

# “A Brave Writer’s Life in Brief”

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## Celebrating 20 Years of Brave Writers

### Podcast S6E1: Julie Bogart

January 23, 2020

#### 2020 20.

There’s got to be some enchanted magic to the triad of 20s greeting Brave Writer in this new year. **January 2020 is Brave Writer’s 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary**—my little idea that could, which launched itself into the worldwide web at the dawn of the new millennium. My first online writing class, conducted by email list, filled to capacity. We were off! No website, and a different name: The Writing Compass.

I self-published *The Writer’s Jungle* in February of that year. A large homeschool company run by acquaintances had shown interest in publishing it initially and then changed their mind. At first, it was a crushing blow to feel the sting of that rejection. I would learn, however, that building a business is precious hard work. Working on my ideas without the boost of someone else’s endorsement proved to be the most important work of my life. I’m grateful today.

Brave Writer is not the story of an entrepreneur in search of a good idea. Oddly, Brave Writer IS the good idea—creating conditions for children to experience writing as pleasurable, as sourced in their ideas, vocabulary, and passions. My heart from the beginning was to alter the story people tell about writing—that it’s difficult, that it’s a requirement so you’d better get to it, that the accuracy of your grammar usage and spelling



skills define the quality of your ideas. Instead, I wanted parents and kids to discover that the writer lives within and that writer is best accessed through play, interest, affirmation, collaboration, help, and kindness.

So January of 2000 saw 25 families take a leap to join my inaugural writing class. They discovered the power of tapping into their children's natural writing voices. By June, I had been invited to speak at the statewide convention (CHEO) where I would deliver several talks and sell the newly minted *Writer's Jungle*. Cindy Clark and Paula Horton, two local homeschooling friends, offered to help me assemble the components into the binders that we sold at my booth at my first convention. In late May, my husband at the time slapped together a website landing page and we registered the name of the company as [writingcompass.com](http://writingcompass.com).

I spoke in my first workshop to a room of 150 people. I found myself saying with dramatic emphasis: "We want free writers. We want brave writers" and bam—just like that, I knew. I knew that my company name was "Brave Writer," not "The Writing Compass." I arrived home and told my husband: "I'm buying [bravewriter.com](http://bravewriter.com); please create the re-direct right away." The cover of *The Writer's Jungle*, you see, already had the wrong website emblazoned across the front.

We sold 45 copies of the manual that weekend and my classes filled to capacity all year, selling out in minutes. During the first 3 years, if you didn't sign up for a class within 5 minutes of registration opening, you didn't get in. I hired my first teacher that first year and added teachers to the staff, usually every other year. Our first two instructors were called Rachel—the two Rachels. I am grateful for their early energy and capability. Today we are up to 26 teachers and over 30 staff members.

By 2002, I launched our second product: the Arrow. The Arrow was my attempt to create a program that would be the "anti-curriculum." I was tired of these heavy books that you had to work through all year. It occurred to me that we could deliver curriculum by month—a



little at a time. This way it would be like getting a magazine. You'd have something new to look forward to each month and wouldn't worry that you were behind since there was only one month's worth of work to do at any given time. The first iteration of the product was an email (not even a PDF file). It caught fire quickly and I remember we hit 100 subscriptions within the first year.

My goal with the Arrow: to make it easy to pair literature with Charlotte Mason's injunction to practice copywork and dictation. As a professional writer, though, I was also interested in craft—why the books we were reading were considered classics or high quality. I knew we needed to look at literary devices, not just the nuts and bolts. I wanted exploration and appreciation for the quality of the writing—why did it work, why did we love it, why did we cry or feel anger? We have a rule in Brave Writer that anything we teach needs to be taught for “epiphany.” What makes a child go “Aha! I get it”? That's the rubric for how we write all of our products and classes.

I named this early book companion product the Arrow because, honestly, I was weary of names that had numbers in them (Grade 6, Core 3, Stage 5). I wanted to “shoot language arts help” directly into mothers' inboxes and the image of an arrow seemed perfect to express it.

We expanded our class offerings into high school level in 2003 and I wrote another language arts product called The Slingshot for those older kids at the same time. By 2005, we added the Boomerang for middle grades. Eventually we retired the Slingshot (though look for a possible reappearance in 2021!) and focused on the Boomerang. Today, the Arrow and Boomerang account for a huge percentage of our customer purchases and are wildly popular. We set a new trend in the homeschool market—monthly subscriptions (which we see everywhere now).

In 2005, I released *Help for High School*. My approach to teaching the essay had been immensely helped by being married to Jon, a literature and composition professor. I pored



over his college freshmen text books and blended those techniques with my own and created a program I still believe is cutting edge in our world of writing and home education. My theory is this: when we learn to write essays, the format is only useful if students first know how to generate insight. We start by stirring up the rhetorical imagination so that our teen writers know how to think about an issue, how to evaluate sources, and how to offer their own interpretation of the ideas. Then we can show them the container that houses argument—the essay. When I teach about high school writing in conferences, it's not uncommon for adults to finally grasp the architecture of academic writing. I worked as a consultant to help doctoral students polish and write their dissertations before I ever started Brave Writer. I have a knack for academic writing.

