

“Everyone Is a Writer”: The Story of the New York Writers Coalition

*An interview with
NYWC Founder and
Director
Aaron Zimmerman**

*Editors’ Note: With this interview, we inaugurate a regular feature of the journal focused on interviews and articles about community-based writing projects unaffiliated with higher education. Discovering the genesis, evolution, and meaningfulness of such projects illuminates theories and practices of writing as a potentially transformative social activity that fosters creativity, communication, equity, and justice. It broadens our understanding as researchers, teachers, writers, students, and community members about what, why, how, and to what end community-engaged writing provides a compelling ground for educational, social, cultural, and political dialogue, personal growth, and collective inquiry. We envisage rich descriptions and investigations of the phenomenon of the written word as a liberatory tool that helps realize individual potential and promotes democracy, equality, and inclusiveness. We are delighted to begin this series with an interview with New York Writers Coalition Founder and Director Aaron Zimmerman. A former co-chair of the Board of Directors of Amherst Writers and Artists (AWA), Zimmerman has been leading creative writing workshops using the AWA method since 1997. He has an MA in creative writing from City College, where he has also taught creative writing. His novel *By the Time You Finish This Book You Might Be Dead* (Sputyen Duyvil) was selected in 2003 by *Poets and Writers* as “new and noteworthy.” His fiction and poetry have appeared in numerous literary magazines, including *The Brooklyn Rail*, *Georgetown Review*, *South Dakota Review*, *Jeopardy*, and *Mid-America Poetry Review*.*

Reflections: What is the origin story of NYWC? Your NYWC bio says that you founded the organization inspired by workshops you were running at The Prince George housing community and by your association with Amherst Writers and Artists. Who or what are AWA’s antecedents in your view? What theories of writing and teaching undergird the work you do?

Aaron Zimmerman: Yes, NYWC was inspired by the work of Pat Schneider, who created the Amherst Writers and Artists method of creative writing workshops, which is explained in Pat’s book, *Writing Alone and with Others*. Pat is also the author of *Writing as a Spiritual Practice*, five books of poems, a memoir, and many plays and librettos. AWA’s work is part of what is sometimes known as the “process writing movement” or the “writing process movement.” I got introduced to AWA in 1994. I was about to enter graduate school for fiction, and I joined a workshop in Brooklyn based on the AWA model.

I can still remember the feeling of surprise and validation after reading my first piece and receiving instant, supportive feedback. To hear what others heard in the scene I’d just written—and feeling that others understood, appreciated, and didn’t judge my writing—instantly changed me. It was magical and I still witness that same sense of magic today in every single workshop. That’s the genius of the model at work. Having a space like that all through graduate school helped me generate material freely, and I think I had a much higher level of resilience than I normally would have in the face of the more challenging aspects of staying creative while in academia.

The process writing movement became prominent in the 1960s and 70s, perhaps most notably due to Peter Elbow’s influential book *Writing Without Teachers*, which popularized free writing and other techniques that focused on the process of writing, rather than the end product. Pat Schneider (who studied with

* Readers are welcome to stop by NYWC public workshops. The organization also welcomes donations, big and small. To find out more about the NY Writers Coalition, visit its website at nywriterscoalition.org, and feel free to drop Aaron a note at aaron@nywriterscoalition.org.

Peter Elbow) traces the movement back to the 1920s and '30s. Two books written by women, Dorothea Brande's *Becoming a Writer* (1934) and Brenda Ueland's *If You Want to Write* (1938), focused on things like connecting with the "true self" rather than literary technique. The title of the first chapter of *If You Want to Write* is "Everybody Is Talented, Original, and Has Something Important To Say," which was a pretty radical idea at the time, and in many circles, still is. (An aside: NYWC's tagline "Everyone has a voice . . . Everyone has a story . . . Everyone is a writer." mirrors the title of this article.)

Years later, books like Natalie Goldberg's *Writing Down the Bones* (1987), Julia Cameron's *The Artist's Way* (1991), and Anne Lamott's *Bird by Bird* (1994) reinforced the idea that we grow as writers and as humans when we focus on the process of writing rather than the results. The entire process writing movement challenges elitist notions that only a select few people (primarily white men) are born with the rare talent or disposition that makes them writers. Creative writing is still often taught with this stifling idea in mind, offering harsh criticism that ignores each writer's individual path. Professors still openly espouse the idea that their job is to weed out the writers who won't "make it," rather than meeting people where they are and nurturing writing as a practice that feeds us all.

