

a conversation **with** Holly Lange on Mississippi Book Festival



Holly Lange is the executive director of the inaugural Mississippi Book Festival. The festival is slated for August 22 at the Mississippi Capitol Building. Lange and her husband, Alan, live in Fondren, and have two sons, Ford and Jake. She recently spoke with Sun Senior Staff Writer Anthony Warren about the festival.

So how were you chosen as executive director?

"There was a core group of people who decided it was time to do a book festival, and I was involved early on. My background is in fund-raising and logistics, so I became executive director by default. I was also a volunteer for the first Texas Book Festival, so I had experience working book festivals."

Who was part of that core group?

"Jere Nash, Malcolm White, John Evans, and Jean Medley to name a few. So many people had been telling Malcolm White that we needed to have a book festival. Malcolm told Jere to bring the people together to organize the festival, and he did. They spent some time considering if the event could be pulled off, decided it could and that's when I got involved."

Now, tell me about the festival itself.

"It's going to be an experience — not just a group of authors in a room talking about books. I'd like to back up for a second. We're doing it at the state Capitol because this is a state festival, not just the Jackson, Madison or Oxford book festival. It is the Mississippi Book Festival. When people come to the grounds, they will see a stage with bands playing. Along Mississippi Street, there will be independent book sellers and self-published authors selling their books. The Mississippi Children's Museum will provide two different tents to give chil-

dren something to do, and the Friends of the Jackson-Hinds Library System will have used books for sale. There will be food trucks, merchandise tents, and then, on the green space in front of the Capitol, authors will be signing books before and after their sessions. Four large rooms in the Capitol will be dedicated to panels, which will be running concurrently."

How long did it take to pull all of this together?

"We started raising funds for the event about two years ago. We had a tentative schedule that was 30 to 40 percent complete, if we could get the funding. Once the funding was secure, we hustled to get the rest of the scheduled filled out. I had a vision in my head of what it should look like, so it was easy to put together on paper."

The event will feature some major authors, like John Grisham. Were authors receptive to requests to participate?

"Absolutely. Three told us no because they were in the middle of writing books and couldn't be here in August. Many participate in festivals around the United States, they appreciate what we are trying to accomplish, and they are eager to be a part of it. My favorite part is how I got John Grisham to say yes. We sent him a package with Cathead Vodka, Bristow Gin, Campbell's (Bakery) iced cookies, Primo's cheese straws, craft beer from Lucky Town Brewery, and an advanced readers copy of Matt Guinn's new book, along with several handwritten notes. I put a note in there that said, 'Everything in the box is made in Mississippi, just like you. Please come home.' And he said yes. I cannot tell you how supportive he has been to make this a successful event."

This event seems to coincide with the release of a book by another famous author, Harper Lee. Was that planned?

"That was certainly not planned. We have added a panel to talk about the new book ('Go Set a Watchman'), and the controversy surrounding it."

From what I understand, the controversy stems from the fact that Atticus Finch is found out to be a racist. What's your opinion about that?

"I have not read the book, so I do not have an opinion. I will quote Rick Bragg. 'We've seen the baby. Now, we need to see how he grows up.' 'To Kill a Mockingbird' was the baby, let's see what happens next."

How many people do you expect to attend the festival?

"It's hard to guess having never done this before but we're hoping for 2,500 people."

How much will it cost to put on?

"Approximately \$150,000. There is no cost to the public. It's free for everyone to attend."

Why do you think this event is needed?

"Everyone knows that Mississippi has a huge, deep literary heritage, but we've never done anything unified to celebrate our authors — past, current or future. This is the perfect opportunity to showcase the breadth of the talent in our state. Mississippi gets lots of negative attention. Hopefully, this will bring a positive spotlight to something we do well."

Are y'all already working on year two?

See Holly Lange, Page 10A

"Many participate in festivals around the United States, they appreciate what we are trying to accomplish, and they are eager to

TO BE A PART OF IT."

-Holly Lange

Holly Lange

Continued from Page 3A

"Absolutely. The three or four authors who couldn't attend the festival this year have agreed to attend next year, including two big-name children's authors."

Do you write?

"No. I read a lot though."

I know your husband has written a book.

"He will not be participating (in the festival). A rule of thumb is the authors have to have a book published within 12 months of the festival."

Lately, the new state testing requiring students to pass reading exams in third grade has made news, in large part, because of the number of students who did not pass. Do you hope this event can help improve literacy?

"Yes: MPB (Mississippi Public Broadcasting) is supporting this event, and provides wonderful early childhood literacy programming. They will be coming and will tell anyone who is willing to listen about their programs. The Children's Museum will also be there to engage children. Any time you can make it seem fun to read, and can get a child to open a book, your job is

done."

Finally, what do you hope people will take from this event?

"I hope they take away several things. I want them to say, 'Wow, what a great experience. I came to the Capitol, met authors and learned something I didn't know before.' I want them to walk away saying it was a worthwhile experience."