We've seen countless students have breakthroughs when they take our classes and I routinely get emails from those students in college letting me know that thanks to Brave Writer, they've sailed through freshman comp or have tested right out of it! In fact, the way we teach the essay is unique enough that when I taught at Xavier as an adjunct professor, my colleagues asked me to do a short training for the tenured professors. Then in 2018, I was awarded Xavier's Alumni Award for Outstanding Contribution to Society for my work in Brave Writer.

I share these details because they are as staggering to me as they may be to you (perhaps more so to me). My background is a Bachelor's degree in history from UCLA and a Master's in theology from Xavier University. The ability to write is essential to both degrees and I believe that because I didn't major in English, I bring a unique perspective as a writing coach. I understand what writing is for—which goes well beyond commenting on literature. It's for thinking—for interpreting, for clarifying what you take away when you learn, for offering your voice to the ongoing project of humankind.

We hired our first "batch" of teachers and trained them as a group in 2011. Since then, we've had two staff retreats, several rounds of hires and trainings for new instructors.



I also launched a podcast with Noah in 2011. What a delight! We didn't know a thing about promoting it, but we did manage to upload it correctly to iTunes! I also had more and more freedom to travel as my kids got older. I traveled to many conferences and experienced a surge of invitations.

In 2014, we began my experimental project: The Homeschool Alliance. I had been wanting to help parents with homeschooling, not just writing. The community staggers me—the depth, the heart, the growth, the honesty. It has steadily grown in stature each year—with an archive of valuable tools for professional and personal development.

In 2016, a strange new online phenomenon occurred. Live stream broadcasting leapt into view via Periscope. A Brave Writer fan invited me to learn how to use Periscope and suddenly I found a way to connect directly with my audience. Our Facebook page exploded, we launched a Facebook Group for our community and we started a YouTube channel.

We've now held four retreats/conferences of our own (3 in Cincinnati and one in Austin, which I attended by the power of Zoom Broadcast, laid up with a broken ankle in Ohio).

Perhaps the biggest lesson in all of this growth, however, is how to go from accidental entrepreneur to CEO of a full-fledged company. In 2017, I attended a two-day seminar called "The Course for Presidents" where I learned all that "I didn't know that I didn't know" about how to hire, how to write contracts, how to set employee standards, how to keep clean books, how to build a vision worthy of the dedication of your team, how to grow without losing your soul, how to plan for the future.

I've worked with a wonderful business consultant since then. He's been the difference. I had begun to feel over my skis. There's nothing quite like realizing that the people who've honored you by choosing to work on your vision now rely on paychecks from your company to pay their mortgages or rent. It gets really real at that point that the project is



not just about putting good out into the world, but honoring the investment others are making with you.

The guiding principles I learned from that experience and that my advisor has reinforced have helped me stay sane in a very challenging world of work. Having never even been on a job interview, you can imagine how unprepared I was for the world of running a company.

The biggest challenge was navigating the shift in how the company was organized. Originally, I had myself and Cindy, a part time staff member plus a couple of part time online teachers. By 2011, Cindy became a full time staff member and I invited friends to work with me as well. Several of my favorite people joined the team and I felt grateful. I told them that I often felt as though I was paying my friends to do me favors. It was difficult to think about what it meant to lead a company, to hold a vision, and to craft the steps for my team to take that would cause Brave Writer to flourish.

Eventually, it became clear I needed team leaders—people who would own aspects of my vision as their own. I had to find people I could trust to create, direct, and lead, not just implement my ideas. I am incredibly lucky that three such people are now directors on our team: Dawn Smith, Jeanne Faulconer, and Kirsten Merryman. They bring extraordinary talent and a commitment to a shared vision of what Brave Writer can be.

Our other staff members find joy in the work they do with the Brave Writer team. They find value for their personal development and freedom to expand their talents.

In 2017, I attended a Writer's Digest conference where I met the woman who became my literary agent. Rita Rosenkranz took my book under her wing and landed it with my dream publisher: an imprint of Penguin Random House called Tarcher Perigee. My book, *The Brave Learner*, was published in 2019 and has exceeded all sales goals including making the Publisher's Weekly Best Sellers List its first week out (we are truly blown away).



The next stage of growth for Brave Writer is to expand our reach, to make our products more intuitive, and to bring cutting edge education tactics to the homeschool space.

As we close out these two decades of Brave Writer, I'm struck by the power of a good idea and people with heart to help it become accessible to others. Thank you for all the ways you've shared about our work, have trusted our input into your lives, and have taken the time to tell us how what we do makes your life better.

Stay tuned for lots of specials happening in 2020! Thanks for celebrating with us.

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