

In Writing

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Bunker Hill Memorial Bridge in Boston, MA

GVSU Writers Visit Boston for the AWP Conference

Rachel Amity

Thousands of writers, students, professors, and teachers descended on Boston, MA over Spring Break to attend the Association of Writers and Writing Programs (AWP) Conference, intent on fostering their passion for creative writing through lectures, readings, panel discussions, and workshops.

AWP's mission is to provide support and resources for writers everywhere, and its four-day conference is its largest annual event, bringing together writing enthusiasts from across the country. This year's conference featured two keynote speakers, Seamus Heaney and Derek Walcott, in addition to over 500 other scheduled events facilitated by professional and published writers. These events explored a variety of topics, issues, and

trends in writing and encouraged attendees to challenge themselves and their techniques.

"This particular conference most impacted me in way of forcing me to think about creativity and the writing process in new ways," reflected GVSU senior Heather Bulliss. "As a student, I've stuck pretty consistently to poetry and nonfiction in my own writing, but after attending a couple panels geared more towards fiction, I feel much more confident and excited about branching out into other areas of writing."

GVSU junior Nicole Fisher agreed, noting that she has already begun to incorporate strategies acquired from AWP panels into her writing.

"I've been using the advice I got from panelists all the time in my writing," Fisher

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Schendel Proposes Evolution through Evaluation in New Book

Rachel Amity

The work of a writing center may seem straightforward from the outside: students seek help, consultants provide help, and better papers are produced. Behind the scenes, though, writing center administrators constantly reevaluate their programs and practices to ensure they deliver the best service. However, writing center assessment tools



Ellen Schendel pictured with her new book

are scanty, a dearth which motivated Full Professor Ellen Schendel to explore strategies for evaluation in her new book, *Building Writing Center Assessments that Matter*.

Co-authored with William Macaulay, Jr., Associate Professor of Writing at the University of Nevada–Reno, *Building Writing Assessments that Matter*, a four-year endeavor, was conceptualized when Schendel and Macaulay met at the IWCA Summer Institute in 2004. The two quickly bonded over shared research interests and talked about someday writing a book about assessment together.

Schendel and Macaulay began writing their book in 2008, using Google Docs to share outlines and drafts. Schendel said their ideas often evolved as they wrote and collaborated, leading to multiple revisions and reconceptualizations of entire chapters. The book was published in Fall 2012 by Utah State University Press.

Currently, most writing center assessment techniques are quantitative, focusing on demographics and how many students use services each semester. In her research, Schendel seeks to go beyond mere numbers, instead exploring “more substantive assess-

ments than just saying ‘We had 10,000 consultations last semester.’ Quantitative and qualitative data are both important because they show us dynamically, especially trends. It’s all about understanding our audience.”

Still, she insisted, qualitative assessments are the key to keeping writing centers on the cutting edge by helping “us build student confidence in more genuine ways, they help us try to find answers to questions we really care about.”

In her nearly ten years as Director of the

“Quantitative and qualitative data are both important because they show us dynamically, especially trends. It’s all about understanding our audience,” said Schendel.

Fred Meijer Center for Writing and Michigan Authors (FMCWFMA), Schendel implemented a variety of qualitative assessments to evaluate the services offered. In the

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shared. “One trick that I walked away with was from the panel ‘This is Your Brain on Fiction.’ They told me the process of outlining and planning a creative piece has the same effect on the brain as actually writing the piece. This can decrease motivation to write it out later. Ever since, I’ve stopped planning in the first draft and have found the process more enjoyable.”

An equally important component of the AWP Conference was the opportunities for networking it provided. GVSU senior Erin Terbrack was both pleased and surprised by the sense of community at the conference.

“Basically, everyone was an open book. While standing in line or sitting waiting for a panel to start, you could turn in your seat and speak with anyone. We met quite a few professors and graduate students, all of whom were very friendly and happy to give advice and suggestions on how to

make the best of the conference and even education in general,” said Terbrack. “It was just amazing to see so many writers together at once. You could strike a great conversation with anyone.”

Fisher echoed Terbrack’s sentiments about AWP’s writing community, stating that “it was overwhelming, but humbling to see 12,000 others in the same place that have the same passion as I do.”

