

Theme Music ([00:01](#)):

Please listen carefully.

Taylor Pardue ([00:07](#)):

Welcome to the NC State Philanthropy Podcast, telling the world how we Think and Do through the support of our friends, alumni and more. I'm your host, Taylor Pardue.

([00:17](#)):

On our season 4 premiere, we're joined by Belle Boggs, the former director of NC State's Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing program, to discuss how private support helps power it forward.

([00:32](#)):

Thanks so much for joining us today, Belle. To kick things off, just tell listeners a little bit about yourself and what brought you to NC State.

Belle Boggs ([00:50](#)):

Thanks, Taylor, for having me. So, I am a fiction and non-fiction writer, and I have lived in North Carolina ... I'm originally from Virginia, moved all over, but moved to North Carolina in 2005, so I've lived in North Carolina a while and have been at NC State since 2014. My teaching trajectory, it's a little different from some of my colleagues, but it's not that unusual for a creative writer. After my MFA program, I was living in New York City, and I joined a program called the New York City Teaching Fellows, and I taught in public schools in Brooklyn, and I continued doing that when we moved to North Carolina. I've taught everything from kindergarten through elementary, middle, high school, GED and in community-based programs, and now I teach graduate students and undergraduates here at State, so I've been here 10 years. I love it. I'm a huge Wolfpack fan. My daughters and I have season tickets.

([02:05](#)):

My family and I have season tickets to the women's basketball games, and my daughters both want to go to State, which I think is adorable. And so, yeah, those are some of the things that brought me here. I taught in a variety of capacities but was publishing and had not imagined that I would necessarily teach at the university level because I was not willing to move out of the state. After I moved to North Carolina, I quickly found that it was my home and [got] involved in some community things and just really loved the landscape here. I live near the Haw River, and I love it, and I got very lucky that I was a visitor and then was lucky to be hired into the English department here, and I've been able to work with some extraordinary students, extraordinary colleagues and really wonderful supporters of our program.

Taylor Pardue ([03:01](#)):

Tell us a little bit about your work with the creative writing program, yes, over the years.

Belle Boggs ([03:06](#)):

Well, so, I teach fiction, nonfiction, creative nonfiction and some intro classes. I teach an intro class that is wonderful and has students coming from around the campus to take it. It's an intro to creative writing class, and that is a training class for our graduate students who also teach the undergraduate 200-level creative nonfiction, intro to creative writing, intro to fiction, intro to poetry. And, so, I get to teach things across a wide array of creative writing, and then I work with graduate students, and these are students who come to us from all over the country, all over the world. We have, very often have international students coming to study with us, and that is really enriching to our program and to the

perspectives that our students are able to have, our North Carolina-based students, because we do have students who come directly from NC State into our graduate program, and so they then get to be exposed to people who are from Bangladesh or from England or from Nigeria, and this is just really enriching to their practice.

[\(04:30\)](#):

And then those students get to study with all of our wonderful faculty, the students who are coming from other countries working with the graduate students. I'll meet some later today who we recruited back in the winter. Now they're here, and they're going to be thinking about what novels, what books of poetry, what essays they're going to write while they're here at State, and we'll be working with 'em. They each get to work with all of the faculty that we have, but then we have really phenomenal faculty here and they get to study literature and they get to study outside of creative writing if they want, but then they also, in their second year, work very intensively with one faculty member in their genre. So, for me, that would be a fiction writer, and we work through the novel, the collection of stories that they're going to produce by the end of their second year, which is also quite amazing that they produce a whole book of fiction or poetry by the end of two years with us where they're also working very hard as teachers, too.

Taylor Pardue [\(05:39\)](#):

Do you feel like having lived multiple places across the country, taught in so many different ranges of ages, do you think that's really helped you meet with these students where they're coming from their different backgrounds and made for a better experience for you as well as for them?

Belle Boggs [\(05:54\)](#):

I hope so. I mean, for me, I see the teaching of creative writing, it is something that anyone can benefit from. Of course, our students are choosing to make this their career, and so they are incredibly talented, driven, ambitious. They're going to write books. You don't have to be someone who has the ambition to write a whole book in order to benefit from classes and education and creative writing. Tapping into that part of you that is creative, fanciful, truth-telling, experimental — maybe you came from this really small town that you really want to tell other people about, or you lived in this very particular neighborhood and in a city and you want to tell people about that, or you traveled and you want to turn that into a short story or a poem. That experience is something that our students, while teaching here and while teaching very serious undergraduate students, also can use in other ways. So, they can use it if they choose to teach in high school for a while after they graduate or an elementary school for a while after they graduate or if they choose to teach in the community.

