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“Nobody describes a flower in the same way”

Toronto’s Sister Writes gives women writers center stage.

BY HORTENCIA CRUZ



Groups members sharing their stories at Toronto's Gladstone Public Library. (Lauren Kirshner)

The day is cloudy and rain is falling on Toronto, but the program room of [The Bloor Gladstone Public Library](#) is filling with the smell of fresh coffee. It's 9:50 am when I show up and set my green binder down in front of me. A few minutes later, a dozen other women have joined me around the table, sharing jokes, talking, all of us with matching binders bearing stickers that read “Sister Writes.”

It's a typical Tuesday morning at [Sister Writes](#), a not-so-typical program in Toronto's downtown west end. As the city's first free creative writing program for women and trans people, most of the 14 diverse participants here had never done creative writing before joining the program. They also came from different corners of the world – Portugal, China, Bosnia, Cuba, Brazil, Poland and Mexico, to name a few. Some had faced challenges including limited access to education, social isolation, poverty, homelessness and mental health issues. Others wanted to improve their English and writing skills.

I joined Sister Writes in 2011 after living in Toronto for two years. I was born in Mexico and studied journalism with a focus on Indigenous issues. My life wasn't easy but I was able to make a living as a writer and an editor. When I came to Canada I sent my résumé to several newspapers, especially those written in Spanish, but the answers I received were not what I expected. They were not really interested in my writing but in my ability to sell publicity. Once, the editor of a newspaper even asked me for money in order to sign a contract with him.

Furthermore, I felt that my English wasn't good enough to compete with local journalists. Nonetheless I never gave up; all I wanted to do was to write.

I remember visiting the Bloor Gladstone library one morning – looking for a peaceful place to pass some time -- when I saw the Sister Writes poster. It invited women to join a free creative writing program taught by professional writers, learn writing skills and publish their creative work in a literary magazine. I sent an email to the writer and founder of the program, [Lauren Kirshner](#), asking her how I could register. A week later I was accepted and was sitting at my first class with my green Sister Writes binder.

I remember my first class. Lauren asked the 12 of us to introduce ourselves. The backgrounds of the participants were diverse in terms of age and education and I also realized that I wasn't the only immigrant there. About half of the participants have found in Sister Writes the opportunity to practice their literacy skills while writing creatively about their lives. At first I felt shy and I wasn't sure that the program was the right one for me. I changed my mind as soon as Lauren started the class and asked us to do a free-writing assignment.

Lauren told the class how she founded Sister Writes in 2010. After graduating from the University of Toronto Masters of Creative Writing program – where she was mentored by Margaret Atwood – she discovered that there were no free creative writing programs for women in downtown Toronto. She believed there were stories in our communities that went unheard and all that was needed was a space where those voices could shine through. “Doing creative writing is often seen as a luxury,” she says. “But Sister Writes is built on the premise that sharing stories is vital.”

Lauren told us about the importance of being on time for the class every Tuesday and to take the responsibility as writers seriously since it takes determination and courage to put our thoughts and opinions on paper. She also told us about her own journey as a writer, from freelancing music reviews and features in her late teens, to publishing fiction, poetry, and articles, and her first

novel, *Where We Have to Go (M & S)*. That novel went on to become a finalist for the City of Toronto Book Award, get published in Germany, Holland and the US, and earned her a “Best Emerging Author” accolade from Toronto’s NOW Magazine, among other distinctions.

Over the last two and half years, Lauren has worked with women from all corners of Toronto to get them involved in writing, editing, publishing and **publically launching** the program’s literary magazine, *Roots to Branches*. So far, over 40 women have contributed to the magazine and published a collective total of more than 50,000 words that traverse the experience of being a woman in Toronto, covering topics including racism, teen pregnancy, immigration, homelessness, factory work, poverty, first love, abuse and disability. Some stories have even been published in translation, ensuring that all writers get a chance to showcase their work, regardless of language differences. Each writer works on at least three drafts of her story, getting feedback from peers and applying skills she has learned in the program.

Helen, one of the participants, recently wrote a story called “The Snowstorm.” Born in Taiwan, where she worked as a bookkeeper, Helen initially struggled to learn English in Toronto. Her story, which chronicles her struggles and aspirations as an immigrant, is a strong example of the importance the program places on encouraging writers to learn literacy skills, while still retaining the authenticity of their own voices. “Your lifestyle is not my lifestyle. I don’t want to work at a restaurant forever all my life,” Helen writes, “I want to go to school. Tell me what I should do. My plan is life getting better. Although, I already in my middle age, I still have young heart. Age for me is not the problem. That is better than never starting, and never late forever.”

Nahid Mehr, who is originally from Iran, joined Sister Writes since 2010. She says the group “is a good opportunity to think about the past, the present and the future of my personal life and other women’s lives.” She also likes to interact with women of “different lifestyles, thoughts, traditions and religions from mine; that helps to make the writing class more interesting.”

This month, Sister Writes is getting ready to publish its fourth magazine with short stories like one written by Shirley Li, who emigrated from China in 1999 and found in Sister Writes the opportunity to write about her experiences as a newcomer.

In “My Mother,” Shirley writes about the day she went back to her hometown after living in Canada for five years: “I was shocked that my town had changed so much. Then I saw an old lady who seemed familiar to me, with gray hair and a bent back. I was stunned when I looked at her again. Oh! That was my mom! She said to me ‘You really came back.’ Her eyes filled with tears...”

For Angela Nolan, an American born and raised in Hawaii to a Pilipino-Spanish mother and a Chinese-Pilipino-Polynesian father, the group is a universal language. “I have learned from all of them, especially those from other countries since they have a different perspective of life. Nobody describes a flower in the same way.”

“These are stories of our city,” Lauren adds. “They are about the experiences we don’t always hear about – the lives that can be hidden from the mainstream – and having these stories written and published really does show how much they count.”

Back in the program room at the Bloor Gladstone Library, I am now writing stories in English, and I am also now confident enough to share my writing with the rest of the group. I also encourage other women to continue writing in spite of the barriers that they may face in their lives, especially those, like me, who came from other countries looking to start a new life in Canada.

Sister Writes helped me to start my writing journey. I now have my own blog called [Spiciness in a Cold Country](#). My goal is to fill it with articles about women and immigrants, but I also want to create a section for fiction. Meanwhile, I am still part of Sister Writes and look forward to starting our new session that will focus on memoir writing.

Sister Writes is 100% free to its participants and runs year-round, accepting up to 15 women and trans people writers per session, on a first come first served basis. The program is presented with the support of Sistering, The Toronto Arts Council, The Ontario Arts Council, and The Toronto Public Library. For more information on how to register for Sister Writes, please visit www.sisterwrites.com

Hortencia Cruz has been a member of Sister Writes since 2011 and is also a newcomer to Canada and a journalist from México; some of her writing has been published in the Sister Writes Magazine: Roots to Branches.