

# SIGMA

The Official Parsec, Inc. Newsletter



Sigma #481  
May 2026

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**Cover image:** "Fresh Offering" by: John R. Muth, 2026.

Want to submit your own photo, art, 3D rendering for use on the cover of Sigma?

**Submit files to [parsecsigmanews@gmail.com](mailto:parsecsigmanews@gmail.com)**

**The four programs under the Parsec Inc., 501(c)(3) organization are:**

- [Confluence Conference](#)
- [Monthly Events](#)
- [Parsec Ink Publishing](#) (Triangulation)
- [Word - Write or Die Writing and Critique Group](#)

**Need to mail anything to Parsec, Confluence,  
Parsec Ink or Word? The address is:  
PO Box 79281  
Pittsburgh, PA 15216**



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## DEAR FRIENDS OF PARSEC,

Short and sweet this month. We have some great content from folks this month. Updates to the different Parsec programs – anyone else getting excited for Confluence?

We have an announcement from Diane Turnshek, Parsec Executive Director, about the panel she will be moderating at the Pittsburgh Book Fest, and I know a number of our members and folks further associated with things Parsec, will also be hosting panels, selling the marketplace, and just attending. So, I hope to see you there.

Speaking of Executive Directors, we will soon be posting an announcement regarding Parsec seeking someone to fill that position. More to come, but I hope we'll get some interest and someone who can lead us into the future.

Lastly, please join us at the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh - East Liberty, on Saturday, May 16, when we're just going to have a good ol' fashioned hangout session. Let's talk books, movies, nerd-fights, or anything else that tickles our fan-hearts.

Until next time!

John Muth

Sigma Editor, Monthly event officer,  
and Parsec, Inc. Board of Directors,  
President

P.S. I wanted to thank Greg Armstrong for hosting our Parsec Holiday Party in May. It was a great time, and my first time attending! The plan, as he said, would be to try and do it again in December, but maybe celebrating the true nerd holiday's is the way to go forward.

# **Become a Parsec Member today!**

Parsec members in 2026 will receive a free ebook of this year's **Parsec Short Story Contest winners**, and enjoy **free advertising in the Sigma Newsletter!**



Your membership dollars allow Parsec to continue offering the following long list of programs, all of which are open to the public:

**Confluence**  
**Parsec Monthly Events**  
**Parsec Ink — Triangulation**  
**Parsec Short Story Contest**  
**Write or Die Writing & Critique Group**  
**Parsec Library**  
**Sigma Newsletter**

The Parsec Membership year runs annually from March 1st through the end of February.



# RENEW YOUR MEMBERSHIP OR BUY ONE FOR THE FIRST TIME!

With your membership you get a digital membership card with your name and status for the year. Each member can also choose to have your name on the Parsec website, and here in the Sigma Newsletter. Join today and get your name listed along with these folks:

## **Lifetime Members:**

Barb Carlson, Greg Armstrong, Mary Soon Lee,  
Timons Esaias, William Blake Hall

## **Founders Fund Members:**

Sarah Wade Smith, Joan Fisher

## **2026 Main Members:**

Judith Gallagher, Susan Urbanek Linville, Susan Kaye Quinn, Dan Błoch, Jenny Thompson, Barton Levenson, Larry Ivkovich, James Hardin, John Muth (BOD), Darcy Conaty, Scot Noel, Kathryn Smith (BOD), Jamie Lackey (BOD), Alan Bailey (BOD), Jennifer Theoret, Jess Simms, John Frochio, Greg Clumpner, Amanda Pica, Christine Benner Dixon, Susan M. Smith, Michael Albergo, Paula Sandusky

## **2026 Associate Members:**

Amy Finkbeiner, Stephen V. Ramey, Elizabeth Penrose,  
Jane Noel, Bernadette Harris

# PARSEC MONTHLY EVENT

**Date: Saturday, May 16th, 2026; Time: 1 to 2:30 pm**  
(Zoom opens at 12:45 and ends at 3:00 pm.)

**Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh - East Liberty,**  
**Meeting Room and on Zoom.**

CLP is not the host or organizer of this event. CLP does not support, sponsor, or represent this group or event.

Check [www.parsec-sff.org](http://www.parsec-sff.org) for more details.



