



**Charleston County School of  
the Arts**

**Gerrita Postlewait, Ed.D.**  
Superintendent of Schools

**Cynthia Ambrose**  
Deputy Superintendent of Learning  
Services

**Kim Wilson**  
Executive Director of Secondary  
Learning Community

**Shannon Cook, Ed.D.**  
Principal

**For Immediate Release**  
December 8, 2017

**Contact:**  
Alea McKinley 843-529-4990

## Media Release

### **English Students at SOA Become Music Journalists for a Week**

**North Charleston, SC** – Teachers are constantly looking for new ways to inspire their students, and help them grasp subject matter and concepts. One Honors English teacher at Charleston County School of the Arts (SOA) has found a method that her students clearly appreciate; current writers becoming part of the curriculum.

Alea McKinley, who is in her second year at SOA (and sixth year in Charleston County School District), developed a plan to bring a music journalist in to her class for a week, so her students could learn how to write in a different style, and facing deadlines. The plan began in May when she read Erin Osmon's *Jason Molina: Riding with the Ghost*.

"I thought it was just fantastic," explained McKinley. "Even though Molina's story is tragic, it's also inspiring in many ways. He left us quite a legacy of influential music. Researching music and interviewing creative people struck me as a progressive and engaging way to tell a story using the academic style of music writing. It requires a specific style and precise word choice in order to translate all of the dimensions of sound and tone to the reader. Osmon makes use of multiple allusions and imagery all the while maintaining an authoritative voice that conforms to an AP (Associated Press) format."

#### **Gaining experience in bringing outside experience**

McKinley has involved outside experts with her lessons for several years; she started when she was a teacher in Louisville, Kentucky. When she returned to Charleston, she wanted to continue that work. Bringing guest "teachers" into the classroom requires extra funding. Fortunately, there are several ways to raise that money, including DonorsChoose ([donorschoose.org](http://donorschoose.org)).

Writing proposals on these fundraising sites can be intimidating at first, and might seem time-consuming. However, McKinley received support and encouragement from the District's Grants Officer, Alicia Kokkinis.

"I met her at a Professional Development meeting, and she was so positive and encouraging when it came to fundraising," remembered McKinley. "She made an appointment with me and taught me how to [create] a compelling [case for my] DonorsChoose project. She's the reason why it worked so well for me. Her confidence and guidance has changed the lives of over 500 students so far."

McKinley raised money to bring a local screenwriter and playwright, Rodney Rogers from PURE Theatre, to her class at North Charleston High School (NCHS) a few years ago; the two of them co-taught playwriting a couple of times. Every student wrote a play, leading to over 100 ten-minute plays written over a two-year period. Ensemble members from PURE Theatre came to the school at the end of the unit and did a professional read-aloud of the plays with the scholars. According to McKinley, some of her former students at NCHS are still editing those plays.

Last year at SOA, McKinley gave her English Class the opportunity to learn about [writing novels, writing for TV shows, and blogging](#) with J. Ryan Stradal, George Ducker, and Jessica Murnane.

Obviously, incorporating professionals into the curriculum requires extra effort and planning. It is a labor of love for McKinley.

"It takes six months at least," explained McKinley. "Fleshing out and refining the project, contacting the artist, fundraising, making sure the artist has accommodations, and then working with the artist so that they are prepared to teach in a high school classroom is a big commitment. But, after seeing raised hands, focused work, and amazing class discussions, it is totally worth it."

"Teachers seek different ways to enrich their students' learning experiences," added Principal Dr. Shannon Cook. "Ms. McKinley's approach to creating impactful lessons often involves creating face-to-face interactions with professionals. I'm thankful for teachers like Ms. McKinley who invest time and effort to provide wonderful educational opportunities for our students."

### **Writing with Osmon**

Earlier this month, the scholars in McKinley's Honors English II class were given the opportunity to become part-time writers in the field of music journalism. For four days, Osmon, a freelance writer and author of *Jason Molina: Riding with the Ghost*, brought her real-world knowledge and expertise into the classroom, and encouraged students to step into her world.

"It was so exciting and such an honor," Osmon said. "Completely unexpected, but I am really glad there are some practical applications that could come out of studying narrative non-fiction and music writing. I think the lessons today have illustrated they can inspire and they can impart lessons that kids might not know they are actually getting."