In 1997, I attended a training with Pat Schneider and AWA and started leading a workshop of my own. Through that, in 1999, The Prince George found me. They were opening a brand new supportive housing residence for low-income working people, formerly homeless people, and people with HIV/AIDS. They asked me to do a one-time workshop for National Poetry Month, but I suggested a weekly workshop, since part of what I think works best is a long-term approach to writing. I knew of Pat Schneider's life-changing workshop for women in low-income housing (featured in the beautiful documentary *Tell Me Something I Can't Forget*) and had been thinking about ways to do something like that in New York City, so I jumped at the chance.

The workshop had a profound impact on me. Here I was, a white, middle-class, well-educated, cisgender male, with all the privilege that goes along with those identities, writing and sharing work alongside people who had gone through immense challenges. I felt truly honored and humbled to be let in closely enough to hear their stories. I learned a lot about our shared humanity, the endless diversity of all the voices each individual carries within, and the power of coming together in community. I also observed how some folks seemed to have simply passed an enjoyable couple of hours while others were undergoing life-changing experiences that helped heal deeply personal matters.

I can't talk about the inspiration for NYWC without talking about one of the writers from The Prince George, Nelson Figueroa, who had been writing poetry for years. The first time he came to the workshop, he fell asleep in his wheelchair during the group. I felt kind of annoyed by this, but later learned that he had AIDS and his medication was changing often, which affected his sleep patterns. That taught me to be really careful about making any assumptions about anyone.

One day in workshop, I looked at Nelson and had a flash of recognition that he might not be with us for much longer, and that when he passed away, his writing would be lost forever. He kept reams of his poems in various folders and envelopes. I asked him if he'd like to publish a book of his writing, and I think the process of putting his book together was a source of purpose for him.

In May 2002, we debuted Nelson's book, *Pigs, Parrots and Pain*, at the launch party for NYWC, where he read alongside poet Eileen Myles and others. His sister, whom he had been estranged from for many years, came to the event. Afterwards, Nelson would call me from time to time and ask me to print more copies because he said, “I think I can move them.” He was out hustling, selling them wherever he went. Something in his identity in the world, with his family, and to himself had shifted, and he fully claimed being a writer. When Nelson died a few months later, in July 2002, one comfort we had was that his work was not lost.

Here's one of my favorite poems by Nelson:

Out of the Chamber
From *Pigs, Parrots, and Pain*
by Nelson Figueroa

I have AIDS.
Death looms near.
Basic situations
Take on perverse interpretations.
Strapped down on an MRI sled
Apprehensions, visions of cremation--hell fires--
Form in my pre-procedure
Countdown to God knows
What they are looking for.
I have to trust.
It comes not easily
Suddenly--whoosh!--I'm in
And now the cacophony of
Gear grinding gear and
The raps on the coffin-like structure
Kunk, kunk, kunk
Oh my god a new sound
Distant but familiar
Sounds that could possibly be
But how would I know?
When does one know?
When you hear what I hear
I hear the new sound
The now perverse mind twisting
A lasting impression
Scunk-shah, shuckska-tamp
Shuck-shuk-tamp
A shovel raking, scooping
Up dirt and tamping tired earth
Is what I hear
I see all too painfully dear
It hurts—I see my
Parents' gravestone, all too vivid.
Ramon Enrique and Diana Reyes

Voluminous guilt fills me
I cry hard and long
For no one can see me
I feel no shame
Save that for my own
No one can feel what
My tortured soul feels
The kunks return rhythmic
But I can't move
I can't hold on
Enough! Arrgghh!! I cry out loud
Loud enough to be heard
Above the din, louder than my
Silent fears--enough!
I'm breaking up. I'm crashing down
Out of orbit from another realm
Another plane--suddenly the
Last blast of clicks, raps, kunks
Whish!!-----I'm out!
The light blinds me
I'm incoherent, visibly shaken
I wipe my tears
And thank God
I'm alive
Out of the chamber.