[\(07:16\)](#):

This past year, we had students working with me in a class called Teaching Artists Practicum, and we were exploring the different ways that creative writing practitioners, creative writers can go out into the community and find places where their needs ... so, community centers, libraries, teen programs at libraries or high school programs, and they can go in and teach creative writing as kind of extracurricular, but also as this enhancing art form that helps those writers. I really think being a creative writer and working in creative writing can just help you become a more self-aware person in general. And so, that was our experience in this past fall. We worked with students at Oberlin Library. We worked with students at Jordan High School in Durham, and we were with three different groups of students, and they were all ... some were adults, some were teens who go to, by choice, a library program, and some were high school students where we were just busting into their class.

[\(08:26\)](#):

And in each situation, the students, the graduate and undergraduate students that I worked with, had developed classes, lessons that were specifically geared to that audience, and they worked with the students, and they got to see how, “Oh, OK, this lesson, I’m going to change it a little bit next time, or I’m going to enhance it by adding this.” They could actually read more poems in a class, or they could, they were going to benefit from having music in the class, they’re going to benefit from having some other kind of art form connected to what they’re doing. And then we actually produce an anthology at the end of that, which is really great. It’s in multiple languages, and it’s artwork, and it is the product of ... and it also includes reflections and description of the lessons that the students taught. And it is a product of that time and those spaces and the thinking that the graduate and undergraduate NC State students did as they thought through, “OK, when a creative writer goes to teach in the community, what are the steps? What are they thinking about? How can they be useful?”

[\(09:36\)](#):

And so, that’s, I think, one of the ways that I am a little bit different than some, or that’s just something that I bring that is particularly ... a particular passion of mine is going into those community spaces where there might not have been a visiting writer, and you can be that visiting writer. For me, as a student, I grew up in a very rural part of Virginia, and we didn’t have a library in my county. We did not have a bookstore in my county. We did not have writers coming to visit. And I remember every extracurricular arts-based thing that my elementary, middle school did — every one of them, and high school, too, because it was so valuable to me. And I know that there are so many other writers and teachers who will say the same thing. They were in a school that didn’t ... creative writing wasn’t a big part of what they did, but then they remember when they got to do it.

Taylor Pardue [\(10:45\)](#):

Obviously, sounds like outreach is a huge part of this program. I’m sure it differs between poetry, nonfiction, fiction, but, if there is a typical pathway through the curriculum and everything, what does the typical two years look like for a student?

Belle Boggs [\(10:58\)](#):

Oh, that’s a great question. I don’t think there is a typical two years. I mean, there are some things that are the same and that our students in fiction and poetry ... so, most of our students will come through the program and they’ll write some nonfiction and some creative nonfiction because they’ll take Elaine Orr’s memoir class, or they’ll take a personal essay class with me, or they’ll take a class with LaTanya McQueen that ask them to write craft essays, for example. So, they will have that experience, but they’re studying fiction and poetry, and they will teach either creative writing, or they’ll teach first-year writing, which also has some creative elements to it, but they don’t teach in their second year. In their first year, they’re training to teach. So, they are learning pedagogy, they’re practicing, they’re engaging with students in one way or another in a very structured way.

[\(11:50\)](#):

And then they also, along the way, may have some other opportunities to work with, for example, honors students. We have a great relationship with the honors program, and so, sometimes our students will be invited to lead small discussion groups. They might lead small discussion groups at Oberlin Library because they’re invited to do that. That’s actually something that we were invited to do with teen writers again this fall. So, they may do that in their first or their second year, but they don’t have primary responsibility for teaching a class until their second year. And they’re taking classes, of course, they’re taking workshop classes, they’re taking literature classes. They’re taking craft classes. And if they have a particular interest in something outside of the English department, they may take a

class there, too. And then in their second year, they're continuing to take classes. They're really working on their books and they're teaching.

