

Program takes Whitworth students into the community to teach writing

Cindy Hval/SR

A small group gathered for a special book launch in the gym at Salem Lutheran Church on Wednesday evening. Instead of wine and cheese, potluck dishes and coffee were served, and the crowd that gathered was a bit younger than the usual attendees at literary events.

The event was the culmination of Whitworth University's Writing in the Community practicum, taught by assistant professor Nicole Sheets.

"As a class we come up with a curriculum for a writer's workshop and then take it out to the community," she said. "The students become the instructors."

For the past several weeks her students have taught workshops at Mountainside Middle School, On Track Academy, Riverpoint Academy and South Hill Senior Living (formerly Cooper George).

The result is "Inkslinger," an anthology of their creative work.

On Wednesday, students, faculty, friends and family grabbed copies of the book – its cover designed by Sheets' student Josh Tuttle.

Tuttle co-led a workshop at Mountainside. He wants to be an English professor, and said he discovered working with middle-schoolers is quite different than teaching adults.

For example when he asked students to read something, he watched puzzled as they quietly scanned the material.

"It didn't occur to me to add out loud," he said, laughing.

He enjoyed seeing the students' skills develop as the class progressed.

"Seeing the effort they put into this was a good example for me," Tuttle said. "It blew me away."

Several Mountainside students attended Wednesday's celebration.

"I'm working on a novel," said Kayli Maucione, 14. "I learned a lot of different techniques you can use. We worked on creating tension and I just wrote a tension scene in my book."

Kayli expressed a desire to one day become an editor.

“I feel like I give good advice,” she said. “And I’m pretty good at grammar.”

Kelsie Sagen, 14, also attended Tuttle’s workshop. She too is writing a novel.

“It was really fun and it helped me out,” she said.

At the end of the Mountainside workshop, the class had a reading at Petit Chat Bakery.

Kelsie shared at that reading, but declined to participate at the “Inkslinger” launch.

“It was so terrifying! I wouldn’t be able to do it again,” she confided.

However, fellow student Trace Nash had no such qualms.

He took the microphone confidently and announced, “I’d like to read a section of my sci-fi action book that I wrote.”

Whitworth student Courtney Murphy co-led a workshop at Riverpoint Academy.

“I was nervous ’cause I’m only 20 and quite small. A lot of them were bigger than me,” she said. “We had a core group of eight kids. There were a lot of fantastic writers. They were especially interested in poetry – they liked the emotional impact of it.”

Mika Lusk, 18, was one of those students. She said she finished her first short story while taking the workshop. Two of her pieces are included in “Inkslinger” including “In Utero” a prose poem resulting from the class.

“The writing prompt was *waves unfurled*,” she said.

Her piece begins, “Waves unfurled like a Picasso, round and decisive, they spun through my head....”

She plans to attend Evergreen State College.

“It would be cool to be an editor,” she said. “Taking what people write and making it better.”

This is the third year that Sheets has taught the Writing in the Community Practicum.

“It’s exciting to see another side of my students – how much they connect with the participants,” she said.

She’s also pleased by the age range represented in the writing workshops.

“It’s rare to have that kind of age range – it’s kind of sweet.”

She found the author biography of South Hill Senior Living resident Marilyn Gray especially moving.

Gray wrote, “I am an old lady whose dream of being able to take a creative writing class has finally been realized after waiting for 60 years.”

Sheets said, “When I was in grad school I taught a writing workshop at a senior center. It was such a breath of fresh air. They (the participants) were affirming, kind and eager.”

For Sheets, seeing her students engage with the community is equally important to what they learn about creating a workshop syllabus.

Her students also appreciated that interaction.

“I really enjoyed getting to know people outside the Whitworth community and to be able to apply my skills,” Murphy said.

And Tuttle said, “I’m not from Spokane, but I have fallen in love with it. I see Spokane as an expanding arts community, so I’m proud that we managed to put this anthology together and add to the vibrant writing community.”

Sheets agreed.

“It’s a reminder that writing happens all over – not just in universities.”