Apparently there was a time when the Parsec meetings didn't always include invited speakers, special guests, or presentations. That was before my time, but let's try bringing that back. Sometimes we can forget that it's the love of science-fiction, fantasy, and horror, that got us all interested in things like Parsec, Sigma, and Confluence.

Join us at the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh - East Liberty, to talk about our favorite genre works, both of all time and recently discovered works. Books, movies, TV, comics/graphic novels, animation, or actual-science related items.

Hope to see you there. Bring a friend!

**Monthly Event Officer:** John Muth

# PARSEC PROGRAMS



Parsec Ink

The 2026 Triangulation anthology is edited by Marie Vibbert.  
The theme for this year is:

## BAD ROMANCE

The Table of Contents is set. The manuscript is under construction.  
And save the date;

**The Kickstarter is set to open on Tuesday, May 19th!**

We'll be creating another limited run special edition, similar to last year's gorgeous Dark Hearts. The only way to guarantee a copy is through the Kickstarter. During the Kickstarter launch, we'll also reveal the full list of authors and the cover art.

Don't forget about our launch party at Confluence on the evening of Saturday, July 25th.

We can't wait to celebrate with you!

Looking for a past edition of Triangulation?

[Dark Hearts](#) (2025)

[Hospitalium](#) (2024)

[Seven-Day Weekend](#) (2023)

[Energy](#) (2022)

Or find many more of our anthologies on [Amazon](#).

**Parsec Ink officers:** Chair: Jessica Carver. Treasurer: Greg Clumpner.  
Editor: Marie Vibbert.

## Confluence T-shirt Orders Are Open!

2026 Featured Artist

**Patricia McCracken**



Our front artwork this year is a gorgeous dragon by artist Patricia McCracken.

### **Description from Patricia:**

*The dragon would best be described as a Chinese Tengshe or a Feilong which basically means a "flying serpent" or dragon who controls the weather and they don't have any limbs. They most likely read scrolls therefore they don't need hands to turn the pages.*



**Pre-Orders Close  
Sunday, June 28th.**

**Writing Workshops  
with Marie Vibbert**

**Saturday: A Story in Three Parts  
Sunday: Plotting Plots**

Signup is required. Visit the [WRITING WORKSHOPS](#) page for more info.  
Space is limited!

# CONFLUENCE NEWS

Confluence will be held July 24 through 26, 2026  
at the Sheraton Pittsburgh Airport Hotel  
1160 Thorn Run Road Extension, PA 15108

2026 Guest of Honor  
**ANDY DUNCAN**



2026 Musical Guest  
**QUICK SAVE**



## Pitch Sessions are back!

We're going to have **Rachel Beck** from Liza Dawson Agency who is looking for horror. And also **Jennie Dunham** from the Dunham Literary and **Sarah Nicholas** (aka Sarah N. Fisk) from Tobias Literary Agency – and both of them look for SF and F, adult and YA.

More details to come!

Writing Exercises  
**M. Christine Benner Dixon**  
and **Schereéya**



Visit <https://confluence-sff.org/> for more information.

Confluence officers: Chair: Kevin M. Hayes. Treasurer: Karen Yun-Lutz.

# PARSEC PROGRAMS

## Parsec Short Story Contest

2026 Short Story Contest Coordinator: Jamie Lackey

**Submissions closed on March 31st.**

You can find out more [on the short story contest's webpage!](#)

**This year's theme is Metamorphosis:** Send us your stories of complete transformations, inside and out. Of inevitable moments of sudden, irrevocable change. Of destruction that leads to unexpected growth.

The contest is open to non-professional writers who have not met the eligibility requirements for SFWA Full Membership. Writers meeting the SFWA Associate level of membership are eligible to submit to the contest. Previous first-place winners and current year contest coordinators, readers and judges are ineligible to enter.

## *Write or Die*

A Science Fiction & Fantasy Writing Group



The Write or Die (WorD), Pittsburgh, science fiction, fantasy & horror writing & critique group meets twice every month!

### **Upcoming Meeting Dates:**

- Tuesday, May 12 at 7:00 pm, on Zoom only.
- Tuesday, May 26 at 7:00 pm in the Mt. Lebanon Library, Room A with a Zoom Option available.

