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Author shares writing skills with Sistering

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Inspired by a popular youth writing workshop in Parkdale, Lauren Kirshner is taking the lessons, encouragement and confidence she has gained as a writer and passing it on to some of Toronto's less fortunate downtown women.

Sister Writes, initiated by Annex resident Kirshner, the author of *Where We Have to Go*, is a creative writing workshop series, which will end with the publishing of a magazine, with members of Sistering in Toronto's west end.

"Being an artist in the community is part of the way I think of being a writer, passing on skills that have been passed onto me is really important to me," said Kirshner, a writer and an educator.

Sistering is a women's agency serving homeless and low-income women in Toronto. Its programs and services help women gain greater control over life circumstances and focuses on changing the social conditions that put women at risk.

"There is a huge need for programming in that area," she said. "So they were really excited to get a creative program."

Sister Writes is committed not only to developing creativity, but also literacy skills. Sistering has a large ESL client base, which Kirshner said would be accommodated.

"The exercises and the themes that I am going to be bringing in are wide enough that people will have a lot of freedom to write about their lives if they want," she said. "I think personal writing is always the strongest writing, the most honest and the most vibrant writing. When it is coming from a place that you have loved from or hurt from...that is the writing that is going to pop off the page."

But if people want to write adventure or romance stories, Kirshner said they are free to do so.

Sister Writes is a pilot sister project to the Parkdale Young Writers' Group, a youth writing series created by Emily Pohl-Weary, where Kirshner interned last spring.

"It is an amazing program and Emily (Pohl-Weary) does so much to keep it together," Kirshner said. "My hope is that this program will be as successful as Emily's program."

She also drew inspiration from a three-month poetry program she did with inpatients at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health in 2005.

"I was 22 at the time. I didn't have a teaching degree at the time, but I had a lot of passion, so it was kind of like a pilot project for me to see if I could do that kind of work," she said. "I was inspired by those women's creativity, the way that writing could be this really powerful tool they could use at any time and anywhere."

Sister Writes began on Tuesday, Jan. 12. The women received their journals and began writing and reading their work. They were also told about the final magazine and how that will be put together.

There are currently nine participants, with a 12 person cap on registration, she said, so everyone has a chance to get feedback from Kirshner and the other guest writers.

The meetings take place at Sistering on Bloor Street between Dufferin Street and Ossington Avenue.

This series runs for 10 weeks and Kirshner said she is hoping to do a second session beginning April.

Through the series of workshops, Kirshner said participants will learn literacy, organizational, presentation and publishing skills.

"We are trying to do something really hands-on and the point is that after every session the women will have finished a piece of writing," she said. "It's about closing that gap between what a real writer is and what someone who writes is."

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