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[Write Around Portland Brings Voice to the Table](#)

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posted June 5, 2007 - 11:14am

[kfann](#) writes:

For a non-profit that deals with community writing and literary art, Write Around Portland is a hands-on operation. This occurred to me as I had my own hands full, helping executive director Robyn Steely unpack and arrange two tables for Write Around Portland's new writing workshop room. The new tables are bright blue, and the tabletops reflect the afternoon sky outside the downtown window. Though the new room is the size of a one-car garage and is located just one door from the main office, its addition nearly doubles the organization's space.

"This is a little tough," Steely says as she places chairs around the new tables. Apparently, the tables are not quite as big as she had envisioned. "They said we could get five people across," she continues, still eyeing them. We push chairs together and squeeze a fifth chair in on each side. The tables look okay to me, but I get the idea that Steely is thinking of maximum efficiency. She smiles, "I guess they meant five super-skinny people."

In a way, squeezing in an extra chair is a fitting image for Write Around Portland. Since 1999, the non-profit has offered nearly 260 workshops for over 1,600 Portland-area beginning writers. Whether providing writing workshops for people with HIV/AIDS, "at-risk" youth, senior citizens, people in jail, or the mentally or physically disabled, creating as much space as possible for underserved communities is a priority for Write Around Portland. Workshops always target isolated communities within the larger Portland community itself.

I asked Steely how the Write Around Portland staff chooses which groups to offer a writing workshop. "The first outreach, back in 1999, was to social service agencies in order to create a partnership," she says, "But now we also have 'open' workshops for adults living on a low income or with disability. If you are an individual not necessarily connected with any specific group, then you can still be a part of this community-building."

Respect. Writing. Community. Those are the three pillars of the Write Around Portland mission. Workshops usually consist of a two-hour writing session held once per week for up to ten weeks in a row. Workshops are free for participants and are run by trained volunteer writing facilitators. Facilitators introduce participants to components of writing, such as voice, poetry line breaks, or revision. But, the creation of community and strengthening of social bonds beyond writing instruction are the real motivations for the organization.

"We have a mission and set of values, and generally there are groups that are a natural fit for that," Steely says. For example, the Spring 2007 workshop session included a workshop for armed-forces veterans. "The veterans' group came out of our board members literally talking about the [Iraq] war at a board meeting. Someone said, 'We need to be working with veterans.' And everyone agreed." And so they did.

Other groups seek out Write Around Portland. Girl Scouts Beyond Bars is a national program that unites young girls with their incarcerated mothers to help re-establish relationships by sharing the writing process in a safe, supportive environment. "Girl Scouts Beyond Bars, they approached us," Steely says. "The national Girl Scouts had a special project for literacy activities. And it definitely fit, because we had already worked with people in prison. And we liked the inter-generational aspect."

"We also have the capacity to do more Spanish workshops," Steely continues. "And we'd love to do a workshop in Russian or another larger immigrant group in Portland." Right now, however, foreign-language workshops are limited by a lack of bilingual facilitators.

Steely also has a strong interest in working with populations who have medical conditions that offer a unique perspective. "I'm really excited about a group we're doing in the fall: burn survivors. People with really severe body burns. I'm very much interested in those ... that kind of ..." Steely suddenly seems at a loss for words.

Perhaps her pause is a hint as to why these workshops and public readings are so important: as a society, we need to hear the voice of "other" communities in their own words from their own perspective, without too many of our own words interjected. Steely and I are both quiet for a moment. I offer a comment about how burn victims must have tremendous sensitivity and insight. "Yeah. Many of these folks have faces that have been severely burned," she says frankly. That is a perspective impossible to imagine,



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much less speak for.

Write Around Portland has witnessed a particularly encouraging trend in the populations that it serves. Beyond awakening these writers, more and more participants have stayed involved to become volunteer writing facilitators themselves. In effect, the program has inspired the population it serves to take over. The dividing line of agency has disappeared in some cases.

But, Steely notes, people do not have to become writing facilitators in order to help out. And most have not. As a small but growing non-profit, Write Around Portland always welcomes help with mailings, filing or other office work. "Even though it's not the most exciting volunteer job, it's very useful to us. And we do our three big readings a year and multiple smaller readings where we need volunteers to hand out programs or help with the snacks. Look at the most recent anthology. The list of volunteers who put that together is huge."

Outside the window, I can see Powell's Books across Burnside. Powell's, along with several other independent bookstores in the area, sells the publication Steely is talking about: the Spring 2007 anthology entitled *Called to Speak Stories*. It is Write Around Portland's 25th publication. If Portland is home to some of the best bookstores in the country, then it might be home to one of the best non-profit writing programs in the country, too.

We end the interview, and Robyn Steely and I prepare to leave the new workshop room. She has been extremely busy this Monday, preparing for the dozen or so summer workshops that begin next week. "They look good," I say, referring to the two tables we arranged. And she agrees. The blue is nice; it matches the afternoon sky; thank you. But I can tell she is still thinking efficiency. She is still thinking there must be some way to get at least one more person a space at that table.

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Discussion

Posted June 5, 2007 - 11:18am



This is a GREAT story!

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