The experience was just as memorable for the students. They learned the differences between reviews and features, how to use press releases for information but not for their own content, how to handle writing under deadline, and to take chances with their writing.

"It's brought a lot to the curriculum," thought SOA sophomore Luke Shaw. "It's become much more than just a lesson. It really is an experience. The ability to talk to an author, somebody who has experience. I mean, we are all trying to figure out what we are doing. But to talk to someone who has had experience with that sort of thing and has their own story; it's really helped us, and me personally."

"Because academic writing requires very specific structure and formatting, it can feel very constraining and unappealing to most students," stated McKinley. "Young adults crave more freedom by nature, and I think music writing is a perfect way to meet their need of rebellion in academic terms. Writing for the public and not just for the teacher is the key to a meaningful student experience, and this is borne out in the published research."

On the final day of experience, students listened to the song "Kept it All to Myself" by The Weather Station, then wrote a paragraph about their impression of the track with vocabulary they had learned recently. After writing under deadline, some of the students read their descriptions (or reviews) out loud, and the rest of the class, along with Osmon, provided their thoughts.

"It was almost like a simulation of what it's like to be a writer," explained Shaw. "There were so many options which we were able to have. Maybe it works for you, maybe it doesn't, but you know what it would be like. And you're learning at the same time."

"I hope that it gave them some very practical tools about what goes into doing this," commented Osmon. "We talked about press releases, we talked about features versus reviews, and I think that practical foundation is really key and vital. A lot of people don't have that until college or their first internship. So hopefully it could give these kids a leg up."

"Having contact with those who have experienced success as writers and artists not only inspires our students, but offers them role models with whom they can talk and interact," explained Cook. "Engaging in discussions with an author offers a unique opportunity to respond to and question the one who made the literary decisions that resulted in the finished piece of writing. These discussions elevate the role of the student and place them on level ground with a published author."

### **The takeaway**

Looking back at the experience, and experiences similar to this one, it is clear McKinley's students are benefitting from their teacher's desire to give them more in

their education, and her willingness to push them. The dedication and opportunities are not lost on the students; they realize how fortunate they are.

"I heard great things about Ms. McKinley last year because peers had her freshman year," Shaw explained. "I was looking forward to it, but I had no idea that it would be this extensive. It's really had a good impact on me."

"I think it's a really beautiful and fruitful concept because we are really empowering the students and treating them like the mature young people that they are," added Osmon. "I think allowing a certain level of autonomy and conversation in the class can be really empowering and fruitful, and I think that has been demonstrated over the last couple of days."

McKinley plans to continue this concept of bringing outside experts into her classroom; the goal is once a semester. That might be ambitious, but it is paying off for her students. That is what matters the most to her, and to the staff at SOA.

"There are always going to be a couple of students who would rather do workbooks but just about all of my students have enjoyed it immensely," McKinley stated. "I have been really pleasantly surprised when I see students who had been quiet or unenthusiastic just light up and literally run up to the artists who I have brought to class asking questions and seeking feedback on their work."

McKinley has a message for fellow CCSD teachers who would like to involve outside experts with their classroom instruction in this in-depth manner as well.

"I just really would like to encourage teachers to take a risk," McKinley explained. "I know how difficult it is to find the time and the space in the curriculum to take on a project like this or even something on a smaller scale, but it can be a way to get a class on your side, and to create community."

For about this opportunity for students, contact Alea McKinley at (843) 529-4990 or [stacy\\_mckinley@charelston.k12.sc.us](mailto:stacy_mckinley@charelston.k12.sc.us).

###

#### **About the Charleston County School District**

Charleston County School District (CCSD) is the second largest school system in South Carolina representing a unique blend of urban, suburban, and rural schools that span 1,000 square miles along the coast. CCSD serves more than 50,000 students in 86 schools and several specialized programs. With approximately 6,100 employees district-wide, CCSD is the fourth largest employer in the region.

CCSD offers a diverse, expanding portfolio of options and specialized programs, delivered through neighborhood, charter, magnet, IB (international baccalaureate), and Montessori schools, and is divided into three Learning Communities led by associate superintendents. Options include specialized programs in science, engineering and mathematics; liberal arts; music and other creative and performing arts; career and technical preparation programs; and military and other public service enterprises.