

Freedom on paper

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Write Around Portland gives inmates an outlet without bars



by: CHRISTOPHER ONSTOTT/TRIBUNE PHOTO - Clifford Jackson is one of 10 Inverness Jail inmates enrolled in a creative writing class sponsored by Write Around Portland, a nonprofit that offers such classes in corrections facilities and other nontraditional settings where people feel some sense of isolation.

Ten men clad in pink T-shirts and rubbery sandals sit around an oblong table, a torrent of words flowing from their pens onto pads of paper.

Inspired by a series of photos displayed by volunteer Graham Murtaugh, the men waste little time, with no sign of fidgeting, clock-watching or writers' block.

"I ask you to come, but you never will," writes Clifford Jackson, looking at a photo of a cat. "I wonder where you will go."

"The sun is setting as low as my eyelids . . . the edge of the road came up to meet me," pens another man, triggered by an image of a pickup truck.

Their focus, and respectful reactions to written words of their peers, would delight a college writing instructor. But these are no ordinary students. They are inmates at Multnomah County's Inverness Jail, in week seven of a 10-week class offered by nonprofit Write Around Portland.

Sometimes Murtaugh, the class facilitator, gives the men five minutes to write, using magazine cutouts and photos as prompts. Sometimes he gives them only 30 seconds, such as an exercise requiring them to lead with "In the blink of an eye."

In half a minute, one inmate writes: "In the blink of an eye, it can all go bye-bye. What happened to me, I couldn't foresee."

Jackson, a 46-year-old from Northeast Portland, says he always thought of himself as a horrible writer, and rarely took the time to read or write.

"I write every day now — every day," he says. "It's almost a way of breathing now."

Jackson says he's such a big believer in Write Around Portland that he promises to volunteer for the program in some fashion when he gets out of jail in 145 days.

Founded in 1999, Write Around Portland offers similar writing classes in a variety of settings: youth, women's and adult correctional facilities; apartment complexes for seniors, disabled people and those transitioning out of homelessness; after-school programs in low-income neighborhoods, programs for troubled youth; and hospitals. Generally they are places where people are experiencing some form of isolation, says Robyn Steely, executive director of the small nonprofit.

Some people find it therapeutic, Steely says. Others find it's a valuable creative outlet or helps them communicate. Many say it's a life-changing experience.

Simple yet powerful



by: CHRISTOPHER ONSTOTT/TRIBUNE
PHOTO - Participants often say Write Around Portland classes are therapeutic or help them communicate better. Some say the classes changed their lives.

Write Around Portland uses a traditional free-writing model that relies on prompts to stimulate writing, and short time frames. There are no grades, no tests, no formal lessons about run-on sentences or similes and metaphors.

“The idea is to keep the pen moving,” Steely says, “and go where it takes you.”

Classes can be particularly powerful for those who are incarcerated.

“Most people don’t serve life sentences,” says Steely, who has led Write Around Portland classes at Inverness Jail and elsewhere. “This is an opportunity to give people some skills, some opportunities and coping mechanisms for when they get out.”

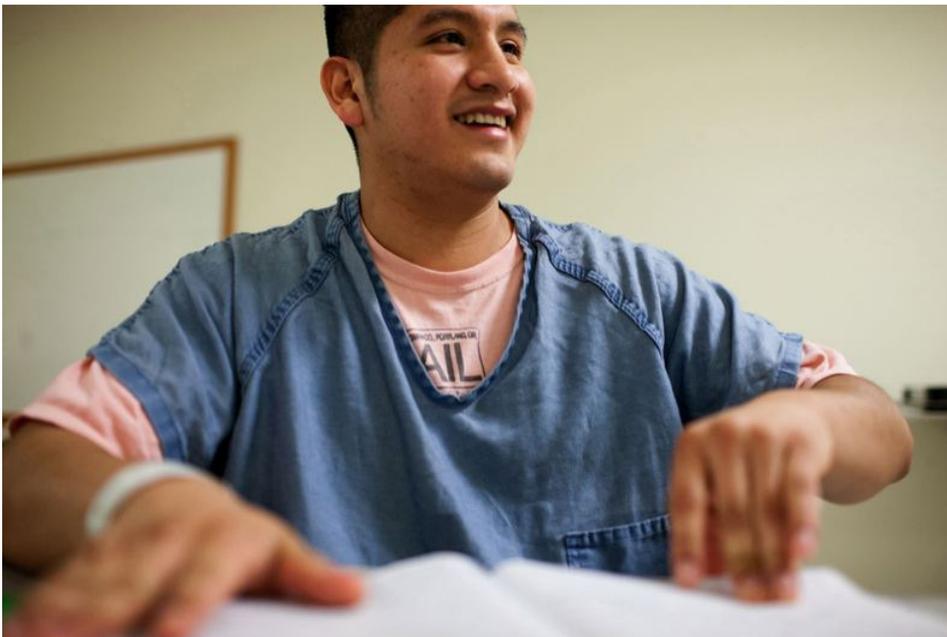
Jackson has been in jail long enough —265 days — to take the Writing Around Portland class twice. He is doing time for assault.