For information on meeting procedures, contact info and how to register, [\*\*Visit WorD on the web.\*\*](#)

# AUTHOR SEEKING REJECTION

## A QUEST, Volume 5

By Timons Esaias

In my search for 300 rejections in 2026 things are going well. At this writing I have 143 rejection year-to-date, so I'm almost halfway there. (The downside is that I have a pile of things that need to get back out there. Working on it.) And oh, yes, I just got contributor's copies for Star\*Line 49.2, and I have a story coming out in Analog. So it's not all rejection.

So why am I doing this again? Here's another anecdote explaining how this brute force marketing works to my benefit. Years ago, I wrote a cute little Borgesian flash piece, surreal and clever. It amused the writers I showed it to. But magazine after magazine quietly returned it with a no. Many of them took quite a long time to do it, so it must have been jumping through some good hoops, but still. No.

Note that this was a literary piece, so most of the markets I'm sending to don't pay a dime. You do it for the recognition. For cred.

Long story somewhat tightened: I'd racked up 20 rejections when I saw a note for the prestigious Winter Anthology Award, so I entered my much-rejected piece, because it wasn't too much different than some previous winners. Result: it won. Thousand dollar prize.

In the publishing game Persistence Is All.

*Timons Esaias is a sporadically award-winning satirist, fictionator and poet. His works have appeared in 22 languages, on at least one planet.*

*He also teaches workshops.*

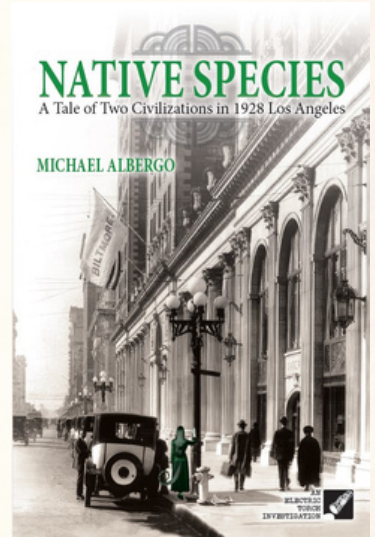


# PARSEC MEMBER ANNOUNCEMENTS



**Michael Albergo** just published his debut novel, *Native Species: A Tale of Two Civilizations in 1928 Los Angeles*. He will speak about his book at Confluence, if the Confluence schedule permits. Michael, a professional engineer, is a professor of risk management at NYU and a co-director of the university's Project Execution Risk Lab (PERL).

In 1928, 10 years after global war and global pandemic, humankind was just beginning to unravel the secrets of the universe and the mysteries of our origins. Set against this historic backdrop, *Native Species* brings real people, locations, and events together to create a story of loss, friendship, betrayal, redemption, and the search for self-worth. It might be called science-fiction, historical fiction, fantasy, or horror, but it's best considered simply speculative fiction.



*It is 1928, and the future is unwritten.*

*When widowed Professor Horace Jennings reluctantly volunteers to search for a missing student, he trades Rhode Island for the West Coast. This isn't Providence; this is Los Angeles. And as his hired detective warns him, bootleggers, museum thieves, and crooked cops are no company for a sherry-sipping professor and his precocious protégé, Helen Parker.*

*But the truly dangerous characters aren't criminals.*

*In fact, they aren't even human.*

*Shila Ghiss, a scientist from a subterranean race, desires only to experience daylight. One day, she gets her chance—if she is willing to help reclaim the surface from humanity. She'll need to become human, to learn about powerplants, facial expressions, and hair care. She'll need to do something awful. But her rival and his followers are planning to do something far worse—something apocalyptic.*

*To save both species, she'll have to work closely with these bizarre, unpredictable humans and become both traitor and savior. She'll have to decide who she is, and which native species will write the future.*

Available everywhere in paperback, e-book, and audiobook. Reviews appreciated!

# PARSEC MEMBER ANNOUNCEMENTS



## From **Brandon Ketchum**:

I will have my little guide "Stokercon 2026 Visitor's Guide: Haunted Sites Outside Pittsburgh" go online on or about May 18.

I will be part of a reading session during Stokercon.

I will participate on at least one panel at Stokercon. That one is called "The Survival Guide for Horror Writers in an Age of Censorship and AI."