Reflections: That's such a beautiful poem, such a tribute to the work that NYWC does. NYWC's support for underserved people—from youth and seniors to people who are incarcerated or living with disabilities—is very much in keeping with the ethos of most university-community literacy and writing programs and projects. Can you describe the impact of NYWC's outreach programs? What do you feel the organization accomplishes in these communities? How?

AZ: There are so many ways to answer these questions because writing is such a personal act, so each person gets something different out of the experience every time. About 1,600 different people attend workshops with us each year, and as you mention,

our writers come from incredibly diverse backgrounds. We often think of our workshop space as a kind of container for healing, creativity, and equity.

Not everyone is seeking the same thing when they come to a NYWC creative writing workshop. For some people, their whole lives have been spent being told that something is wrong with them and their writing. It's amazing how powerful a judgment-free space to explore and share can be to help heal one's self-image. People write with us to help process personal experiences, to develop their craft, to engage in the act of creativity, to find community, and to find an audience and have their voices heard and appreciated (by themselves and others). For most people, these things intersect, and multiple outcomes are happening at once.

Even saying we have five workshops for people with disabilities doesn't account for the diversity of these groups. Two are for blind and visually impaired writers, one is for people with a wide range of disabilities, one takes place in a hospital for people with psychiatric disabilities, and another is for young people with cognitive disabilities. So the impact can be wildly different across these groups.

Similarly, our goals as an organization are multiple. We believe that writing changes lives and that telling our stories is a basic human need. But in our society, this act is often reserved for the most privileged. Most creative workshops are expensive, require time, and often neither accessible nor welcoming to many of the people who attend our workshops. So we make all of our workshops free, and we bring them to our participants. We work closely with each of our program partners to make sure that we keep our workshop members' needs at the forefront. We try to meet people where they are at in their writing processes.

That all being said, we do have some very specific outcomes that we measure. For example, eighty-four percent of our adult writers surveyed say that they consider themselves a writer as a result of our workshops. Eighty percent say the workshops have

expanded their love of reading. Ninety-five percent report that our workshop has improved their writing skills and expanded their love of writing. Ninety-eight percent feel more confident in their writing. Ninety percent feel like they belong to a community of writers and that the workshop has helped them get in touch with their hopes, dreams, and fears. The numbers are similar in our youth workshops.

I think an important aspect of the work we do is the long-term nature of it. Writing is a lifelong process, and most people benefit from some form of ongoing support in community. Our own relationship to our writing deepens over time. More than a quarter of our workshops have been running for eight or more years, and about half have been running for five or more years.

Beyond numbers, there are countless ways that impact shows up. We have been specifically focusing on how our work creates greater equity in the world. Right now, twenty percent of our current workshop leaders are former members of our workshops. This past year, James Peele, a blind writer from one of our workshops, took our training and started leading two NYWC workshops. James leads both of our groups for blind and visually impaired writers. Some of our writers get their work published, participate in readings, and join the broader literary community. Others have returned to school or used writing as a daily practice to support their path to sobriety, better mental health, or new jobs. Some people show up once and have a couple of hours of community and peace in otherwise chaotic lives. We welcome any possible benefits that people get out of writing with us.

Reflections: In addition, NYWC holds regular public workshops free and open to anyone. Can you discuss how these two initiatives—the outreach and public programs—came about and how they complement each other?

AZ: Right now, we have about ten different weekly and bi-weekly writing workshops open to anyone to drop-in and attend for free. These have grown over the years because our outreach programs are generally open only to people involved with one of

our program partners. We thought that public programs would help build audiences for our books and readings and also create connections across communities. It's hard to really understand the magic that happens at pretty much every single session, so we also figured that having more people experience it would only strengthen our organization.

What has evolved in our public programs has been truly inspiring. We have participants attending multiple workshops per week at different locations. Powerful bonds have formed among participants. Writing in community has become an important part of people's lives. And we see a lot of similar challenges and barriers across all of our programs. Most people who come to public programs can't afford to attend even a short cycle of a creative writing workshop, let alone one that continues for years.