[\(12:45\)](#):

So, the second year gets really intense because you are in charge of your own classroom. You're the instructor of record with a group of bright and expectant undergraduates, and then you're also working really hard on your own book, and you're also taking classes still. And you might also be applying for fellowships and applying for creative writing, teaching jobs and other kinds of opportunities. Some of our students go on to do Fulbrights, they go on to right after graduation. Some of them go on to do fellowships, residential or otherwise; some of them go right into teaching. Occasionally, they'll come right into teaching at NC State. And so, we still get to see them, which is awesome, but they're starting to think about that path also. So, the second year is really busy.

Taylor Pardue [\(13:35\)](#):

It sounds like it, yeah. What role does philanthropy play in all of this? It sounds like there are so many different giving opportunities.

Belle Boggs [\(13:41\)](#):

Exactly. So, philanthropic giving has played a huge impact on what we're able to do in our program. And I didn't talk about one of the things that we do, and so this is a good opportunity to do that. We also run a reading series, so we offer to the whole university as well as the community, because all of our events are free and open to the public, we offer between six and eight readings a year with incredible writers. We've had Percival Everett; we've had Sharon Olds; we've had Billy Collins before I was here. We have amazing new writers sometimes who graduated from our own program, like Tyree Daye or Sarah Grunder Ruiz, who still teaches in our first-year writing program and is [a] phenomenally productive writer. And Tyree is an incredibly talented poet as well who teaches at [the University of North] Carolina.

[\(14:39\)](#):

So, those opportunities don't come for free, right? They're free to the audience, but we believe very strongly in paying artists for their work and expertise. And, of course, we have to get them here, the reading series that we have. And we also run two contests that are connected to a fall reading and a spring reading; that takes money. And for many years we've been supported by, for a while it was annual gifts from the Brown family, and the Brown family very generously made a transformative gift to us. I believe it was in 2020. I mean, I remember where I was when I got the news. It's such a powerful experience. I mean, it does a few things, right? First of all, you know, "Oh, OK, we're going to be able to continue doing all of the things that we know are really valuable for the community, for the university and for our graduate students." And then you think, "Oh, this also means that someone believes that we're doing a good job."

[\(15:47\)](#):

And you have that wind at your back, that vote of confidence that what you're doing matters and that what you're doing is valuable, and that is incredibly joyous. And so, the Brown family's gift has helped us do everything from when I've mentioned that program that we did at Oberlin and Jordan High School. We produced anthologies and printed them, and we could not have done that without the gift from the Brown family. So, we were able to use Brown family funds to pay for those anthologies. They weren't that expensive, they turned out beautiful, but it's difficult to pay for things like that when all of the university funding that you have really needs to go to things like graduate student stipends. And we

have other gifts. The ... Jane Craven, who is a graduate of our program and also an incredible poet, she noticed that the students really benefited from travel and from travel to conferences, particularly the AWP [Association of Writers and Writing Programs] Conference, which is the major conference in our field, and it's expensive to travel, so it's very hard to do it as a graduate student.

[\(17:05\)](#):

And so, she and her husband gave a gift that is specifically designed to help support students when they travel. And so, we're able to combine that with money that comes to us from the graduate school and sometimes from the English department to all the students who want to go to AWP every year or want to go to a conference every year and say, "OK, we can give you this amount of money to help you with your journey." And so, maybe we can't pay for all of that, but we get as close as we can. And so, another gift would also ... when you give a gift, you can say, "Oh, I really want it to go to travel." Or you could make it open-ended and say, "I want this to just support this program" and what you see as valuable. And that can go to everything from funding students to do things here on campus, like special programming connected to a reading that we have.

[\(17:56\)](#):

If we want to connect with honors or something like that, we can pay the students a stipend to run these, or an honorarium, I should say, to run these small groups. Or we can support students when they're doing internships. We believe very strongly, in the same way that we believe in paying artists, we believe that our artists, our writers should be paid when they go to do things like internships at presses, which we have a lot of here in this area as well. But a lot of times presses can't afford to pay their interns, so we can chip in and we can provide — a lot of times we just pay the whole internship for our students to go and get that experience. And so, that makes them better on the job market when they leave. It lets them know if this is something that they want to move into.

