

COAHSI\*

Interview with Ten Penny Players  
by Melanie Cohen  
on January 23, 2012

Over the past few months,  
we've been enjoying a poetry  
publication "Waterways."  
Produced by Ten Penny  
Players, a Staten Island-  
based arts organization,  
"Waterways" is a project  
promoting "populist poetry  
by reaching out to disenfran-  
chised populations."

We reached out to Ten  
Penny Players so we could  
learn more about what they  
do.

\*Council on the Arts and Humanities for Staten Island  
became Staten Island Arts.

## COAHSI

How did Ten Penny Players get started?

### Ten Penny Players

Ten Penny Players grew from the daily arts program we ran at St. Peter's Episcopal Church in the Chelsea section of Manhattan. After incorporating as a not-for-profit arts program we gave NY State a list of 20 possible names and they chose Ten Penny Players Inc. Our first New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA) grant in 1969 came from their Ghetto Arts Program. The funds supported Barbara Fisher's environmental play, "Noisy City Sam." Using Equity actors the play was presented free of charge in the 45th Street playground to thousands of children, whose ticket of admission was an aluminum can for recycling. After being given a letter press we began publishing

poetry and organizing poetry book fairs and readings on city piers. We called this program 'The Waterways Project' and the National Endowment for the Arts in 1979 gave this program of Ten Penny Players a grant to develop audiences for poetry.

## COAHSI

As an organization that is heading towards its 45th birthday, what do you think are some of your greatest accomplishments?

## Ten Penny Players

Ten Penny Players has always fostered intergenerational activities and participants of diverse abilities and ethnicity. We are as apt to publish the picture book by a child or fete with a book party a 102-year-old poet retired from a university. We've provided puppet shows to children in hospital, jazz to

disabled adults in a prison hospital, employment to artists with multiple disabilities and to those discriminated against because of their skin tone and brilliance.

“Streams,” an anthology of expressive writing by a diverse young adult population, was published for 16 years. The annual book evolved from a 20-year partnership with NYC’s Alternative High Schools. “Streams” for many years was a New York Public Library (NYPL) recommended book for Young Adults.

“Waterways: Poetry in the Mainstream,” our poetry journal for adults, comes out in limited edition 11 times a year. It has been in continuous publication since 1979, a rare feat for an indie press.

Bibliomania was created as an annual event soon after we moved to Staten Island in 1989. Designed with the NYPL, K-12 students living in all Staten Island communities were published in a “Bibliomania” anthology and performed at a local library.

In Search of a Song is a series of almost 1,000 individual poetry chapbooks and picture books by NYC K-12 public school students. Youths from all five NYC boroughs participated.

And Bard Press was begun by Richard Spiegel in 1975 to publish adult poets for whom he hoped to achieve a wider reading audience.

## COAHSI

What current projects are you most excited about?

## Ten Penny Players

“Waterways: Poetry in the Mainstream” continues to attract poets from many countries as well as the United States. Each month we publish a limited-edition paper edition of the magazine. The Internet and ‘social media’ also provide an inexpensive and fast way to virtually share “Waterways” and videos we produce.

The Internet enables us to receive submissions and to engage in real time professional development and discussion with poets, educators, and new audiences interested in poetry without borders.

We are particularly enthused about the workshops and publications we have been creating with residents at Sun Rise Senior Living where we also have been

applying the techniques and concepts we developed for our curriculum 'Reprising Joy' that uses pets and photographs to inspire creativity. The barriers between persons of dissimilar backgrounds or personalities are often breeched with the use of pets. A lagging conversation can begin while petting a rabbit; an argument deflected with the wriggle of a tail wagging pup. A temper tantrum averted when hugging a pet.

## COAHSI

You were an early adopter of technology in getting your work out to a wider public, can you talk about why and how it affected your work?

## Ten Penny Players

Not that long ago 'inclusion' was an esoteric concept that many people thought too expensive or difficult to master.

Our use of Distance Learning evolved from our need to find a way that incarcerated youths, students with disabilities sheltered in special programs, and English language learners studying in another borough could engage in written dialogue to improve English language skills. A NYSCA technology grant enabled our consultants to design STREAMS on LINE. The program's password safeguards enabled only registered users to input their original expressive writing and for other students, teachers, and artists to both read the material and respond with critiques and ideas. Using the technology we also were able to provide professional development and implement programs for artists participating not only within the five boroughs but working from other states as well.

## COAHSI

Do you have advice for younger artists/cultural workers as they begin their journey as founding directors of art programs/nonprofits?

### Ten Penny Players

Allow the project to expand from your interests and ability. Avoid the trap of creating a program because a potential funding source has issued a call for proposals.

## COAHSI

And related to that, do you have advice on how they can sustain their effort over the course of many years without burning out?

### Ten Penny Players

Maintain a creative input into the project. Think of it as a child ... sometimes fun and interesting to be with; at others

exasperating and temperamental. A strong support system is critical to preventing you from feeling that you are ‘the only kid on the block’ involved with the effort. It helps to have your family and closest friends connected in some way to the work you are doing. It helps, that is, if you’ve worked out ways to argue without insult (as the psychologist Haim Ginott used to caution).

## COAHSI

We love getting “Waterways.” Is there a way that people can order Ten Penny Players publications?

### Ten Penny Players

Subscriptions to the magazine cost \$45 a year. There’s a poet discounts available at \$30. If readers are interested, they can find more information at [www.ten-pennyplayers.org](http://www.ten-pennyplayers.org).