

Sarah O'Leary is from Mentor, Ohio, a little town outside of Cleveland. She has lived in Portland for the past seven months. She is twenty years old and loves to write and sing current songs from the radio with her own spin on them. Sarah was adopted at a young age. Between her biological family and her adopted family, she has fourteen siblings. Sarah is most proud of the fact that on the day after this interview she is going to be starting college.



How did you first hear of the workshop?

I was in the education center at New Avenues for Youth for GED training and trying to get high school credits. I was there after the computer lab and it was cold outside and I was getting ready to leave and I remember thinking, “I don’t want to leave.” One of the staff asked me if I was going to stay for the Write Around Portland group and the Write Around Portland facilitator came in and said, “You should stay. Just try it.” She told me, “Just one time. If you don’t like it, you don’t have to come back.” So I stayed and I came back. It was my best decision ever.

What was your favorite part about the Write Around Portland workshop?

I don’t know if there was a favorite. I mean, don’t get me wrong, I love writing and I love having my imagination go and being able to be creative. And at the same time hearing the other youth that I share shelter with and drop-in space with — some of them I didn’t like at the time — and hearing them write too it was like, “Wow. Who knew that we were so talented?”

What do you think it is about your writing that makes it so powerful?

With my writing, I don’t know how I even do it or how it comes out. I tend to put whatever emotion I’m feeling into words so that the reader — or when I’m reading it, the audience — they feel what I felt. They feel the frustration or the anger that I feel.

In your piece, you express not feeling heard.

It’s frustrating being a homeless youth. Part of the reason I wrote that piece was because walking down the street when you’re homeless and you have bags and you’re wearing layers and layers because it’s freezing, people on the street will not make eye contact with you. They’ll look down and turn their head away just not to look at you and it’s frustrating because they don’t realize that we’re human too. We both have families. We both have goals and dreams. But we’re not looked at like that. No one cares what happens to us. It’s funny because just in October I had two jobs, my own place and my own car back in Ohio. Situations happen and you make bad choices and you lose everything at the drop of a hat.

In your mid-way evaluation, you said that this group is the most enjoyable thing for you. What do you most enjoy about it?

Seeing everyone come out and blossom and how deep their writing gets. Someone started writing something simple and now is writing long poems.

How do you see your role in the group?

We were all there to write and we all had the opportunity to get published. I saw myself as another person there. We were all there for the same reason because writing helps us express ourselves.

How does it feel to have your writing in a published book that's on the shelves of Powell's?

Amazing. Amazing! Just to see it in an actual book. It's beyond...I don't even know how to say it. It's like, *I did this*. It's like, *I wrote this*. And it's in a book. It's real.

Do you think the workshop built community?

Yeah. I think so. Even when we went to the reading we were so excited for each other. Like "Oh my gosh, we're published! We get to go read our poem!" I think it brought a lot of us closer together.

Would you say the Write Around Portland workshop helped you change your life in any way? How so?

Absolutely. Even though Write Around Portland is over at NAFY, we still have a workshop run by one of the staff members who saw how much we loved it and decided to keep it going. Every Tuesday, I'm there. I never miss a writing workshop. Because of writing so much I'm going to college for writing. It's definitely changed my life in a lot of ways.

Is there anything I didn't ask that you'd like people to know about your writing?

I hope that when audiences read pieces that mention homelessness and the struggles, they keep in mind that we are very much real and we have emotions and we are human and we try to reach out to that. Yeah, we're homeless, but we're still human. I hope that readers get that from reading the Write Around Portland book.