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## From **Diane Turnshek**:

Far Out! Exploring Sci Fi with John Scalzi and Isabel J. Kim

Room: Lecture Hall

Building: Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh - Main (Oakland)

Time: 1:00 PM - 2:00 PM

Books: After the presentation, attendees are welcome to purchase a book and/or get their book signed at the tent outside.

Pre-registration: Closes on Thursday, 5/28, at 12 PM. Pre-registered attendees will receive priority seating. Walk-ins are welcome if capacity allows.

Moderator: Diane Turnshek

Author Talk

**Far Out!**  
**Exploring Sci Fi**  
**with John Scalzi**  
**and Isabel J. Kim**



John Scalzi



Isabel J. Kim



PGH  
BOOK  
FEST

# PARSEC MEMBER ANNOUNCEMENTS



## From Mary Soon Lee:

I surprised myself and decided that I will attend Balticon in-person this Memorial Day weekend, a thing I have never done before. I will be on panels, which is good yet also intimidating. I have attended only one in-person conference in the last several years. (Confluence, yay!) If you will be at Balticon, please let me know. Any friendly faces will be very welcome!

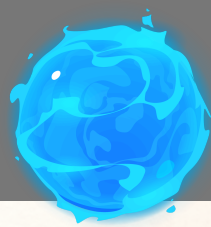
On the writing front, I've had five poems published since the last update. Mushroom appeared in Strange Horizons; "Mars Loop Magpies" appeared in Space and Time #149; and three poems appeared in Star\*Line: "Dilettante" + "How the Dragon's Daughter Tasted" + "Unspoken." The dragon one is part of the midquel for The Sign of the Dragon that I've been working on – it's atypical for the midquel, being darker and unlinked to Xau.

I had a busy time on the reading front, including reading five of this year's crop of Nebula-nominated novellas(\*). I particularly liked Jordan Kurella's novella "The Death of Mountains," narrated mostly by Plundered Mountain, who describes themselves as a middling hill of the Appalachians. I loved Plundered Mountain. I can't recall ever reading a story told by a mountain before.... On the poetry front, which was also busy, I particularly liked George Guidall's narration of Stephen Mitchell's "Gilgamesh: A New English Version," which proved both fascinating and enjoyable.

Best of all, I was utterly smitten by C. J. Cherryh's 1995 high fantasy, "Fortress in the Eye of Time," 773 pages in the mass market paperback edition, and I was under their spell from about the tenth page all the way to the end. I love the central figure, Tristen, an innocent heart entangled in magic, who is drawn into battles political, wizardly, and military. I can report that book two in the series also pleased me very much, and that I am forty pages into book three, and in danger of neglecting Important Things so that I may read more. Oh, yes, to those who have read it, as well as Tristen, I especially like the pigeons and Owl, and the horses, and Uwen. As ever, my book reviews may be unearthed at Goodreads.

(\*) Footnote for those keeping overly careful track: I read the sixth, Amal El-Mohtar's "The River Has Roots," last year and liked it very much.

# PARSEC MEMBER ANNOUNCEMENTS



## From Susan Kaye Quinn:

Hello Friends! I've got a sale going on two of my Mindjack books -- Book 1 and Book 4 ebooks are free for a limited time! There are actually two Mindjack (YA SF) trilogies, so this sale gets you the first book in each trilogy FREE!

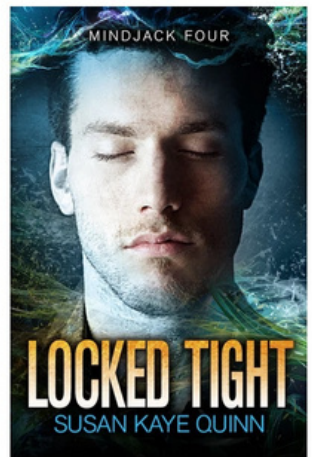
*THE FIRST MINDJACK TRILOGY follows Kira, a girl who can't read minds in a world where everyone does, as she discovers an underground world of Mindjackers. Open Minds launched my indie career and convinced me I could make a living at this writing biz. It's been a wild ride ever since!*

*THE SECOND MINDJACK TRILOGY follows Zeph, a boy whose mind is locked tight, impenetrable to even the strongest jackers... which makes him more of a weapon than he wants to be. This second trilogy was written years after the first and explores more of the darker side of jacking... but it's also a continuation of the world Kira broke open in the first trilogy.*

If you haven't read any Mindjack, the first book (Open Minds) is where you should start!