When main AWP events concluded each day, attendees enjoyed a bit of Beantown. Late-night off-site readings allowed them to explore the city by train, while breakfast and lunch breaks afforded time to see the city on foot. Bulliss shared that the late-night readings in particular were “a great way to experience the conference and the city at the same time.”

Reflecting on their experiences, Bulliss, Fisher, and Terbrack unanimously recommended that other GVSU writing students

consider attending the AWP Conference when it convenes next year in Seattle from February 26 to March 1, 2014. Although the distance could make for an expensive journey, Fisher pointed out that the university can assist with funding. “If you can get funding through Undergraduate Office of Research and Scholarship, you can greatly decrease the expenses of the trip,” she explained.

The experience gained from attending such a conference is invaluable, said Fisher: “It gives you a better understanding of how the industry works, what it’s like to be in an MFA program, or just what it’s like to be a writer post-undergrad. My plans post-graduation have changed, as I might take a few years off to try science writing, a field I wasn’t all that familiar with before attending an AWP panel. You get a better view of the big picture and that’s key when it’s your future.”

WRT 150 E-Portfolio Helps Students, Professors, and the Environment

Krisy Force

The face of WRT 150 portfolios has been changed thanks to Full Professor Dan Royer, who created an e-portfolio web application that collects and disseminates 1700 student portfolios gathered at the end of each term. Although the original goal of the program was to help the grading process go quicker, Royer and the other participants are discovering that the program has produced other valuable benefits including the sharing of ideas and saving paper.

For 15 years, students enrolled in the WRT 150 course would submit paper portfolios that consisted of three papers approximately 4-10 pages in length. The 1,700 portfolios submitted each semester meant that professors passed around roughly 35,000 pieces of paper.

“[This system] will eliminate printed portfolios to hand around and the system does all the sorting of first reads, second reads, and third reads automatically for the portfolio group according to the strict criteria of privacy and the unique needs of our program,” Royer said.

Royer spent the summer of 2012 developing the application and had it ready for a test run

by Fall 2012. He proposed his program and received a Faculty Teaching and Learning Center grant so that he could begin testing the application. The grant also allowed him to purchase four iPads for the four affiliate faculty members, Mary Lotz, Dauvan Mulally, Amy Norkus, and Julie White to use to read the portfolios submitted by the 235 participating students.

Mulally commented that she joined the e-portfolio group because she was excited about going paperless and being more

“It soon became much more than saving lots of trees. This experience has changed me as an educator,” Mulally said.

eco-friendly as a department.

“It soon became much more than saving lots of trees. This experience changed me as an educator,” Mulally said.

The test run proved to be a great success, and Royer managed to work out the majority of the kinks before the final live test.

“Given that there is extensive programming behind the software and hundreds of moving parts, I am pleased—even a bit surprised—that not a single

glitch was encountered in the last two weeks. The system worked so well that faculty finished their work more quickly than anticipated, and we moved on to some meta discussion about the new system during the time when we would ordinarily be grading,” Royer said. Professor Lotz commented that the last day of the semester seemed less stressful for students in general without the normal print, read, find an error, then re-print process. Students were able to upload their portfolio, check it, then re-upload if they found an error.

“Overall, the students were positive about turning their final portfolios in electronically. They found it easy, efficient, and environmentally sound,” Lotz said.

Students seemed to like the process, but the participating faculty seemed to like it more for two main reasons. One was the decrease in the amount of paper they had to lug around and the other was the ease of the system.

“The biggest benefit for me as an instructor came during grading. With the portfolio group grading system, if the first

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Meghan McAfee: Writing for Good

Amy Hinman

While in college, it's easy to view volunteer work as simply a résumé booster. For recent Writing Department graduate Meghan McAfee, serving her community has become a way of life.

In November 2011, McAfee was looking for volunteer work. After reading on Twitter that the Creative Youth Center of Grand Rapids (CYC) had received a grant, she was immediately interested.

The CYC, a non-profit organization started in 2009, works with students in elementary, middle, and high school to develop their writing voices, and have those voices heard, often through publication in *The Rapidian*. The after-school programs offer fun, informational workshops that get the students excited about writing by helping them improve their writing skills.

