

Vern Horner, age 66, moved to Oregon eight years ago. He still considers himself a newcomer, as he spent the previous 40 years of his life living in the Bay Area where he primarily worked in the theater industry. Vern still enjoys the theater now in Portland, going to shows at Portland Center Stage and the Portland Baroque Orchestra. Aside from attending theater performances, Vern enjoys his quiet life at home in Tigard with his cat, Magnolia.

When Vern first started to attend programs at the Q Center, Portland's LGBT community center, he hadn't done any creative writing for 40 years since arriving in San Francisco in his 20s. He recalls arriving in San Francisco on a one-way ticket to perform poetry on behalf of Idaho State, where he had been a theater major but didn't write much after that.

When the Q Center offered the Write Around Portland workshop through their eRa (encouraging Respect for aging) program for senior lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender, and queer folks aged 55+, Vern was excited to write again. In his interview, Vern reflected on how having the opportunity to write in community "awakened" a creative side of him that had been dormant for a long time.

What brought you to the Write Around Portland Workshop at the Q Center?

I had gone through a narrative writing project with [Q Center staff member] Susan, which I had really enjoyed. When she told me about the Write Around Portland workshop, I thought, "Why not?" I was very pleased. The gay scene in Portland is a mystery and continues to be a mystery to me. I hoped the workshop would be a way to connect more to the gay community here in Portland.

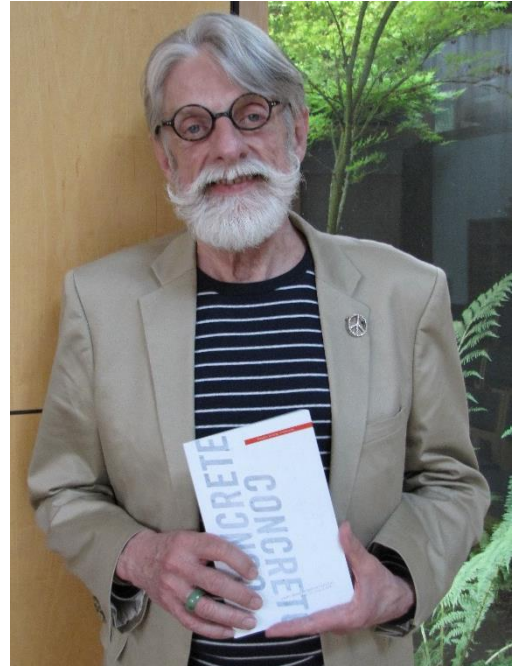
Can you tell me about your experience in the workshop?

The factor of trust is very important to anyone who is going to sit down and suddenly start writing together. What makes that safe is the idea of presenting our writing that we do together as fiction. It acts as a safeguard to what we might write — either to write autobiographically or actually fiction. That was one of the key elements in our workshop. If you can create trust with your group, you can give yourself permission to express yourself. A lot of people 55+ are starting to give themselves permission to explore things about themselves.

Sometimes we forget [in the context of our busy working lives] that there's this other [creative] energy going on. Write Around Portland awakened that. The workshop was an awakening of things going on that I hadn't tapped into in a long time, and I would speak for other people in that respect. On the ride back home, I would think to myself, "Where did *that* come from? I haven't thought back to that in..."

What was your favorite part about the workshop?

The evening that I wrote about the old man, a man that was in my picture prompt. I wrote a fiction piece about that man, which was one of those "aha" moments. "Where did *that* come



from?” I asked myself. “Where in the world did you find that person and his story and his loneliness?” That was kind of early on. From that point on, I was always waiting to see what was going to come out of me, and it was always exciting. I never disliked anything that I wrote. The good thing about the prompts is that you don’t have time to self-edit; it’s the purest form of writing because it’s immediate.

How did you feel about hearing other people’s writing?

I liked it a lot because it really reflected how diverse the group was. The workshop was a real education for me, learning about everyone and where they came from. The timed writes were really interesting to see where people would take their writing. Everyone approached the prompts so differently, which is something that made the workshop so unique.

How did you feel about sharing your own writing?

I was comfortable with it! Defining boundaries, being supportive, and nonjudgmental is the key, the success of this program. You have all these unique individuals; everyone is so different. [Defining boundaries] has to be the stepping off point for the workshop to make everyone comfortable. It was also easy [for me to share]. Once you’ve been bitten by the theater bug, you have to take advantage of opportunities to get it out!

Do you plan to continue writing now that the workshop is over?

I think so. I have my diary on my desk. I’m taking a break from writing for a bit but I’ll probably start doing it again soon. I may try the Write Around Portland workshop at HOTLIPS Pizza! The workshop did a good job at planting seeds for when we’re at home and want to write. It’s a lot of energy to instigate this by ourselves.

Do you recommend Write Around Portland to others?

Absolutely. Very much so, I think especially the 55 and over age group of folks. Most people at this juncture in their lives have begun to mellow out, know what their message is, and are becoming more comfortable with who they are. Especially when they sit down to write about it. I would absolutely recommend a Write Around Portland workshop. I loved it. Really enjoyed it.