Public programs have also allowed us to do some innovative work that we wouldn't otherwise be able to do. For example, in January 2017, we launched a workshop focused on self-care and writing for people of color, called "Making a Fist." The leader, Sara Abdullah, is an herbalist, healer, writer, and performance artist. We were thinking about the 2016 presidential election and what additional, as yet unknown stressors people of color would face with a white supremacist in charge. It also was a reaction to the constant stream of videos of black people being killed by police. With all the ways bias (unconscious or conscious) and racism infect group spaces in our society, we wanted to create a space for the power of our work to support people of color.

Members of "Making a Fist" have told us the following about what the group means for them and actions they've taken as a result:

"This workshop was the beginning of joining a community of writers when I needed it most. When I saw this invite come back after applying I was so excited. It was just after the 2016 election and I needed not just to write, I was already doing that, I needed a community. This workshop led me to being committed to making time to write. To giving a gift of art to myself every

week. I was for many years a working journalist, but I started as a creative writer. This workshop helped me revive that part of myself as a writer."

"The workshop has engaged my interest/passion in self-expression and healing through writing! It has also provided me with a space that feels safe and welcoming with other people of color."

"Three pieces either got published, read at a spoken word, and got me invited to other writing groups. It got me submitting my work. It helped me create more than fifteen pieces in the last year and a half that I'm really proud of. It helped me see myself flourish over the last two years as a writer."

"I was able to come to terms with a relationship that was heavily and negatively weighing on me. Writing it through helped me to take the first steps in healthily approaching it."

Reflections: What enables you to sustain the work you do with NYWC? Your website notes that the workshop facilitators are volunteers. What attracts them to this work? What sort of funding do you need to sustain the programs and how have you managed to obtain it? In addition to financial sustainability, there is always the question of sustaining interest and engagement in the workshops (and writing) and the emotional and social wellbeing of both participants and team members. In that sense, too, what do you think sustains people involved in various capacities in NYWC?

AZ: Our workshop facilitators are for the most part volunteers, although sometimes we obtain specific funding that allows us to put people on staff as Teaching Artists and pay them a decent wage. We are working on changing our model to pay people as much as possible, but that is a long process. It's a tricky thing, because we are here to spread writing far and wide, and if we had let a lack of money stop us, most of what we've accomplished would never have happened. We started out as a purely

grassroots, volunteer-run organization. One of our theories was that if we built up our work to serve a lot of people in a lot of places, the funding would follow. That's somewhat true, because we've grown from a budget of almost nothing to a range of about \$350,000 to \$420,000 per year. But we also have been doing a comprehensive review of all of our practices through a lens of equity, and know that in order for us to have even more leaders from the communities we serve, we will need to be able to pay everyone a decent wage.

Leaders are attracted to the work because they are themselves writers who know how important their own writing practice has been for them. Many of our leaders also have a social justice or volunteer background. The leaders want to give back to others and also create equity in ways that they find personally meaningful. There are very few organizations that do what we do, so opportunities are rare to bring writing to marginalized communities, while getting the comprehensive support of an organization with our history and very specific expertise. This sort of work is a labor of love that many of our leaders would do or have done on their own, and joining our community of leaders enables them to find other likeminded people to share ideas and problem solve with.

Financial sustainability is one of the many tricky things in the nonprofit world that has been infected by the current iteration of capitalism. We are expected to make detailed plans for every dollar we will raise, but the reality is that all plans change. It seems like every year we experience some organizational crisis or another. Some years, we have been more reliant on institutional support than others. In recent years, there have been some major sea changes in funding streams. Income inequality has resulted in consolidation of resources at the top, and many funders now approach philanthropy the same way venture capitalists approach investing. They want to support scalable projects, with lots of data to prove impact. These trends take a couple of years to start trickling down to nonprofits of our budget size, and in the last few years, we have received less support from foundations.

So each year, we have to adapt. We have increased the amount of time we spend seeking individual donations, and especially focused more on major gifts. We've also tried to increase our revenue from earned income. It takes effort, in a capitalist world, to not connect the value of a program with its fundraising prowess. We believe in the work we do, and that's the motivator to keep raising funds, but honestly, it's exhausting to always have to worry about money, just as it is for everyone struggling in this increasingly economically stratified world.

