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"Civic imagination incubator" launches, aims to envision change through storytelling

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Sep 16, 2022

A diverse cohort of media creators began exploring their civic imaginations through storytelling at the official launch of WKU's first Civic Imagination Incubator on Thursday, Sept. 15, at the university's Innovation Campus.

A museum curator, a former multi-media journalist, a web developer, a cinematography and video production editor, a comics writer and a WKU user experience major from the region will collaborate in a series of mostly-virtual meetups over the next eight months to develop cross-medium story worlds and media projects.

The program is a partnership between the WKU's Potter College of Arts and Letters, the Innovation Campus and the University of Southern California.



Civic imagination is "the capacity to imagine alternatives to current cultural, social, political, or economic conditions," The Civic Imagination website states. "One cannot change the world unless one can imagine what a better world might look like."

Clint Waters, a 2012 WKU grad and Sundog Comics lead writer, said that civic imagination seems especially relevant in Bowling Green.

"We have that brain drain where people come here for school and then they don't have any opportunities. There are a lot of ways that we are sort of behind the times or backwards in our legislation," Waters said. "So it feels like Bowling Green has an identity crisis, but i would love to be an influence, a positive move toward the future. I hope we all create pieces that convince people that we can have a better future."

Ryan Dearbone, a WKU broadcast journalism professor, said he's happy to be on the "ground level" of a project like this. As a former multimedia journalist, he's told stories a certain way in the past, but wants to "soak up" new methods his peers introduce "like a sponge," he said.

"No matter what realm you're in, everybody loves a good story and everybody is connected by a good story," Dearbone said. "If you can tell a story, you can connect with people from different age groups, different countries, different genders—it doesn't matter."

Dr. Sangita Shresthova, director of research of the Civic Paths Group based at USC, gave a speech Thursday night at Jody Richards Hall to kick off the program. She also spoke on the power of storytelling in enacting real change.

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"Whenever you're going to accomplish something, you need to touch people, you need to touch them in an emotional way," Shresthova said. "Yes, we can rationally

argue about issues and whatnot, but to really be touched by it, that's a story."

Each cohort member may have unique desired outcomes or goals for the program, but Shresthova said it's more about the journey and the connections they build with each other.

"That journey may overlap with bringing their project into the world, but it may in fact be about them experimenting with a different medium that they haven't used before," she said.

For example, Justin Hall, a web developer who founded Bit Source, hopes to get one of his long-term ideas off the ground. The idea involves combining mediums like comics and graphic novels with digital technology through an open source mobile app, Dark Holler Comics, that would allow users to "remix and share" each other's stories.

His first planned story is about a superhero from his hometown in Appalachia, which he wants to fine tune throughout the program.

"This is an opportunity to imagine with the civic imagination that we can have heroes, just like New York, just like all the big cities," Hall said. "It looks a little different, but it's also similar."

Evelyn Pollard-Gregory also said she wants to make progress on several personal projects, as well as collaborate with everyone else to see what they can create.

"It seems like everyone has something different to offer," she said. "That's really cool when we're collaborating to make projects bigger to reach more audiences."

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