

◆ YOUR NEIGHBOURHOOD ◆

Brontës got nothing on these sisters

West-end workshop helps women find their voice

By JESSICA STEVENSON

As the fourth session of the Sister Writes workshop entered its final weeks, the participants prepared to feature their work at the launch of the magazine *Roots to Branches* on Dec. 10.

Wanda Krzeminski, back in the program for her second session, says that writing is a way of dealing with suppressed anger and an abusive past.

Although she did little writing prior to joining the program, she cites an experience from 1985,

when she was staying in a women's shelter after leaving an abusive relationship.

A social worker gave her a piece of paper and left her alone to vent her feelings. "Once I started writing I couldn't stop. When I looked back on what I had written, I couldn't believe how much anger was there ... it went on for three pages," she says.

She hopes that through the publication of her work in *Roots to Branches*, her writing can help someone else leaving an abusive situation. "There should be more writing groups for women," she adds, "instead of women keeping their anger inside."

"Only one person of those participating had previous writing experience," says Sister Writes founder Lauren Kirshner.

Others had a love of literature, but limited access to books and ed-

ucation. A minority had a library card. None had opportunities to work with professional writers, publish work, or read publicly. "The common threads are obvious in the women's writing," says Kirshner. "Securing affordable housing, securing housing after leaving abuse, racism, growing up in a household with abuse [are common themes]."

The workshops give women from Sistering, an organization that provides services for homeless and low-income women in the downtown-west-end, the opportunity to work with professional writers in a workshop setting.

Kirshner first had the idea for Sister Writes after hosting a poetry salon at a women's inpatient program at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (1033 Queen St. W.).

She wanted to share the impor-

tant role that writing had taken in her own life with people who hadn't had exposure to writing. She also sensed that there were important stories in the city that weren't being heard, because there was no venue for their development or publication to feature them in.

After attending graduate school and writing her first novel, Kirshner approached Sistering with her idea for a writing workshop.

They responded enthusiastically; in their 25 years of service, Sistering had never had a literacy program.

The Ontario Arts Council, The Toronto Arts Council, Toronto Public Library Foundation, Art Gallery of Ontario, Raymond James, and the Lawrence Family Foundation provided further assistance for the program. Seventy-five per cent of the current participants have remained since the program's launch.

The workshops encourage the participants to develop their own voices without necessarily fulfilling genre expectations.

One-on-one meetings are held early on to discuss goals and the area in which participants wish to focus their writing.

Another meeting is held at the session's conclusion to discuss editing techniques. These meetings are important for providing more tailored mentoring in a group where there's a variety of skill levels.

During the twelve weeks of workshops, participants are introduced to writing poetry, fiction, non-fiction, and memoir. The content is geared toward building skills for reading work aloud and participating in critique. The aim is to allow the development of a personal voice along with critical discussion.

The feedback from the workshop is "warm, positive, and encouraging," says participant Cynthia Webb. She'd never had any formal writing training and the supportive environment gave her the confidence to continue writing: "I'd been wanting to write my memoir for a long time, but had been putting it off, because of difficult experiences."

The inner strength that the participants find in their own writing is something that Kirshner hopes will translate into an essential life skill: the ability to effectively advocate for oneself.

The women develop the basic skills to create an argument, back it up with evidence, and then transfer that skill to other areas of their lives.

In addition, the magazine launch provides a venue where their stories can be heard through the power of subjective narration. "There's power in the fact that it's not a distant reporter, but there's someone owning that story."

For more information on the program, visit sisterwrites.com.



COURTESY LAUREN KIRSHNER

Participants from the previous writing workshop at the magazine launch at the Gladstone Library.



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