

Writing doesn't have to be a solitary act: The Role of the Community Based Writing Organization

This paper was first presented by WCDR President James Dewar at the CCWWP, Creative Writing in the 21st Century, Conference held at Humber College in May, 2012.

Hello, my name is James Dewar. I am a writer.

I am also a freelance editor and website designer. I earn a good part of my income writing nonfiction editorial for the Metroland Media Group.

I love poetry, so four years ago I started **Piquant Press** which publishes one book of poetry each year. I have edited and published over a dozen poetry chapbooks for emerging talents and co-edited three poetry anthologies. In addition to occasionally teaching advanced creative writing at **Durham College**, I also teach poetry and fiction writing workshops. My poetry has been published in ***The Garden in the Machine*** (Hidden Book Press 2007) and several anthologies and literary journals.

I believe that poetry is community and so I started a monthly reading series in Toronto, **Hot-Sauced Words**, now in its sixth year.

But the reason I am here this morning is because I proposed a paper to talk about the role of the community based writing organization. To my delight and surprise, the committee said yes! So thank you to the CCWWP for putting me in this room in front of you this morning.

I am also pleased to be the current President of the **Writers' Community of Durham Region (WCDR)**. As of this moment we have 375 paid up members. It has been steadily growing, particularly over the last 5 years, because it fulfils a vital role in the arts scene of one of the fastest growing municipal areas in Canada.

If you ask anyone in greater Toronto where Durham Region is, most of them would not be able to tell you. But if you mentioned the Pickering Nuclear

Power Plant or the massive General Motors complex in the 'Shwa, you would at least get a sympathetic nod.

But there is a lot more than those two eyesores in our region, and perhaps those writers who spent their lives partially motivated by a desire to coax something of value from that imminent wasteland, began to realize that there were other people also compelled to write about it.

Alone or in small groups, these writers improved their knowledge and craft in workshops at the local community college, shared their work with each other in small writing groups and developed mutual respect. More and more of these writers joined together in writing circles that ranged anywhere from 6 to 12 at any given time.

So it's not surprising that 16 years ago, creative writing instructor Marge Green led a supportive group of local Durham Region writers through a series of morphing organizational formats before settling on the non-profit organization structure that would become the Writers' CIRCLE of Durham Region.

Its mission would be to offer opportunities for support, education and networking in an encouraging setting.

Writers love to write. They love it with a passion and a dedication that keeps their eyes bright and intuition strong. But skill levels increase at varied rates and with different results.

Those who achieved publishing success in the WCDR paid it forward to those who developed at a slower rate, or found a plateau where they were comfortable. New members coming into the organization were treated with kid gloves.

That generosity inspired the same response in others, and before long the organization was identified by the way it hoped to welcome and help new writers who had the courage to even join a group of their peers, let alone share the words they had never shared with any other writer.

A couple of weeks ago I emailed many of the members of the WCDR and asked them if they would provide input for me to use in my presentation this

morning. I was overwhelmed by the response. I received 102 emails, most of them offering details of how their lives changed as a result of their experiences with the WCDR.

Twelve of the responses contained 2 or 3 typed pages of careful contemplation. Many of them expressed a profound thank-you for the efforts of the volunteer board in helping them arrive at that fundamental moment in their lives when they stood up and said: I AM A WRITER.

Here is a response from Laura Maynard, who has been with us about a year.

“We tend to lock ourselves up with pen, paper and computer, socializing only with the characters we create. The problem with isolation is that it breeds self-doubt. Is this plot line developing the way it should? Is my dialogue natural? Is this the right word choice? We question everything we do and, eventually, we go stir-crazy until we share our creations. The first time I read my work out loud, I was absolutely overwhelmed by the outpouring of support I received from the members. This was not my mother patting me on the head saying what a “nice story” I’d written. These were complete strangers offering me meaningful information, genuine advice and encouragement because we had this wonderful thing in common. They understood, better than anyone else, the labour pains I had undergone in giving birth to my story, and the courage it took to bring that baby into the public eye. Isolation had been replaced by fellowship.”

One of the founding members of our organization, Dorothea Helms, professionally known as The Writing Fairy, celebrated with,

“The days of writers sequestering themselves in a tiny room and feeling alone living out their passion for words are over. Aspiring writers who are fortunate enough to have access to an organization like WCDR can interact with other writers, ask questions, take workshops and courses, gain information from newsletters, hear industry speakers, share their writing successes, sell their self-published work, even market for freelance work. They can celebrate, commiserate, grumble about editors, praise editors, trade stories and experience a sense of belonging that inspires them to continually advance their craft.”

