By Joel Brillant

The Mayborn Literary Nonfiction Writers Conference of the Southwest provides a fitting launch of the Mayborn graduate program’s new publishing track. The conference, also open to the public, offers cash prizes for winning essay submissions and a book contract for the winning manuscript proposal. Participants may attend without submitting their work.


The conference, which provides discounted rates to UNT students, faculty and staff as well as all other educators in the region, will be held at The Hilton DFW Lakes Executive Conference Center in Grapevine July 22-24.

The writers, editors and literary agents will conduct workshops and present lectures, discuss their own work and answer questions.

Mayborn Director Mitch Land said, “In laying a foundation that will be enlightening and educational for this unique program, we’ve selected current and former journalists who have learned how to transcend the traditional boundaries of journalism while upholding its highest standards for fairness and accuracy.”

Conferrees may submit sample articles and essays for review by top industry professionals. A panel of judges will select the top 50 entries in the article/essay category to attend a special workshop. The top three entries will be eligible for cash prizes between $1,000 and $3,000. In the manuscripts category, the top 20 entrants will have their work reviewed, and the UNT Press will extend a provisional contract to

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In my first 24 years, I never attended a party that had a helicopter and a tank present. Then I spent a day with Harper Clark.

Clark is a Mayborn alumnus and the Killeen bureau for the Temple Daily Telegram. No, that isn’t a typo. He isn’t the bureau chief; he’s the entire bureau.

On March 14, Clark graciously allowed me to do a shadow day with him, following him around and picking his brain with incessant questions as he covered stories that day. That afternoon, we covered “K-cops,” the affectionate term Clark uses to describe crime reporting in Killeen. We also covered the demobilization of a combat battalion in Fort Hood. Both stories were a great learning experience, but the most memorable moment of the day was standing on that field, between the helicopter and the tank, watching the troops return home from Iraq.

Seven flights from Iraq were arriving that day at Fort Hood, carrying about 1,800 soldiers from the 1st Cavalry Division. Clark and I were there to greet the first flight of the day, the 20th Engineer Battalion.

It was surreal, walking onto that sun-drenched field while a disc jockey, “Tony Karaoke,” blared Garth Brooks music. Children were petting the horses from the division’s horse detachment. Smiling faces were everywhere as friends and family members waited for their loved ones to return home after more than a year in harm’s way.

When Tony Karaoke announced that “the buses are on their way,” the entire mood changed from cheery to electric. A chill went up my spine and my arm hair stood up, although I knew no one on those buses.

A few minutes later, five buses pulled up to the curb on the other side of the field. A cheer went up from the crowd, more of an emotional release than a greeting. Children began jumping up and down, not going anywhere but too excited to stand still. The troops exited on the other side of the buses from the crowd. From between the buses, we could see them lining up.

The buses pulled away, leaving the battalion behind in formation. Faces in the crowd contorted from smiles of eager anticipation to floodgates of tears. The soldiers marched across that field, finally home to their families.

As Harper Clark and I drove away from that field, on to cover another story, he reminded me that we’re not just in the business of relaying facts. We’re also in the business of reporting on people and emotions.

“You have to like people,” he said. “Be conversational, real, talking to them like a person…It’s not just an interview.”
Growing up in the highlands of Central Kenya, I always admired the oratorical skills of the elders. I often tried to voice their wise sayings, but without much success. With a chuckle, the elders would respond, “Only when a chick swallows a grain of corn can it be sold as a mature cock.”

Numerous attempts to swallow this corn have ended in a now seemingly endless academic journey.

My road has been punctuated by deep curiosity, a journey that has left me diagnostic, acquiring a disposition resembling that of a surgeon; allowing no mistakes in its scrupulous analysis of reality. During my undergraduate, I used to have hallway discussions with my literature professor and mentor, Emilia Ilieva. Dr. Ilieva taught me the history of world literature, tracing world literary developments from antiquity to post-modernism. I was intrigued by the encyclopedic nature of the works of Homer, climactic speeches in Euripides’ tragedies, and ethical issues raised by Socrates. Stupefied by how little I knew generated a threatening thirst for knowledge. Ilieva relentlessly impressed on me to unremittingly strive to offer credible alternatives to unquestioned popular opinions, for therein rests the real pursuit of knowledge.

With my childhood dream of being a communicator unrealized, I joined UNT for my master’s degree in journalism. Still, I could not swallow the proverbial corn. It was Dr. Mitch Land, Mayborn Institute director and a close friend, who reminded me that knowledge is a living thing and needs to be constantly nurtured. In pursuit of truth, I gathered one has to indiscriminately and uncompromisingly question the unjustifiable confidence in which accepted views are held. My sojourn at the Mayborn Institute engendered more inquisitiveness and a realization that one must be dedicated to careful reasoning. This all-consuming consciousness produced an irresistible need to pursue a doctoral degree. Every time I am asked what motivated me to pursue a doctoral degree, words of Michel Foucault come in handy: It was curiosity – the only kind of curiosity, in any case that merits the pain of being practiced with a little obstinacy: not the kind that searches out in order to digest whatever is agreeable to know, but the kind that permits one to get free of oneself.

No one can deny that the doctoral journey is a painful experience that leaves invisible scars. It is a journey that mercilessly deflates the lofty bubbles we create around ourselves upon receipt few academic papers. One feels empty. And a doctorate increases ones’ disdain for material success! It is not a means of making a living, I was told by Dr. Brian O’Connor, my professor and philosopher who hunts and gathers in the information savannah. It is just a way of life. My starting point in the doctoral program was to honestly accept my ignorance, to painfully destroy the feeling that I was knowledgeable, and to resist devastation from that weakening feeling. And as I struggle with this “critical labor of thought itself,” I am slowly getting accustomed to fewer hours of sleep and many cups of coffee.

And still, I cannot swallow the corn!
Mayborn students were honored at the C.E. Shuford Journalism Banquet April 9. Christina Jancic, Mayborn Scholar was named Mayborn Graduate Student of the Year. She had no idea that her honor included a $1,000 check generously donated by former NT Journalism professor Jim Rogers and Sue, his wife.

“It was a good thing I was sitting down when I opened my envelope.” Jancic said, “I was stunned.”

Another Mayborn scholar honored was Hedish Connor. She won the William D. Richardson Scholarship.

“When I heard Dr. Wells call my name I couldn’t believe it,” Connor said. “This scholarship is a real blessing.”

The journalism banquet began with a reception and the music of the Jeffery Eckels Trio, faculty members from NT Jazz Studies.

After the reception everyone made their way to the banquet hall for dinner and the main ceremony. Foreign correspondent and honored alumnus Ray Mosley shared interesting experiences and wild adventures from his forty-year career.

“Ray’s speech provided head shaking wows and elicited awe,” said Mayborn Professor Richard Wells. “Current students and the rest of us can see what an important profession we have chosen.”

Following Moseley’s speech the NT Journalism department doled out more than $18,000 to 35 students in scholarships and awards.

After the dinner and awards ceremony, everyone retired to an after-party hosted by the Mayborn Social Club at Sweetwater, off the Denton square.

Hannah Seddelmeyer, Mayborn Social Club officer, said, “I think it’s important for everyone to meet each other and form relationships because we are all going to be in the profession some day. Knowing other people in it will be invaluable.”

This year’s C.E. Shuford Journalism Banquet was a tremendous success. The Mayborn Institute would like to thank all faculty, sponsors and students who made this year’s banquet great. A special thank you goes to Nancy Eanes for her hard work.