“A lot of this writing is like getting naked in front of these guys,” Jackson says. “You don’t have time to cloak what you’re writing. Exactly what you’re feeling is going to come out in the piece.”

In week six, one of the prompts was “back of the garage,” which evoked images of Jackson’s grandfather. “Before I knew it, I’m sitting up here in tears, because it brought back memories from 35 years ago,” he says.

Murtaugh is an unpublished poet, and volunteers for the program to share his love of writing. “They’re giving voice to people who may not believe they have voices,” he says.

Every day, Jackson does 1,500 to 2,000 pushups, runs for a half-hour and writes in what he calls his spiritual journal. From 6:30 to 10 p.m., when most inmates are watching movies, he reads. So far at Inverness, he’s read about 50 books. He’s into novelist John Steinbeck.



by: CHRISTOPHER ONSTOTT/TRIBUNE PHOTO - Alberto Baltazar Moreno often writes about the experiences of Latin American immigrants who cross the border illegally to seek new lives in the U.S.

Life stories

Alberto Baltazar Moreno, 24, says he hardly ever wrote before taking the Write Around Portland class at Inverness Jail. He fell behind in school taking English as a Second Language classes, Moreno says, and managed only “straight Cs” in school.

“This class helped me get my courage up,” he says. “Writing these stories gives me like a weight off my shoulders.”

The longtime Gresham resident isn’t a good speller, and that had inhibited him from writing. But in the class, one of the rules is that spelling, like handwriting, is not a worry.

Moreno has lived in the United States since he was 6, when his family crossed the border illegally from Mexico. A lot of his writings are stories of families making the trek across the border, including those pressured to be “mules” — carrying drugs as the price for passage to new lives here.

Write Around Portland rules specify that writings produced in class are works of fiction, which can’t be used against the participants. But they are based partly on his life, and those of people around him.

If Moreno is convicted of the two burglary charges for which he was arrested and jailed, he figures he’ll be deported back to Mexico.

In a poem he wrote for the class, called “Through the Sky,” he wrote about birds and his desire to fly. “I always see the airplanes passing by and passing by, wishing that soon, on one, I’ll be flying high,” he wrote.

“At the end of this journey I know I’ll be in a plane, but not like I would want to. I’ll be in chains and shackles.”

In response to a writing prompt about summer, Moreno told of a summer job he took during his freshman year at Sam Barlow High School. He obtained a fake ID to work in a strawberry cannery in Gresham.

“I became Antonio Gutiérrez López Guzmán,” he wrote. “I hated that name as much as I hate strawberries now.”

Moreno says he’s the only one in his family in jail. But as longtime residents who are here illegally, “we all feel like we’re prisoners,” he says. “It’s nice to let people know how we feel.”

Moreno also has taken up reading while at Inverness. He read the Hunger Games series, using it to get inspiration for his writing. He is reading a book called “Aztec.”

Fellow class members are very supportive of his writing, Moreno says. When they cross paths elsewhere in the jail, they usually greet each other, he says.



by: CHRISTOPHER ONSTOTT/TRIBUNE PHOTO - Inmate Clifford Jackson uses a photo prompt of a cat as inspiration during a writing exercise at Inverness Jail. Jackson says he’s written every day since taking the class, and intends to volunteer for Write Around Portland when he gets released from jail.

Published authors

Write Around Portland offers the class at Inverness Jail for free, with no charge to Multnomah County. The nonprofit has four paid staff, about 250 volunteers during a typical year and operates on an annual budget of about \$250,000. Its funding comes from grants, donations and service fees.

One of those services is a series of writing classes called Prompt, which provide roughly the same writing experience for members of the general public. It’s offered at Powell’s Books.

One special opportunity, or incentive, for Write Around Portland participants is the chance to get their work published in an anthology.

Called “Roundabout,” the paperback editions include one piece from each class member. The books come out three times a year.

Jackson is quick to note that his work appears on page 141 of the spring anthology. He says the piece “Out of Sight” was his effort to write about love.

Find out more

- Participants in Write Around Portland classes will read from their latest works at a public reading on Wednesday, Aug. 29, from 6:30 to 8 p.m., at the First United Methodist Church, 1838 S.W. Jefferson St.
- The event is free and open to the public.
- Write Around Portland will release its latest anthology at the event. Copies also may be purchased at Portland independent bookstores.

- For more information: writearound.org.