If you've read all six Mindjack novels, don't forget to check out the [Mindjack Short Story collection](#), with deleted scenes, origin stories for some of the favorite characters, and lots of fun tidbits. As always, please request my books at your local library-- even if you've read them! That way more folks can discover the series!

**Get the Mindjack stories now!**



## Your Announcement Could Be Here!

Parsec members never pay for ad space in the monthly Sigma!

Become a Parsec member for only \$30/yr

## The Tinfoil Dossier

By: Larry Ivkovich



*The Tinfoil Dossier* is a horror/dark fantasy/Lovecraftian-inspired series by Caitlin R. Kiernan. It's made up of three novellas: *Agents of Dreamland* (2017), *Black Helicopters* (2018), and *The Tindalos Asset* (2020).

Kiernan has won and been nominated for several awards in the horror and fantasy genres, although they think of themselves as a writer of dark fantasy rather than horror, considering horror more an “emotion” than a genre. But, you can't prove that by me, since some of their work has truly unsettled me like good horror should. In an interview Kiernan said they're not concerned with plot or characterization as much as with mood and atmosphere, which their work has in abundance.

A lot of Kiernan's work is influenced by H.P. Lovecraft but is attuned to more modern and humane elements. They forego the misogyny and racism of some of Lovecraft's stories in favor of female and LGBTQ+ characters taking the lead.

The Tinfoil Dossier's main character throughout the series is a mysterious man (an exception to Kiernan's character rule) known only as the Signalman. The Signalman is a longtime and jaded special agent of a secret government organization called the Agents of Dreamland, dedicated to stopping eldritch menaces from invading our

# REVIEWS

world. Think of the Tinfoil Dossier series as a much darker, grimmer, more violent version of the Laundry Files by Charles Stross. No humor but a ton of creepiness.

In *Agents of Dreamland*, a disturbing event has happened to members of a cult, the Children of the Next Level, at their compound on the shore of the Salton Sea. To exchange information and work together to solve this mystery, the Signalman meets with a female operative from a rival occult intelligence agency who is basically a living corpse and can mentally travel back and forth in time.

In *Black Helicopters* (the expanded 2018 version of the 2013 World Fantasy Award winning short story) the Signalman takes on a supporting role, deferring to another agent named Ptolema. Ptolema is investigating strange, violent occurrences on a stretch of New England coastline. There, albino twins named Bête and Ivorie, subjects of hideous experiments, hold back the forces of chaos and the Great Old Ones from wreaking havoc.

*The Tindalos Asset* takes its name from the Hounds of Tindalos, a Lovecraftian creation by Frank Belknap-Long. Here, the Signalman recruits a former agent/assassin of Dreamland, now a down-on-her-luck, living in squalor, junkie named Ellison Nicodemo, to help him stop a possible upcoming apocalypse. It seems Ellison is the only one who can unleash the Hounds of Tindalos, the eldritch creatures she has a psychic bond with, to stop the forces of chaos.

Kiernan's work can often be hard to read and follow, some of the narratives being non-linear. And the story endings don't always tie things together, so I'd say Kiernan is an acquired taste but one worth sampling. Check out *The Tinfoil Dossier* but prepared to be enveloped in a lot of "mood and atmosphere."

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Publishing Reader Content is not an approval from the Sigma Editorial team of any art or opinions stated in submitted work.

Send submissions to [parsecsigmanews@gmail.com](mailto:parsecsigmanews@gmail.com)

## Project Hail Mary

By: John R. Muth



First things first: I have not read the Andy Weir novel this movie is based on, but despite what I'm about to write I would like to and I have enjoyed his previous book (and the movie based on it) *The Martian*. I also liked *Project Hail Mary* quite a bit.