Through investigations on Facebook and Twitter, McAfee learned more about the organization. The prospect of working with kids in a way that used her writing skills was appealing, and she began to volunteer.

Most of the students involved with the CYC are considered 'at risk,' a label that McAfee finds motivating.



Volunteer Meghan McAfee helps out at the Creative Youth Center

"I feel like these kids have a lot more to prove. It makes me want to advocate for them," said McAfee.

With the CYC, McAfee is busy leading a class on Thursdays. She works with the

students as they write illustrated stories—going through the process of brainstorming, writing, and editing together.

See CYC on page 6

fishladder Celebrates 10th Anniversary

Marie Orttenger

This year marks the tenth anniversary of the student-run literary journal, *fishladder*. For ten years the publication has featured the poetry, fiction, nonfiction, drama, and artwork of GVSU students. The *fishladder* staff have put effort into changing and improving the journal to continue its excellence.

This past year, Editor-In-Chief Kate Willis and Assistant Head Editor Nicole Fisher have tried to make those who contribute to the journal, both as writers and as readers, more of a community, as well as introduce *fishladder* to the overarching community of GVSU.

The community-building started within *fishladder*.

"In the past, [as a reader of submissions], you would read your stuff, you'd talk about it, and then you'd go home, and you were done. It wasn't a giant commitment, but I wanted everybody to hang out and get to know each other," Willis said of her previous experience with the journal.

To address this, Willis encouraged editors and readers of the magazine to get to know each other, and make the work associated with the journal an opportunity to create relationships with fellow writers.

"I wanted members of *fishladder* to be closer," said Willis, "I realized that I don't know who these people are. Supposedly most of us are writing majors; we have something major in common, and we don't know each other."

In an effort to expand this community beyond the borders of the journal, Willis

put together a gala to celebrate the journal's ten years of success as well as give readers, writers, and GVSU students in general the opportunity to eat some free food and engage with each other.

"It's not just about us *fishladder* people or us writer people; it's about Grand Valley." Willis emphasized that the event meant that "people outside the writing community who don't know what *fishladder* is could be pulled into our little world."

Willis hopes the effort to use *fishladder* as a tool to establish community will continue with future contributors to the journal.

"We have published really high-quality work for ten years from GVSU students," Willis said, "we can only get better from here."

Patricia Clark and the Process of Creating *Sunday Rising*

Sami Birch

In February, Full Professor Patricia Clark's fourth book, *Sunday Rising*, was released from Michigan State Press. A collection of poems, the book "opens with a haunting vision of human forms risen from the underworld, trying to communicate, and [ends] with poems that question the past, her heritage, human relationships and the meaning of loss," according to Clark's website.

The process of compiling *Sunday Rising* was just as creative as writing the poems that compose it. In an interview, Clark referenced a recent conversation she had with a fellow writing professor questioning, "How does a poet do a book?" She explained that it's become the fashion lately to have a book project.

"Somebody just gets an idea, maybe they write five poems about music and they decide 'okay, I'm going to write a book, and it's all going to be about music or musicians...' so, they make this project, and I don't really like that idea. So, what I have done with all of my books is ... just write poems. And not try to make them fit anything."

Clark described her process as similar to

how one could imagine a musician putting an album together.

"If you're making a CD, you don't want all the notes to be the same, you want up, down, happy, sad," she said.

To determine how she would arrange the poems in *Sunday Rising*, Clark went on a retreat and took with her all of the poems that she saw fit to be in her new collection. She spread all of her poems out on a baby grand piano, making them into three different

"So what I have done with all my books is... just write poems. And not make them fit anything," said Clark.

arrangements, and looking for themes in her work. Clark began to see poems that would fit together—poems about the different seasons, different stages in life, and poems that took readers across borders to Western Europe—and used these groupings as a way to organize her book.

"I think you want a journey, you bring someone into a story, in a sense, and bring them down into the dark, the depths of something, and then by the end, bring them back out into the world, so that's kind of

what I hope the book does," she said.

Sunday Rising brings forth ideas of spirituality and questions traditional ideas of organized religion. Clark explained the title poem:

"Basically it's kind of a person like me outside in the garden on Sunday morning, thinking 'oh, the bells are ringing for church. Guess I'm not going there.' and this is kind of why."

