

Kayte Cookewatts, 41, loves to write. She also likes acting and has been involved in local theater for about fifteen years. When she was twelve, she was asked to represent Easter Seals in a promotional campaign. Kayte enjoys volunteering and has worked with a number of organizations, including Cascade AIDS Project and Portland Women's Crisis Line. She participated in our workshop at Zimmerman Community Center for residents of affordable housing.



How did you first hear about Write Around Portland? What drew you to the workshop?

It was in our apartment newsletter. I've been in various writing courses and groups before and I find I work better with structure. Since it was free, I wanted to check it out to see if it was something that would work out for me and it did, incredibly.

Tell me more about that. How did it work out? What did it do for you?

I was really surprised by the difference between being in a [Write Around Portland] writing group and being in a writing class. Just the entire vibe was different – it was all positive. I felt that there was a lot more freedom.

There was really a strong sense of community right away. Everyone was genuinely really happy for you when you wrote something that sounded great. I was just surprised at how close we all got and how easy it was to be open.

Initially, you were hesitant about sharing your writing with the group. Can you talk more about that?

I've always been like that. It goes back to wanting to be perfect and wanting to be good all of the time. Reading my own work was terrible – I would get so anxious that I would start hyperventilating. You're putting a piece of your heart out there and just the idea of reading that, I was extremely intimidated. Not by the [Write Around Portland] group because no one was mean, but just my own inner critic.

How did you get over that fear of sharing?

[Laughs.] I wouldn't say that I overcame it because it's still there.

But you started reading your writing with the group, right?

Yes, I did start reading. I think I just realized that no one in that group expected me to be perfect. It was really helpful that everyone just was real honest on the page. I just wanted to get out of my own way and start reading my work.

Did this Write Around Portland experience change anything for you?

Ultimately, it gave me my sense of fun back. Ever since the age of nine, I've been writing but somewhere along the way when I was being educated about how to write, I lost the fun part. I lost really having fun and creating characters. It became *Is this sentence good enough? Is this paragraph good enough? Am I going to publish this? Is my audience going to like this?* That's what I was concentrating on. It was completely freezing me up.

This [workshop] ultimately gave me the enjoyment of writing back. That's an incredible gift. Now I'm writing every day a little bit and just enjoying telling a story again.

What was your favorite part of the workshop?

All of the sharing was great. I enjoyed watching other people that maybe weren't so confident in themselves in the beginning start to get really excited about writing and feeling braver about giving everyone feedback. You could see that happening with everyone, not just me.

Have you noticed a difference in the sense of community in your apartment building?

Yes, I'm still in touch with people in my workshop. I'm exchanging writing with two people and we're going to keep it going.

So you're going to continue writing? That's great!

Yeah, we're going to email each other prompts and we're going to try to keep the basic format with prompts and freewriting. I don't want to lose the ability to go off the cuff. Because that was the gift of this group for me.

Would you recommend this workshop to other people?

Yes, the Write Around Portland environment is so positive. I don't think I've ever been in that kind of framework before. It's a chance for anyone to get out of their own head and just have fun. Any writer can benefit from that.

Is there anything else about you, your story or your experience in the workshop that you want to share?

I just want to emphasize the framework – you're not going to find that anywhere else. I've taken a lot of courses and I was always able to learn something, but I wasn't able to come away with enthusiasm for writing.

If you're not getting a sense of freedom in your writing, you're really locking yourself down and losing the joy of storytelling and that's the whole point of writing.