[\(18:45\)](#):

And then it helps the community, too, right? Because generally they're doing something, they're always doing something in the arts, something that supports writers and supports our literary culture. And so, we feel so grateful to the philanthropists who give to us in every way that we are donated to, makes a big difference to us. So, it's all big ways. We've had faculty members — Wilton Barnhart made a gift to us years ago, and it continues to fund things like this contest that we run that is open and free for anyone in North Carolina. We have a ... so, everyone should know, I don't know what the dates are yet, but there's a fall fiction contest and a spring poetry contest, and therefore, anyone in the state of North Carolina who has not published a book, and you just send in your stories. And we have one, a longer story contest, a shorter story contest, and then we have poetry contest in the spring, and those are judged by readers who are coming to campus — really esteemed writers. I think we have Annette Clapsaddle is judging the fall fiction contest this year. And this is a way for us to engage with the whole state.

Taylor Pardue [\(19:59\)](#):

I think these are great examples of ... we always tell people we're so appreciative of what the state of North Carolina does for us as a state university, but I think a lot of times when the public hears "state university," they think that the state of North Carolina pays for everything. And while they give a[n] excellent foundation for us, funding these programs that go above and beyond — these different learning opportunities, these outreach programs — that comes a lot of times from philanthropy and from outside donors and just help us really make, like Chancellor Woodson says, a good university an extraordinary one.

Belle Boggs (20:34):

Oh, exactly. And the reading series is just such a great example of that. There are things that we can pay for with state funds, and there are things we cannot pay for with state funds. We can't use state funds, necessarily, to host students and a visiting writer for dinner necessarily. But when we have these discretionary funds, we can do that. And the opportunity for a graduate student to go to dinner with an incredible writer that they have loved and read for years, it's just something, right? To go to dinner with Ada Limón, our poet laureate who read here a few years ago; that's an unforgettable, career-changing experience. But then for Ada Limón to come and read to [a] large group of listeners in Tally and have people from the community who've loved her work, have people from other parts of the university who've loved her work, have our own students from the English department and our graduate students. That's bringing a lot of people together. That kind of opportunity is created by people like Tony Brown.

Taylor Pardue (21:57):

The student outreaches to the public schools — I really feel like that gets at the heart of being a land-grant university so much. So many times, I feel like when people hear "land grant," they think of agriculture, probably first and foremost, or STEM fields, something along those lines. But really, like you said, going to visit these schools, maybe that's the first time a student has ever met a writer or a writer in training, and to really be able to reach them is just as important as anything. To reach out and to really let the public see the benefit of NC State and the work that we do here.

Belle Boggs (22:30):

Oh, absolutely. And when we were working with Jessica Odom's English, sheltered English IV class — so, this is a class at Jordan High School that's taught in English to students where English is a second or sometimes a third language for them. And these students were so welcoming to us when we came into their space that, after we'd been there for a couple of weeks, we said, "We need to be reciprocal, and we should invite them to our space." And so, we had not planned this at the beginning of our project there, but we worked with Transportation, we worked with the Libraries, we worked with Communications, and then the English and creative writing department to bring them to campus. They brought, rode a school bus to campus, and we met them at Tally, took them on a tour of the university. So, they got to see the university. Took them to Hill Library, where we had projected their poetry and their artwork on ... it's an exhibition room where you see the projection in 360 degrees.

(23:40):

And so, we had a display of their work set to music there, and they were not expecting that, and they were just blown away. Their teacher ... people were crying. It was really powerful. And then we went after that, we had lunch outside, just like a student would, just like a college student right? They had Chick-fil-A, and then we walked, because this was a walking tour of campus. Oh, we also went to the Belltower, and they loved that. After we'd done our big tour and had lunch and seen the work at the library, we went to Clark Labs and the greenhouses there. We went into the greenhouses. It was a chilly day. We went inside. Of course, in a greenhouse, the air is warm and kind of humid. And we explored the greenhouses, looked at the plants, and they did a poetry prompt given by one of the graduate students, and they sat in the greenhouses and they wrote a poem.

(24:41):

And these are not students who, necessarily, at the beginning of the process with us, if you'd said, "OK, just sit down in this 10-minute window and write a poem." We might've said, "What do I write about? I don't know." But they all had words and poems and expressions and ideas on the tips of their tongues, and they just went right to it in their notebooks. And many of them were the NC State notebooks that

we'd brought to them at the beginning, the little red with a wolf logo on the front. It was a really special experience. And I think that is my dream: doing more things like that, where it's not just we go into the community, but we also bring the whole community to our beautiful and really important campus. We're really interesting. Things are happening all the time, and they get to see themselves on campus as a community member, but also maybe as a student, too. And they get to see what college students do, what graduate students do, what professors do, what scientists do, what engineers do. And I think that is really inspiring and what I would love, love, love to do more of with our program.