The poem explores ideas that Clark puts her faith in instead: "the fragrant Earth, and the church of the window box ... you know, with flowers in it," she laughed.

When asked where she gets her inspiration, Clark responded that she doesn't really believe in inspiration, but rather a daily practice of writing.

"The people who are going to be successful at writing take as many sources as they can... and it's not usually the big thing. You know, big things happen, like say, September 11th, but it's usually the smaller thing that kind of nags at me and I think 'what does that mean? Why am I still thinking about that? I need to write about that to see what that means,'" Clark said.

Sunday Rising is available for purchase in the University Bookstore.

Nominee Winners for the AWP Intro Journal Award

Fiction

"What Remains" by Lindsay Matteoni

Nonfiction

"Crazy is Inherited" by Russ Pontius

Poetry

"Dear Love" by Liz Dalton

"Third Generation" by Nicole Olweean

"US-101, Sometime after Midnight"
by Sara Warren

Award Recipients in the Writing Department

Department of Writing Outstanding Student

Matthew Russell

Kenneth R. VenderBush

Student Leadership Award Nominee

Jessie Miller

Glenn A. Niemeyer Award Nominee

Sara Warren

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past, FMCFWMA met with focus groups from specific student populations, such as nontraditional students, international students, students who frequent the writing center, and students who have never used the writing center, to collect feedback about what works and doesn't work in the writing center. "Assessment is not about showing that the writing center is great, but about looking at what's going on that will help the center," Schendel explained.

Schendel recommends in *Building Writing Center Assessments that Matter* that assessment stretch beyond the writing center to take into account what's going on in the Writing Department and the community in general. Recently at FMCFWMA, for example, Schendel has tailored assessments to target goals for collegiate writing put forth by the American Association of Colleges and Universities, with which GVSU's newly reformed General Education program has aligned. She explained, "Tying our assessments to initiatives at the university shows a clear and direct path between the work of the writing center and the work of the university."

More than quantitative assessments, Schendel asserted that qualitative assessments "really show what students are learning and gaining from the writing center." Better understanding of student needs leads writing center administrators to refine their services. At GVSU, FMCFWMA has seen a tremendous increase in students visiting the center. Six years ago, approximately 3,000 students were consulted, but last year, over 10,000 students sought feedback. This gain can likely

be attributed to changes made to center services as a result of feedback from qualitative assessments. "We should be showing leadership," said Schendel. "We should be at the heart of the university."

Still, FMCFWMA and other writing centers could use other, more in-depth qualitative assessments in the future. Administering surveys at the beginning, middle, and end of semesters, comparing results in writing classes with and without consultants, and examining the actual changes in student writing are some assessments Schendel suggested.

Ultimately, Schendel concludes in *Building Writing Center Assessments that Matter* that assessment should be proactive, providing opportunities for administrators and consultants alike to adapt their approaches to better fit student needs.

"Assessment helps shape what we understand about the art and teaching of writing. We should be looking to do things in new, fearless ways."

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two grades agree, the grade is set, and if they don't agree, it goes on to a third read. The system allowed us to see right away whether a grade agreed or not. That may not seem like much, but it really made me think about grading more. I asked, 'What would the group give this portfolio?' I think it made me a better grader," Norkus said.

The program went into full mode this past semester. Fourteen teachers are now participating and they have iPads courtesy of the Department of Writing. Although Royer's

original goal of decreasing grading time is still being achieved, the other participating faculty have discovered another benefit to the site. The website allows students to share their writing and for professors to provide feedback.

"The most beneficial feature is the way drafts are open to the class. Writing is meant to be read, and this site makes it easy. I think the act of posting a paper to the site makes students think more about audience, too," Norkus said.

The final and most surprising thing about this site that Royer created was the fact that it seemed to bring students and professors together rather than create a technological divide.

"The adoption of a more digital approach to teaching made me feel more connected with my students and enriched our exchanges," Mulally said.

CYC continued from page 4

"I'm going to be so excited when they hang them all up," McAfee said of their work. "I might even be more excited than they are!"

