

FKA Poets House Staff

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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New York City

CONTACT

formerphstaff@gmail.com

EX-STAFF RESPOND TO POETS HOUSE CLOSURE AND LAYOFFS

We are a group of former supporting staff at Poets House who have chosen to continue organizing collectively following our abrupt termination by Poets House management. We were laid off without notice during a meeting at noon on **November 16, 2020**. Moments later, a press release announcing the organization's temporary closure was distributed to the public, claiming the closure was due to pandemic-related financial stress and timed to "before [Poets House's] limited reserves are depleted." Yet the press release fails to mention that this unexpected closure follows months of staff-led organizing to hold management and the board accountable in light of frequent complaints of workplace discrimination, sexual harassment, and exploitative labor practices.

Despite great personal and professional risk, we feel obliged to respond to the misleading statements made by Executive Director Lee Briccetti, Managing Director Jane Preston, and the Poets House Board of Directors on **November 16** regarding the sudden closure of our beloved institution. While we recognize the dire financial situation that arts organizations across the world are experiencing, we believe the closure and layoffs are a direct, retaliatory response to our efforts to form a union at Poet's House with UAW Local 2110 and to address discriminatory and exploitative practices at the institution.

These issues were first raised collectively at a meeting on **February 28, 2020**, while Briccetti was on temporary leave and Preston was the acting director; Briccetti returned shortly before Poets House closed its doors on **March 14**, due to the rapidly developing COVID-19 crisis. Complaints about the hostile workplace culture continued through the initial months of remote work with acknowledgment from management but little progress. On **June 5**, a longtime staff member of Poets House quit abruptly after being blamed for an executive error, part of a pattern of scapegoating by executive management. The day after this occurred, Briccetti announced a second leave.

At a meeting on **August 20** between the staff, management, and board, and mediated by Mark Pearce—the former Chairman of the National Labor Relations Board under President Barack Obama, who was brought in upon staff's insistence—employees explicitly raised concerns about racism, discrimination, sexual harassment, and mismanagement to Poets House's Executive Committee (Nicholas Potter, Outgoing Board President; Linda Earle, Incoming Board President; Adrian Ellis, Board Secretary; and Margo Viscusi, Board President Emerita) and Jane Preston. Lee Briccetti and Bob Kissane, Board Chairman, were absent.

Mark Pearce compiled a comprehensive memo highlighting these concerns for continued conversation, and a committee was established with representatives from staff, management, and board to select a Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility consultant to lead mandatory training for all parties. The consultant would also assist with revising Poets House's Code of Conduct, including the creation of a formal complaints procedure. These changes were to be implemented in **January 2021**.

Simultaneously—and against the board’s goodwill promise that staff would collaborate in the hiring process—the board hired HR consultant Celeste Thompson to investigate allegations that executive leadership knowingly exposed staff members to sexual harassment by board members and explicitly told staff members who complained that they should allow this behavior. Staff met individually with Celeste Thompson throughout **October 2020**, following which she submitted a detailed report on sexual harassment and workplace discrimination based on race and gender at Poets House in early **November 2020**.

During this time, a majority of Poets House staff began meeting with representatives from United Auto Workers Local 2110 and signed union support cards. We filed our petition to unionize with the National Labor Relations Board and notified Poets House executive management of this petition on **November 4, 2020**; the deadline for their response was **November 17, 2020**. After the petition was filed, management abruptly cancelled two consecutive weekly staff meetings, citing reasons such as “paperwork” and “deadlines,” and all executive correspondence with staff slowed to a standstill.

On the morning of **Monday, November 16th**, all staff received notice of a mandatory meeting about the future of Poets House to be held at noon on that day. No information was given regarding this meeting beyond the subject line, “IMPORTANT MEETING,” and a zoom link. During the meeting, management announced that all nine union-eligible staff were being laid off, effective immediately, leaving only Lee Briccetti and Jane Preston on payroll to “wind operations down, and to plan succession.” Simultaneously, the institutional email accounts of all nine laid off staff members were frozen, preventing them from accessing their inboxes or tying up existing commitments. Staff who weren’t able to attend this last-minute meeting were not officially notified of their termination until three hours after the public announcement.

We share these facts out of concern not just for ourselves, but for the integrity of Poets House and its mission. We believe in the power of language to form coalitions across differences and speak truth to power. To merely accept the terms of our unemployment without sharing this information with our community would be to tacitly accept the untruths and omissions that have been offered by Poets House’s executive leadership as representative of the values this organization’s mission upholds. We are working poets, artists, and performers who understood our jobs at 10 River Terrace not only as an important means to provide for our respective families and partners, but also as a service to our community. We are grateful to our community for their outpouring of support for us as individuals, staff, and stakeholders in the mission of Poets House. As we join the thousands of cultural workers around the world who have lost their jobs during the COVID-19 crisis, we hope that the board and leadership of Poets House will be held accountable for the discriminatory and exploitative practices they have perpetuated—not least with these retaliatory layoffs.

For more information or to schedule interviews, please email formerphstaff@gmail.com.