

# Literary Citizen



## Donna Talarico Writes Her Own Story as a Publisher

By Vicki Mayk MFA '13

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Donna Talarico '05 MA'09 MFA'10 MA'14 remembers exactly when she came up with the name for her online literary magazine. She was sitting with members of her cohort in the Maslow Family Graduate Program in Creative Writing, brainstorming project ideas when it came to her.

*Hippocampus.*



Donna Talarico is the publisher of *Hippocampus Magazine* and Books by Hippocampus, and also leads the nonfiction writing conference HippoCamp.  
ALL PHOTOS BY ERIC FORBERGER

The hippocampus is the tiny, seahorse-shaped part of the brain associated with memory. It was the perfect name for a publication that would showcase creative nonfiction — a genre which often focuses on work based on memory.

Nearly a decade later, *Hippocampus Magazine* (www.hippocampusmagazine.com) draws between 20,000 and 30,000 visitors to its site each month to read essays, book reviews and craft articles, all focusing on creative nonfiction. There are 9,000 subscribers to its email list that announces when issues go live and trumpets calls for submission. While the internet has spawned a proliferation of online journals, the bimonthly *Hippocampus* has emerged as one that has caught the attention of readers and writers. In 2020, the publication will celebrate a decade of publishing new and established writers. It has since spawned HippoCamp, an annual literary conference, and a small press, Books by HippoCampus, which has published six volumes.

“The first time it hit me that we might have something people were paying attention to was when I heard someone say, ‘*Hippocampus* published me!’ I know we’re not top tier like *The Sun*,” Talarico says, citing one of the literary world’s most respected publications. “But someone was proud to be in our magazine.”

Allison K. Williams, a writer and editor based in Dubai, says the publication fills a niche. “There aren’t a lot of lit mags that are respected but not impossible to get into,” Williams says. “It’s important to have a magazine like *Hippocampus* with quality writing that’s still able to accept submissions from writers without agents or big-deal reputations.”

Talarico leveraged the magazine’s growing audience to start HippoCamp, a nonfiction writing conference, in 2015. Held at the Lancaster County Convention Center in the Pennsylvania city where Talarico lives, it draws more than 250 attendees from 29 states and four foreign countries. A list of keynote speakers at the conference includes Lee Gutkind, founder of *Creative Nonfiction* magazine, Mary Karr, author of the “The Liar’s Club,” and Tobias Wolff, author of “This Boy’s Life,” among others. At the conference’s heart is a team of dedicated volunteers and more than 40 sessions presented by writers at all levels of experience.

Veteran New Jersey writer Lisa Romeo, author of the memoir “Starting with Goodbye,” is a frequent presenter at HippoCamp. She finds it unique among conferences. Romeo says, “From the very first day of HippoCamp conference, everyone was treated the same and felt valued. Everyone is part of the community there. This is because of Donna. It’s how she set this conference up. You very much have a feeling that the participants are coproducing the conferences.”

Community is the word that comes up over and over again when people talk about Talarico. The other words most frequently used to describe her are “literary citizen” and “nice.”

“She’s one of the kindest people I’ve ever met,” says Wilkes creative writing classmate and HippoCamp volunteer Angela Eckhart MFA ’10. Eckhart says Talarico’s success is a combination of perseverance, networking and an online platform that she has skillfully nurtured.

Talarico, who also works as a freelance writer and content marketing consultant, took a few detours on her way to

publishing success. She entered Wilkes as an undergraduate in 1996, but took time off to work full-time as a promotion director for a Wilkes-Barre radio station. A gig as an admissions representative for a trade school followed.

She returned to Wilkes five years later to finish her bachelor’s degree in communication studies, and cites faculty Jane Elmes-Crahall and Andrea Frantz as influences. She returned to Wilkes in 2008 to earn her creative writing master’s degree while at the same time working at e-commerce firm Solid Cactus. The latter job proved invaluable since knowing how to establish and nurture an online presence has been integral to *Hippocampus*’s success.



Talarico, seated at the book sale table at the HippoCamp conference, began publishing books in 2018.

Talarico takes a moment to chat with an attendee at the nonfiction writing conference, HippoCamp, that she runs in Lancaster, Pa.



“The common thread in my career was that I was always there when something was going to change. I got into e-commerce when it was just starting,” she says. “It has always helped that I’ve been an early adopter and been able to have a skill that others didn’t have at that time.”

Talarico says that early experiences hinted that writing and nurturing other writers would become her life’s work. She wrote for *The Beacon* at Wilkes and freelanced for local newspapers in Wilkes-Barre. She tried her hand at starting an entertainment Web site, NEPA nights.net, and self-published an anthology, “Kids, Have You Seen My Backpack?,” a collection of essays about people who went back to school as adults.

After earning creative writing degrees, she became director of integrated communications at Elizabethtown College. While there, she reconnected with Kevin Beerman ’01, who she first met when they were Wilkes undergraduates. They married in 2012 and he’s familiar to attendees at HippoCamp, working the registration desk and troubleshooting technical problems.

Talarico left her college job in 2015 to concentrate on her own writing, her literary endeavors and to do freelance consulting. She earned another Wilkes master’s degree — this time in publishing — in 2014 as she prepared to launch her independent publishing company, Books at Hippocampus. The first book published under the Hippocampus banner was “Selected Memories: Five Years of Hippocampus Magazine.” Two other anthologies, “Air,” a collection of essays about radio, and “Dine,” an homage to diners, have followed.

The first books Talarico has published by solo authors are “Dig: A Personal Prehistoric Journey” by Sam Chiarelli ’08 MFA ’14 and “By the Forces of Gravity,” an illustrated memoir by Rebecca Fish Ewan. Both writers affirm that publishing with a smaller publisher is a writer’s dream come true.

“I feel so grateful that my manuscript was published through Hippocampus,” Fish Ewan states. “I hear a lot of horror stories about working with heavy-handed editors or publishing houses that see writers as small cogs in the big business machine of bookmaking. Donna took my manuscript and brought it into publication with tender care and as I had created it.”

Some colleagues were surprised by Talarico’s decision to publish books in print. “That might be where the ‘guts’ comes in,” she says, referencing the fact that some say the era of publishing books in print is past. “We’re seeing book publishing moving in the direction of audio books and ebooks and online. People have asked me ‘Why are you publishing books?’ If I had money, *Hippocampus* would have been a print magazine. I always imagined we’d do an annual print edition or anthology.”

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– Lisa Romeo, author of “Starting with Goodbye”

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What might seem like risk-taking actually has been a measured strategy. Talarico introduced the writing conference five years after the magazine started. She announced her book publishing endeavor at the first conference, where she had a built-in audience for the first anthology. She likens building her business to the time she watched a friend’s family open a restaurant in the Poconos. The restaurant was almost-but-not-quite finished, when it opened. “They weren’t trying to be perfect. They just tried to grow as they were doing it,” she says.

Slow but steady progress has been her mantra. She remembers an interview with country singer Kenny Chesney, who had his first big hit after having minor success with earlier albums. The singer noted the value of those more modest beginnings, saying it’s sometimes better to start slow. “He said, ‘Take off like a rocket, fizzle like a rocket,’” Talarico says. “It always stuck with me.”

