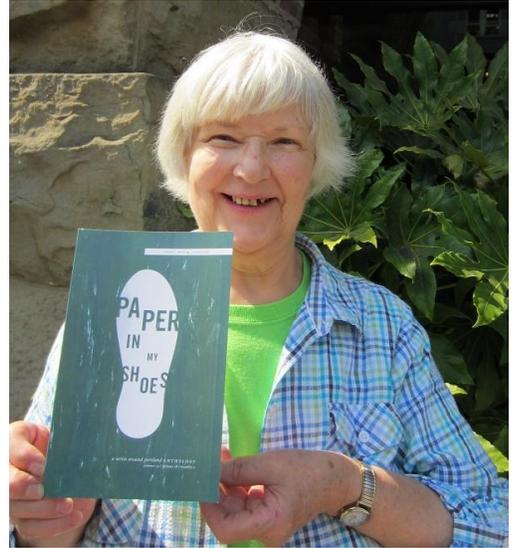


Suzette Lightner was born in Portland and has spent her entire adult life here, but she grew up on a farm in the mountains outside Estacada. The eleventh of twelve children who all began working the farm at age six, she ate fruit from the orchards — Italian plums and petite plums, pears, apples and quince — and played with snakes, frogs, moles, grasshoppers, and field mice instead of toys. Now, at seventy-three years old, she describes herself as a “homebody” who loves to cook, study the Bible, play computer games, and crochet. This summer, Suzette participated in our workshop at Home Forward: Ruth Haefner Plaza.



How did you hear about Write Around Portland, and what drew you to it?

That sign-up sheet sat there on that table, waiting for my name, for three weeks or a month. But I wanted to find out what it was about, and the very first time, I was hooked. So I showed up every week. I never missed any of the Write Around appointments.

What was it that hooked you?

The freedom of letting myself think about those things in my past, and the safety of the group. Like, we don't take anything we learn about another person here out and broadcast it. We keep it to ourselves. We honor the other people, and we hope that they honor us.

Can you talk about your experience reading at the anthology release party?

I was a little nervous, but they told me I sounded like a pro. That made me feel good! I'm glad that I went, and I'm glad that I had that experience because that's the first time that I ever got up in front of a crowd of any number of people and recited anything or spoke in front of anyone.

What was it like to be published in the anthology?

It's great. Years ago, back in 1980, I saw this dog that had a haircut like a lion, and I thought it was a small lion. So I called the police. And of course the newspaper picked it up. I got published then, but they got my name wrong. Now I can say, *I'm* published. And it encourages me to continue my prose.

What was it like being in the workshop with other people and hearing their stories?

I got a deeper understanding of my neighbors. Because they hadn't had the experiences that I'd had, and I hadn't had the experiences that they'd had. When you put them both together, it really is a patchwork.

What has changed for you as a result of the workshop?

I'm a lot more outgoing. And I'm trying to teach myself not to be so critical in a negative way. Okay to be critical in a positive way — that's important. But leave the negative out of it. Because negative will draw negative, and positive will draw positive.

What was your favorite part of the workshop?

The writing. I enjoyed getting those thoughts on paper. Numerous times, I would be right in the middle of writing, and she'd call time. And I was not quite finished with my piece, but that's okay. I enjoyed that.

Is there anything you'd like to share about your piece?

My memory of my mother's cooking and just her person — she could do anything. My mother only went to school until the third grade. Where she learned all she learned, I don't know. My dad too. Plumbing, electrical work, he worked on all of his farm equipment. He could build, he did carpentry, he could hang wallpaper so you could not see the seams. How he learned that, I don't know. You don't see that in society today.

Is there anything else you'd like to share about yourself?

I'm thirty years sober. I didn't get sober because I'm good; I got sober because I trust God. He got me sober. He has been with me all through my life, protecting me and guiding me.

Would you recommend a Write Around workshop to someone else?

Yes, absolutely. I have had a really super experience in all of this. When I see other people out on the street, I say, "Have you heard about Write Around Portland?" I would never have talked to strangers if it hadn't been for the workshop.

What's the best thing about having writing in your life?

If you're older, writing keeps your mind active, so that you can think and respond to others. That's what it's done for me. Because of my age, I know that I don't have a whole lot longer on this side of eternity. So if I'm going to leave a positive footprint, then I'm going to have to start sharing what I know. And what I know may not be for all people. But a few can learn from me, just as I learn from them. It's a two-way street. Everything in life is a two-way street.