And I quote from another writer in our group, Wendy Passelent:

“Through the monthly breakfasts I’ve heard much better writers who are still struggling to be published. And yes, I’ve heard writers who were not my cup of tea. I’ve heard published authors discuss how they were rejected multiple times before finding the right fit. And I’ve heard stories of people that just happen to be at the right place at the right time. Above it all, however, I’ve heard words of hope and encouragement.”

I love those two words because they are so fundamental in the life of all writers. The HOPE that we will write a short story or poem, a novel or screenplay, that will mean something to someone else. Why do we tell our stories in all their permutations? It’s not so we can hide them away in seclusion and take them with us in our graves. We write because we are compelled to write. We express our own suppressed feelings through the characters that appear like magic on our computer screens; but too many of us are so afraid to share that wonder with others.

Why we encapsulate so much of who we are into our art is a question best answered by psychologists. I don’t know myself. I obtained a degree in English at York University. I was lucky enough to be in Irving Layton’s poetry class in 1972. I graduated. I got a job in the corporate sector. I wrote poetry. I wrote books full of poetry, but I never shared any of them with anyone until I had the nerve to go to a WCDR breakfast. I joined one of our small writing circles in 2002. And it took 2 more years of reassurance and coaxing before I had the nerve to get up on the open mic at the Artbar poetry reading series. I was terrified, but I did it. My hope to share my work with the wide world would never have happened without the encouragement I received.

A year later I was invited to do a featured poetry reading at the Artbar.

A year after that, I joined the board of the WCDR. I wanted to help every writer I could find to feel that way about their writing.

HOPE and ENCOURAGEMENT.

Helene Paquin, a writer who joined us only a year ago, and who is now our Public Relations Director, told me it took her 8 years just to muster the courage to join the group.

"Writers are so hard on themselves," she says, "We face rejection all the time. Most members at WCDR will go out of their way to help you and answer your questions. It's so nice to go to a meeting and say "I'm writing a play about the financial meltdown of 2009. It's a comedy" and not get strange looks. Where else can you get that kind of support? It's priceless.

They'll also share in your disappointments so you don't feel alone when an editor dumps you or your query gets rejected. I love to listen to the speakers describe how they began their careers, when they got published and how long it took. It's inspiring to learn that there isn't just one way. The process is different for everybody. The point is to just keep trying."

At the WCDR we award \$3500 in scholarships every year. We match every cent donated by patrons, who include Canada's preeminent gardener, Mark Cullen and award winning author Terry Fallis.

Here's what another fairly new member, Phil Dwyer said to me:

"Last spring I applied for and won a Len Cullen scholarship. This enabled me to attend the Algonkian Conference in Niagara Falls last October/November, where I pitched my novel to agent Sam Hiyate, as well as Random House, Scrivner and Penguin. Sam and Random House asked to see a partial of the novel with synopsis, Penguin asked for the whole thing. Winning the scholarship also encouraged me to apply last summer for an Ontario Arts Council grant and a Toronto Arts Council grant. I won the TAC grant (I didn't win the OAC grant -- you can't win 'em all).

"The WCDR also introduced me to Robyn Read, through her one-on-one sessions, and pitching workshop, in May, 2011. Since that time she's carried out a substantive edit and a line and copy edit of my novel, improving it immensely in the process."

One of the key aspects of what we do is to provide practical advice and access to the qualified experts who can give our members the help they need at those pivotal moments in their writing careers.

Dorothea Helms reminded me that,

“Community-level organizations can help writers place themselves within a publishing world context and open their eyes to possibilities they may not know exist. Many organizations such as WCDR offer workshops where writers can gain knowledge in a variety of writing topics, which may help them when deciding what area of post-secondary training would benefit them most. WCDR even presents annual scholarships to help with a financial boost toward the furthering of writers’ education.”

We heard previously how Phil Dwyer applied his award. We have a fabulous writer who will be going to Banff this summer with the award that she received. She is another one of our writers who has steadily developed her craft combining College and Durham Region writing workshops.

So I guess I should let you know how the group runs and why we seem to be so busy all the time.