Second things... second: I saw an internet clip today of a stand-up comedian talking about how he doesn't like that the character of Severus Snape, in the new HBO tv series based on the Harry Potter books, is Black. He goes on to say how it's not the fact that they've changed a character, who in all previous adaptations (most iconically played by the recent Alan Rickman, in what I would call the textbook definition of "aplomb") has been white, to Black, but in that the decision drastically alters some of the meaning of things that happen in the stories — especially, and maybe more so in the United States — like Harry Potter just "not liking the look of him". Or the fact that Harry's father finds out Snape is in love with Harry's mother, and he hangs him in a tree. I'll leave it to you to parse out the implications in that one... He then goes on to say any other character would be fine to change the race of, other than the Weaselys, oh, or Hermione. In fact, if you consider pretty much any of the characters in the Potterverse (other than the already, well-defined problematic "ethnic" characters), changing their races will add much unspoken issues. (I should also note that I only read the first two books of the Harry Potter series, and couldn't go any further

# REVIEWS

because I so disliked the house-elf — read: slave — Dobby, who definitely couldn't be a Black character!)

“Okay,” you ask. “What the Xenonite does any of this have to do with Project Hail Mary?”

Well, it has to do with representation. If you pay attention to any of the “woke” progressive discourse about representation (I'd just call it the “discourse” but that's for another conversation), you may be aware of the tropes that come along with many races, sexes, and ethnicities, in media. And I was just really turned off by Project Hail Mary's continuation of that trend, despite its powerful message of friendship, bravery, and sacrifice. It soured me on the experience of seeing, yet again, a fantastically humorous, nuanced, and earnest performance by Ryan Gosling, as he mainly holds the camera in almost every scene of the film, and mainly is alone or reacting to... no one. But that doesn't remove the troubling fact that, and this is only a spoiler for the very beginning of the movie, the sole Asian character dies. The female characters die or are heartless and cruel, who, along with the (nearly) sole Black character will betray you. That bothers me.

It bothers me that once again, we get a middle-aged (if Gosling qualifies as that) white man, who's so brilliant that it's only him, and his genetic superiority, that can save the entire world. That he's ostracized and excluded from the emotional connection everyone around him has. That despite his idiotic behavior sometimes, an alien species would give him the time of day to partner up and try to save THE UNIVERSE! It sets up an intergalactic toxic relationship that I couldn't help but cringe at.

But it's beautifully shot, the visual (and special) effects are great, and I'm happy it's doing very well. I'm just to the point where I'd like more.

I'd be very up for hearing other people's takes on the film.



## The In Your Write Mind Writers Conference is taking place June 25 - 28 at Seton Hill U in Greensburg, PA.

Want to get your writing mojo back? Attend Seton Hill U's In Your Write Mind Writers conference. \$120 for the entire weekend event!

### Included with Registration:

- A FREE TABLE at our book signing on Sat, June 27th
- A live "Embrace What Haunts You" audio experience by Palimpsest Productions
  - Agent pitch sessions
  - Over 30 writing-related classes
- Ghost Tour of the historic Seton Hill U campus
  - Open mic night

**Who:** In Your Write Mind is a writers conference that is organized by the alumni of the Writing Popular Fiction MFA program at Seton Hill University.

**What:** The conference is open to the public and features writing-related classes, agent pitch sessions, a book signing, an open mic and other special events.

**Admission for the entire conference is \$120.00.**

**When:** June 25 - 28, 2026.

**Where:** The workshop takes place at the scenic campus of Seton Hill University in Greensburg, PA. - 1 Seton Hill Drive, Greensburg, PA 15601

**Why:** It's a great way to network, gain new writing and publishing info, get inspired and jump-start your writing.

[> REGISTER NOW](#)



# PARSEC EVENT IN JUNE

**TBA!**

**Date: Saturday, June 20th, 2026; Time: 1 to 2:30 pm**  
(Zoom opens at 12:45 and ends at 3:00 pm.)

On Zoom.

Check [www.parsec-sff.org](http://www.parsec-sff.org) for more details.

Thank you to this month's contributors, who have yet to say anything about the robot destroying all of civilization..

Editor, John Muth



**Parsec Board of Directors:** President: John Muth.  
Vice President: Kathryn Smith. Treasurer: Larisa VanWinkle. Secretary: Laine Wilson.  
At Large Members: Alan Bailey, Jamie Lackey. Executive Director: Diane Turnshek  
Current BOD can be found on the [WEBSITE](#)

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