

Featured Writer Interview with Rachel

Advocate, mother, woman, writer. At 27, even with all her creativity and imagination, Rachel likely couldn't have penned that which was to become her own life's story. Having endured tragic loss, intimate partner violence, and a traumatic brain injury, Rachel's ongoing narrative is one of courage and introspection, faith and honesty ... and – of course – the written word. Even while in the hospital with her eyes swollen shut, she asked for a pen with which to write and inked over 18 pages. As she shared, "That's who I am: I'm a writer."

This past fall, Rachel participated in a writing workshop at Legacy Emanuel Medical Center in North Portland which hosted burn and trauma survivors as well as their friends and family members. Her short story "Smile for Me" can be found in Write Around Portland's anthology, *Headed Home, Looking Back*.



Smile for Me by Rachel

As I did my laps in the hallways of the trauma and acute care unit in my sweats and hospital-issued socks, I excitedly waved at her as if I'd seen her for the first time, every time. She matched my enthusiasm. She would look up from her computer in the fishbowl, a term she taught me for the glass encompassed nurses station, smile and wave as many times as I did. Bonnie taught me that it was okay to have fun in a hospital.

It reminded me of working at Camp Tadmor when I was in high school. My brother had just died and "sad" hardly begins to describe grief. But in between my hidden tears, I would smile just like everyone else. I would cheer for the women manning the dish room and for my fellow grounds crew as they would drive by in their trucks. I would wave to excited campers, just like I waved to Bonnie.

The hospital was full of camp-like adventures. Once again, my situation was sad, but I was different. The hospital was my refuge as well as a place of healing. I felt happy for the first time in my life.

I didn't know the specifics, but I was keenly aware of my having just survived death. Not only was I alive, but my inability to eat made me a trimmer version of me. I was also away from the coward who put me here.

While I laid in bed alone I began to picture my life—not our life— moving forward. There wasn't much I could do in the way of preparation, but I would need a discharge outfit, and there were computers for shopping. Now I just needed to figure out my size. I reached for my nurse call button. "Excuse me, do you have a measuring tape?" I asked. My next adventure had begun...

© 2016 Rachel and Write Around Portland

Interview with Featured Writer Rachel

Interviewer: Mark Leary, Write Around Portland volunteer

What inspired you to join the Write Around Portland workshop? Was writing a part of your world before your injury?

Yes, in fact, in the days right before my injury, I had actually just gone to a writing conference and I was starting to look for a writing group.

Then, everything happened. When I was in the trauma and acute care unit, I saw the sign for the Write Around Portland workshop. And, although I hadn't imagined being in a *trauma* writing group, I thought, "Hey, I'll do it!"

Is writing in the workshop different than say writing at home or in a journal?

It is different, yes. The prompts and the group create an environment that focuses you on writing things that people can connect with, rather than just writing for yourself, like in a journal. Everybody in the group is trying to connect and find feelings, so it brings that out in you.

Can you talk about the "trust factor" the workshop creates and allows for?

I did my first workshop within weeks of being discharged from the hospital. I was still processing a lot. And, I still didn't really know what to think or what to feel. It kind of felt like my feelings had all dried up. I immediately started writing about some pretty horrible things.

It was *really* helpful to me to hear people's responses to my writing. The group validated me, and allowed me a safe place to think through the events of my life. It felt very much like therapy to me. Having the kind of acceptance the group offered was big. It was really cool to hear people connect and relate to something I'd written because they'd been through similar things, too.

How do you think this trust is created in the group?

I think it's the way the workshop is set up and the types of people (those who have been through trauma) in it that could understand and appreciate the strength and courage of my path and being able to do the same thing for them.

What was it like to experience other people's writing in the workshop?

Hearing other people's stories and living vicariously through them has been really helpful. Stories are really powerful. They can bring a person back to life in many ways.

How was the public reading at the anthology release party the public reading? Did you get nervous?

I get nervous, sure. But, I like it also. It was a cool experience, especially with friends there the first time. I *do* like reading my work and I do like when people come up afterwards and share how they connected with it.

Have you continued writing after the workshop?

Yes, although I want to do more. One of the other members of my Write Around Portland group and I are planning on beginning our own writing group. We just decided last week. It's just the two of us so far, but it's a start.

Finally, is it important for you to be able to tell your own story and did the workshop allow you to do so?

It's really important. There are a lot of labels I have been given – victim, domestic abuse survivor, Traumatic Brain Injury sufferer. But, I prefer to come up with my own. To tell my own story. I feel like I'm able to do that through my writing and in the workshops.