McAfee wants to share this excitement with others. Volunteers are welcome and encouraged to visit the CYC. Positions include helping in McAfee's classroom, working with the Press Club at the Cook Arts Center, or tutoring in any subject at the Baxter Community Center.

Because of her time with the CYC, McAfee decided to eventually pursue a Masters Degree in Educational Psychology, to work with teachers, and to help develop early comprehensive writing programs for students. McAfee maintains that volunteer work is one of the best ways to get involved and actively use writing skills to help others.

"Volunteer! Get your face in the organization! Just keep showing up wanting more responsibility. Because those kinds of programs open your eyes to how you can use your skills. Because I never would have thought I could totally become a [teaching] consultant or get my masters in educational psychology if I hadn't done this."

Distinction in Writing Recipients

Heather Bulliss

Michelle Green

Hayley Larson

Jessie Miller

Matthew Russell

A Look Inside Brimhall's Poetry

Hannah Matro

The emerald green walls echoed the hue of the gold-studded chairs in which eager students, professors, and poetry fans sat awaiting a reading from Traci Brimhall, who spoke at the University Club on March 11, 2013 as a part of the Grand Valley Writers Series. As Brimhall stepped behind the lectern, her warm, friendly manner brought all those in attendance to ease.

She preceded each poem with a quirky anecdote and noted that she was letting the audience in on the ground floor—the origins of most of her poems are not well known. Brimhall, a creative writing professor at Western Michigan University, is the author of *Our Lady of the Ruins*, winner of the 2011 Barnard Women Poets Prize, and *Rookery*, winner of the 2009 Crab Orchard Series in Poetry First Book Award and finalist for the ForeWord Book of the Year Award. She is also the editor-in-chief of *Third Coast*, a publication by the English Department at Michigan State University.

Her poetry might be described as straight-faced and serious, but playful. Brimhall began the reading with a series of poems experimenting with the form of 'aubades', or songs one sings to their lover in parting. These poems were filled with sadness, heartache, impending breakups, and change. Among those read were "Aubade with a broken neck" and "Aubade that the bats warned me about." As Brimhall recited, her voice bantered between soft and whisky to taut and staccato, and she used pauses to punctuate the emotion in her poems.

Her playful creativity was further displayed in the diction Brimhall employed in her poems. Brimhall incorporated unusual words like 'rutabaga' and 'auspices' into her pieces,

later declaring, "I love strange language." She said she thought she could get away with using such vocabulary in a title, and thus introduced her poem, "Oneiromancy," which she revealed is the Greek word for the divination by the interpretation of dreams. This particular poem was inspired by Lars Von Trier, who directed a documentary, *The Five Obstructions*, which is about his challenge to his friend, Jørgen Leth, to revisit and remake a movie, *The Perfect Human*, five times. After once being told she was not vulnerable enough in her poems, Brimhall, up for a challenge, applied this idea to her own work and revisited one of her poems five times amidst obstructions she was given. She finally came up with "Oneiromancy."

Brimhall derives much of her inspiration from her interactions with people. "The Light in the Basement," sprung from a question someone once asked her at a subway station: "Do you ever see a train coming and want to step in front of it?" Brimhall wrote her next poem, "Prayer for Sunlight and Thunder" after her grandmother sent her a birthday card that predicted the day she was going to die.

Brimhall recited her poetry throughout



Author Traci Brimhall

the night expertly, despite the noisy rush of the train whistling and chugging by and some unanticipated microphone issues. Through it all, Brimhall retained her composure and delivered a unique, warm, and truly enlightening experience. The evening concluded with a book signing and a well-deserved round of applause.

InWriting

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Alumni News

2003

Abby Heugel is the managing editor and writer of three national trade publications for employment, and a humor blogger at *Abby Has Issues* for enjoyment. She self-published a book of humor essays in 2011 and donated all profits to the Humane Society of Kent County. Her blog has won many awards.

2004

Amber Eby-Shearer has been a Client Care Associate at the San Francisco SPCA for five years and has received a Ludwig Grant, SF SPCA Strategic Fund Initiative, and their Above and Beyond Award in 2010. This year, she got to lead the Holiday Windows at Macy's Adoption Event.

2006

Bison Messink lives in Brooklyn, NY and works as an editor at the mobile news magazine *SPUN*. He got over his fear of new content technologies just in time to land a couple of online writing jobs, and now finds himself with one solid foot in the "tech" industry.

