive or too personal for her. Luckily, we built trust during our conversations. She was very open, and she had a lot

DePaul English instructor Chris Green, co-founder of Big Shoulders Books, edited “I Remember: Chicago Veterans of War.”

“Bill’s and my commitment to Big Shoulders Books and our enthusiasm in supporting it in whatever way we can underscores our love for the written word and our commitment to social justice.”

—Irene Beck
of stories to tell. In the end, it was easy for her to talk about her life,” he says.

The whole experience gave Sabolo a profound sense of connection to his fellow Chicagons. “Through this project, I learned so much from the people who shared their stories with me. It gave me a completely different understanding and appreciation for the diversity of Chicago. And it did get me out of my bubble, because my experience up until then had just been at DePaul,” says the Southern Illinois native.

A Lifeline for the Press
When philanthropists Bill and Irene Beck (LAS ’97) attended the premiere of “How Long Will I Cry?” at Steppenwolf, they were moved to action.

“We went back several times and later wanted to know how we could increase its impact,” says Irene, who with her husband, Bill, runs the William and Irene Beck Charitable Trust as well as the Beck Research Initiative at DePaul.

Through Beth Catlett, an associate professor of women’s and gender studies at DePaul who directs the Beck Research Initiative, the Becks soon met with Green and subsequently offered their support.

“The Becks are special people, and they are the lifeline for the press,” says Green, a senior professional lecturer at DePaul who edited the Big Shoulders book “I Remember: Chicago Veterans of War.” “Normally, a publishing house is a commercial venture where books are widgets, and they need to sell a certain amount. Here we are able to give the books away for free, and we purposefully look for ideas for the books that will be of interest to the community.”

For their part, the Becks’ support of the project is unwavering. “Bill’s and my commitment to Big Shoulders Books and our enthusiasm in supporting it in whatever way we can underscores our love for the written word and our commitment to issues of social justice. For us it is a way for extraordinarily talented faculty and very capable students to offer a really valuable and much-needed contribution to our society,” adds Irene.

Lasting Impact
While Big Shoulders Books gives its books away for free, there is a catch. Readers must message the press via its website or Facebook page sharing how they will use the books.

Requests have poured in from across the globe from educators, activists, social workers and even incarcerated individuals. “How Long Will I Cry?” is currently in its sixth printing and has been distributed to more than 50,000 readers from 17 different countries (and counting), and “I Remember: Chicago Veterans of War” is now in its fifth printing and has reached at least 20,000 readers. “Write Your Heart Out,” still in its first print run, has been read everywhere from high school English to college-level adolescent psychology classes. A number of requests have come from outside Illinois. “For a small press, if you are even able to sell 1,000 copies, that is a big deal. The fact that we have given away thousands of books is a minor miracle and speaks to the impact of these books,” says Green.

While the reach is wide and the audience diverse, there is one constant: the appeal among nontraditional readers. “Teachers will email and say, ‘Our students don’t like to read, but they will read these books.’ This wouldn’t be possible if we had a different business model,” says Morano.

As for the tragedy that launched the press, Harvey can only say, “I am not an expert on the problems of the inner city, but what I am an expert on is storytelling. Books can never solve the problem, but they can give people a means to talk about the problem, and that’s a start.”

To find out more about Big Shoulders Books or to request a title, please visit bighouldersbooks.com.