

Featured Writer interview with Peter Willis
March 2014 Newsletter

Peter Willis, age 53, was born in New York City, grew up in Connecticut, and eventually landed in Portland when he rode his bicycle across the country in 1985. He works in sales and enjoys reading, writing, riding his bicycle, and spending time with his two daughters. He participated in our workshop at the Oregon Burn Center for burn, wound and trauma survivors.

When did you begin writing?

I remember writing things as a kid, but I never called myself a “writer.” I used the ability to save myself, when I was going to flunk a class, I could always put something together in story form and manage to squeeze by. So I’ve used it in that way, but based on doing this Write Around Portland workshop, I now call myself a “writer.”

How did you first hear about the workshop?

Helen Christians at the Oregon Burn Center mentioned it to me a couple of years ago when I first was introduced to her. She was very excited about it, but I pooh-poohed it. It made me scared to think that I would do anything like that so I didn’t take advantage of it the first time... Helen brought it up again, and for some reason, that time I took her up on it. So I did it this last fall and kicked myself for not doing it before.

What was your experience like in the workshop?

I believed that writers sat down with an outline and a story laid out, and everything was already formed before words were committed. What I got to understand is what that process is really like... I’ve gone from being on one side of that creative wall and having a certain perspective, to being on the other side and having a perspective that I could never have imagined for myself. Now I can call myself a writer. I can call myself an artist. I always thought that it was there, and I can’t believe that at this point in my life this significant shift in who I am has just unfolded. It’s been fantastic.

How did you feel about writing and sharing with other people in your group?

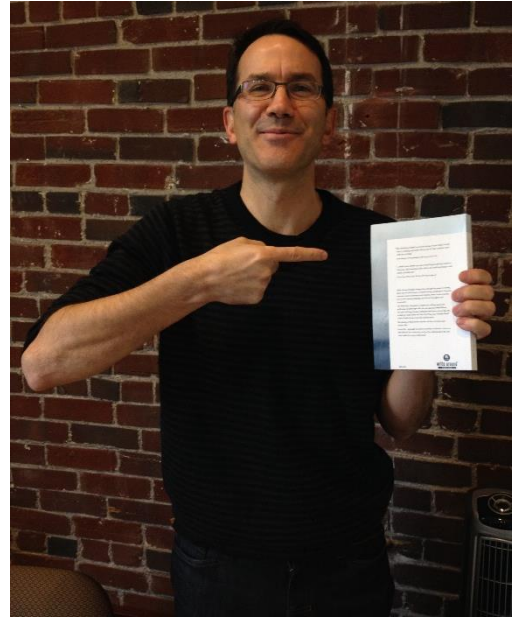
I didn’t hold back at all from the beginning. What was cool about it was that other people were doing the same things. There were also those who were not as willing to share, and as they contributed and opened up it was an amazing experience to get to know people. It became the highlight of my week. It was the thing that I wouldn’t miss.

How did you feel about reading at the anthology release party?

I was excited because of the last four people to read that night, three of them were guys from my group at the Burn Center. It felt really good to be up there lined up with those guys... The amazing thing about it was that when I came back to sit down with my daughters [after I read], my youngest daughter was like “Dad, dad look at Riley.” My oldest daughter, [Riley], she was crying. It was very powerful and very moving.

How did you feel about being published in the book?

I felt great. I walked in [to the reading] and Robyn, the Executive Director said “Hi!” and she came up to me and she showed me the book and one of the lines from my piece was highlighted



on the back of the book. And I thought, “Wow, that’s cool...” There is something different about seeing what you have written on the page.

What was your favorite part of the workshop?

You are given a moment when you are given a prompt and you make the pen go. And so it’s like, I just wrote this right now, it doesn’t have to be perfect. It doesn’t have to be fine work. The ease and relaxation of that, and being able to share that and get people’s reactions was mind-blowing. It was really helpful to me, understanding that I could tell stories and they were interesting.

Would you recommend Write around Portland to other people?

I would recommend it to anyone...It’s therapeutic, fun, artistic. It would be that way if you did it by yourself but the act of sharing and being in a group and showing up every week and laughing and hearing what other people were doing and being amazed by it, and being inspired in that way, and getting to know others styles and voices. I don’t see how anybody wouldn’t benefit from it.

Is there anything you would like to tell your readers?

The fact that I have readers is something new! I’m putting a story together; this story is evolving and unfolding and if you are like me you don’t read the forward, you start where the writer starts. So I would want them to know that they should read the story and to talk later.