- Monthly Breakfasts provide networking opportunities, mini-workshops and Blue Pencil Sessions.
- Chef Phillippe prepares the favourite breakfast of the guest speaker for everyone. We have not had a duplication in a year.
- Industry speakers provide education and advice and give members a chance to ask questions about the writer’s life in person.
- Previous speakers include: Ian Brown, Craig Pyette, Jessica Westhead, Wayson Choy, Hilary McMahon, Dave Bidini, Rabindranath Maharaj, Robert Sawyer and many others.
- A solid relationship with Shelley MacBeth, the owner of Blue Heron Books in Uxbridge, recognized as the favourite bookstore in Canada last year, and one if the 10 best bookstores in North America,

- Shelley helps us obtain industry speakers and she also encourages our local authors, including the self-published ones, to hold book launches in her store.
- WCDR website – We’re in the process of adding author pages for all members similar to the one used on the League of Canadian Poets website.
- WCDR Grants and Scholarships to help members pursue advanced learning. Additional scholarships have been added by Mark Cullen. The Writing Fairy (Dorothea Helms), Writescape (Ruth Walker and Gwyn Scheltema) and Inkslingers (myself and AWA specialist Sue Reynolds)
- First Publication credits in The Word Weaver, our bimonthly newsletter
- Contests and anthologies for recognition and publication
- Reading Series to encourage public performance to work out the jitters in the writing and in one’s own fears
- An annual SUMMER SLAM competition to encourage modern word art forms and have fun.
- Writing Circles (we’ve just introduced the idea of accreditation to start this fall)
- EMAIL listserves to announce events, workshops and kudos of members (ie publication etc)
- The “Ask a Writer” column
- WCDR Sponsored workshops and events, such as Cynthia Good on the business of Writing, and a booth at Word on the Street in Toronto.
- A Reading as Writers (RAW) website
- The annual OWC Conference
- Expansion into York Region and Simcoe County
- A democratic Board, with clear succession planning, ensures members needs are constantly being revisited and new ideas put forward.
- I know I have forgotten one or two other things

Finally I would like to point out a couple of the key differences between the design and outcomes of our community-based organization and those institutions housed in brick and mortar.

1. Firstly, we must listen to our members. We must know why people join and why they leave and extrapolate that into our rationale for continuing or amending current programs and adding new initiatives.

2. We must identify the opportunists. Now that we have attained a certain level of success, the super networkers and media gurus abound. The writing community is inundated with publishing scams and other bric-a-brac.

In that respect we are gatekeepers. We know where our advanced writers can get the help they need to polish their projects at the professional level, but we also protect our newbies from the vanity press scams and other n'er-do-wells who circle the publishing business like sharks. We had a new member come to us last year asking if \$18,000 was a fair amount to print 25 copies of her memoir. That's 25 copies, and he wanted her to sign away her copyright as well.

And this was not an American online scammer either. This was/is a small press publisher north of Toronto who is still in business.

Gate keeping: another rewarding element of being on the board of the WCDR.

3. Who you know means nothing.

What are you doing to enjoy your life as a writer? What risk level are you at? Are you ready for the tough slog of literary criticism? Or is your sense of identity still too sensitive? You need more encouragement?

Of course we have hobby writers whose skills reach a plateau and they are quite happy to stay there, and we're happy for them that they know themselves so well.

We have writers who have been unwilling to accept criticism. We have writers who are happy just for the community. Inevitably those who are like-minded find each other and enjoy themselves immensely in a world where they are valued for their love of writing.

In essence what we are finding is that there are large numbers of writers whose hope is to be able to stand up in front of their friends and family and

say I AM A WRITER and not feel one nervous twitch. They want to believe in themselves.

Our culture is filled with writers. The advent of the internet and email and all of the other forms of communication that involve typing and sending and receiving and listening and speaking, has betrayed the existence of these many lonely souls who want to tell a STORY.

Tell a story. No matter what form or genre or level of development. Every story is as relevant and valuable as the next. Every poem is recognized for its place in the heart of that poet, in the stage of development where that poet is right now.

The role of the Writer's community is to recognize that writers are everywhere. We coax them out onto the stage and applaud when they have the courage to take that chance of horrible rejection in the spotlight, while we, the happy crew, tap dance and sing around them. Yes being a writer is like living in a Broadway musical!

Ok, so I made that part up. I'm a writer.

It's not quite like being on Broadway, but being a part of a writing community is better than writing in seclusion, MUCH better.

I am a writer.