Taylor Pardue ([25:55](#)):

And there's no telling how many of those students that we impact end up enrolling here and applying and coming to NC State and bringing it full circle.

Belle Boggs ([26:03](#)):

Exactly. I know we got some Wolfpack fans from that time.

Taylor Pardue ([26:08](#)):

You mentioned wants for the future and things like that. What's the future look like for you? You have an interesting new role coming up, and then for the future of the program, too.

Belle Boggs ([26:17](#)):

Sure. So, I was director of the program for six years, and next year, this academic year, I'll be on fellowship at the National Humanities Center, which is not far from here. So, I'll still be able to come to campus for basketball games and readings as needed, but I will be spending most of my time working on a book called "Big Yellow Bus: The Essential American History of a Disappearing Public Good." And it's a book that tells the story of American education through the transportation system. So, it's about school buses and school transportation and how they have played a role in access in consolidation of schools from our tiny one-room schoolhouses to our bigger schools now. But also the history of racism and segregation and resistance to a shared public good, a truly shared public good that is a mark on our history, but is one that people need to know, so they also understand why it's so important.

([27:24](#)):

And in the context of today, where we have school bus drivers working so hard to fight for better pay and reasonable hours and accommodations and things like that. And having to fight in general for resources for our public schools is hugely important. And so, that's what I'm writing about next year. It is a nonfiction book that is immersive and will have its kind of critical creative side as well. And I'm sure I'll write some short stories, as I always do. And yeah, I'm just really looking forward to it. My daughter and I, she's 10 and is ... one of the experiences that she had as ... comes to campus with me on occasion. And she also went to those greenhouses and also got to meet scientists and cool people at NC State around the time that she was getting interested in houseplants. And so, she and I have cowritten a book called "Plant Pets," which is about houseplants.

([28:36](#)):

It's the first book for kids about houseplants. It has a lot of great interviews with scientists and NC State-trained scientists and veterinarians, because, of course, you have to keep your pets safe when you're choosing houseplants. And that's coming out with Story Press on the 27th of August, so it comes out pretty soon. We actually have an event here with Friends of the Libraries in September. Those are things going on in my life. I'm really excited about the new students that we have. I'm sad that I'm not working

with them this year, but I know that I'll see them because I'll take them to basketball games and I'll see them at readings. I'll see them today, and I'll read their work, right, because that's the other thing that I did not emphasize, but being a writer, it's really, it's this great career because you can do it all your life.

[\(29:30\)](#):

It's not like being a gymnast, which is also awesome, but there's a date of expiration there where you're not going to be doing those flips anymore. But writing, you just hopefully just continue to get better at it as you go. And it is a long path to ... it can be a long path to first-book publication, but it isn't always a long path. And we have students who graduate here, like the talented Sarah Grunder Ruiz, who will publish right out of the gate, or like Tyree Daye, will publish books right out of the gate. And then we also have students who are publishing in important journals and winning important contests. And so, we're reading their work while they're here as graduate students, and we're also working very hard to teach them the practice of both protecting your time, spending the time that you need to get the work where you need it to be, but also when you're ready, putting the work out there and trying for that hard-to-reach fellowship or that dream publication. So, we try to work on the professional side of things, too, with our writers while they're here.

Taylor Pardue [\(30:40\)](#):

Both of those books sound so interesting. I'm looking forward to those coming out.

Belle Boggs [\(30:43\)](#):

Oh, thank you.

Taylor Pardue [\(30:44\)](#):

Thank you so much for joining us today, and all the best in this new role, but looking forward to seeing you on campus again, too, for the basketball games and things like that. Glad you're going to be able to still be in the community.

Belle Boggs [\(30:52\)](#):

Oh, definitely. For sure. Yeah. I'm very excited.

Taylor Pardue [\(31:01\)](#):

To learn more about the MFA in Creative Writing program, please visit go.ncsu.edu/mfa. To hear even more stories of Wolfpack success, please subscribe to the NC State Philanthropy Podcast today through Apple Podcasts, Spotify, Podbean or Stitcher. Be sure to leave a comment and rating as well to let us know how we're doing. Thanks for listening, and as always, go Pack.