Morgan Sherburne works at the *Petoskey News-Review*, a daily newspaper in northern Michigan. She uses her Master in Science Writing from MIT to develop the environmental journalism beat, and her Master of Fine Arts in creative nonfiction from the University of Minnesota to inform her feature writing.

2007

Meahgan Pear is the Director of Marketing and Communications for the Girl Scouts of Michigan Shore to Shore, spearheading the marketing efforts for a 30-county council serving over 10,000 girls and 4,000 adults in northern and western Michigan. She is also the owner and founder of Mimi P Communications, LLC.

2008

Jenny Knodell currently heads the marketing department at PolyVista, a business intelligence software company in Kalamazoo, MI. She writes and designs marketing materials such as case studies, brochures

and white papers, as well as drafts their internal and external documentation.

2010

Jamie deGraaf worked as a freelance journalist for *Chicago-Scene* magazine in Chicago before moving to Austin, Texas, where she now works as a creative writer for a start-up company. She's getting paid to write—just like she always dreamed!

Hazel Foster is pursuing her MFA in Creative Writing at Hollins University, where she helps manage the department's reading series, reads submissions for the *Hollins Critic*, and will teach creative writing next year. Her fiction can be found or is forthcoming from *PANK*, *Midwestern Gothic*, *Metazen*, and *TRNSFR* among others.

Madeleine Hart is continuing her tenure at Zondervan as the Trade Books Marketing Assistant. This fall, she will be applying to several higher education programs focused specifically on publishing.

Rori Leigh Hoatlin is a second-year graduate student at Georgia College and State University. She was a 2012 Agnes Scott Finalist and a member of the editorial staff for Arts and Letters. Her work has previously appeared in *Young Scholars in Writing* and is forthcoming in *Prick of the Spindle*.

Leah Mastee is the Assistant Editor at Kregel Publications, an independent book publishing company in Grand Rapids, MI. She is responsible for tracking proposals and managing freelance proofreaders, as well as reviewing and editing manuscripts.

2011

Claire Helakoski is in her first year of pursuing her MFA in fiction at Georgia College. Last year she worked for the Advance Newspapers and *On-the-Town* magazine in Jenison while applying for programs. Georgia College selected one of her fiction pieces for this year's AWP Intro awards. She will begin student teaching next year and hopes to pursue a career as a professor of writing once she completes her degree.

Meghan McAfee currently serves as an AmeriCorps member in the Heart of West Michigan United Way's Schools of Hope

program. She provides literacy tutoring to 1st through 3rd graders in Grand Rapids Public Schools and Godwin Heights Public Schools. Meghan is also a creative writing workshop leader through the GR Creative Youth Center.

Allie Oosta is a style copywriter for Amazon Fashion in Seattle. She writes editorial stories featuring the latest trends for clothing, shoes, jewelry, and watches. In addition to on-site features, Allie is also responsible for emails, SEO content, and about a third of the @AmazonFashion tweets.

Kiera (Wilson) Prince is attending Clemson University's Master of Arts in Professional Communication. She works as a graduate assistant and will be teaching freshman composition next fall. After graduation, she plans on pursuing a PhD and teaching professional writing and feminist rhetorics.

2012

Joshua Hackler divides his time between his freelance web design business (money), running the literary journal *Squalorly.com* (industriousness), and writing fiction (passion). He is currently working on countless drafts of several short stories and one seemingly endless novel in preparation for grad school.

Jeremy Llorence is a graduate student pursuing an MFA in Playwriting at Western Michigan University. He also teaches a writing class at WMU. Recently, a staged reading of his one-act play "Goodman James" was performed at Theatre Kalamazoo's Third Annual New Play Festival.

Michelle (Thomas) Oswald works as the Marketing Assistant at TerraTrike, manufacturer of three-wheeled recumbent tricycles for adults based in Grand Rapids. She feels she was uniquely prepared for success through the great teaching of the Writing Department faculty and her peers.

Megan Smith is the technical communication specialist at VerTech Solutions Group in Denver, Colorado. VerTech is a strategic advisory company that focuses on finding technical solutions for small businesses.