We work hard at, and are very thoughtful about, the social and emotional wellbeing of our community of leaders and staff. There are many ways we approach this. We take care to match our workshop leaders with a workshop that is right for them. For instance, some leaders have specific communities they'd like to work with because of their own experiences or things they care most about, such as with formerly incarcerated or LGBTQ people. We speak regularly with leaders to make sure they are satisfied with their experience, and if not, we do everything we can to make the workshop as successful as possible. This requires a lot of communication with our program partners, who are often themselves facing the challenges of being underfunded and trying to meet a broad array of needs. It can be as simple as changing what room we use, or providing snacks, or doing more to spread the word to potential workshop members. We also create an atmosphere where our leaders can feel free to speak their mind and to let us know if they need a change or to stop leading.

For our staff, who make more happen than should be possible for such a small team, we try to create a humane work experience. This work is hard and we often encounter situations that are upsetting and impossible to change, which can take a toll. Being generous, humane, and authentic are values we inhabit in all of our work, so we try to bring that to the workplace. I personally think that if we can't fully be ourselves at work, where we spend so much of our time, we can't be at our best. So we do things like share weekly beautiful moments from our work or lives, so that we are talking about things other than problems to solve. If someone is facing something difficult in their work

or life, or just having a rough time with mental health, we try to acknowledge what's going on, rather than suppress it. We try to resolve conflicts rather than bury them, and that also takes time and space. I also think that we all share a deep passion for what we do, and respect each other deeply, so that also helps.

Reflections: We have a special issue on prison writing scheduled for publication this spring, marking the 15th year since the first *Reflections* special issue on writing in prisons. We are receiving a lot of proposals that indicate increased interest in working/writing with incarcerated people. What have you learned from the work NYWC does in this arena?

AZ: A couple of years ago, we got contracted to do four workshops a week for men detained on Rikers Island. Over the course of the year we did this program, I went to the jail about a dozen times either to meet with program staff or occasionally visit or lead a workshop. In those times, I saw about 150 to 200 different participants. Only one of them was white. It was a stark reminder of how mass incarceration disproportionately impacts people of color.

Our most successful program inside jail is our workshop for women on Rikers, which has been running for about seven years. Our leader for most of that time has been the writer Deborah Clearman, who also used to be our Program Director. Week in and week out, Deborah shows up, undaunted by all the obstacles, from not being admitted to the facility to not having an escort to take her from the entrance to the programs area to not having anyone in the group. Because of Deborah's relentless determination, we've been able to publish a few books of writing by the women and have held some readings on Rikers where we've brought in guests to be the audience. It's been extremely powerful to put faces to pieces of writing, to hear stories that are either highly relatable or about something that I have never experienced myself. But the amount of perseverance it takes to keep something going in that environment is monumental.

One of the things that causes the incredibly high incarceration rates we see in this country is the dehumanization of others, especially people of color. We see it now with the constant stoking of fear of immigrants, and with people calling the police on black people sitting in a Starbucks or walking down the street or driving a car. The more we can do to see other people as fellow humans, with the same worries, concerns, joys, desires, and needs that make us human, the better. Writing is a great way to do this. It’s also true that being heard, appreciated, and understood can change people’s lives. So, writing and sharing writing is a two-way street. It’s become more and more vital that we hear from all people, not just the select few, as a counter to the deep divisions that are being exploited by those who seek money and power.

One of my favorite poems we’ve published came from our workshop for women on Rikers. I feel like it is a great counterbalance to dehumanization, because it brings to life sounds, smells, tastes, and love of family. These are things we all hopefully can understand, if we are willing to actually listen.

PUERTO RICO

by Christine Feliciano

from *These Are Hard Times for Dreamers:*

Writing from Rikers Island

July and August
Mami Rody house
a backyard filled of
plantain trees, coffee bean plants
and croaking roosters at five am.
Grandma I want pancakes
stacked with butter and syrup
freshly squeezed orange juice
six pm dinner time of authentic rice and
beans with chicken and salad
Grandma mmm, I missed your cooking.
Twenty pounds later
estamos en el río
we’re at the river

jumping off the cliffs into a crystal
clear stream of water
the tropical sun burning at my
city skin.
Yo soy boricua is what I tell my
friends. Nothing compares to visiting
my family in the midst of the green top
mountain, driving down a one lane
road past the roaming cows and horses
beating your horn, alerting your arrival.
Two months of magic taken away from
cellphone coverage and into roaming
into humility of nature
and family.
Back on the plane
Te quiero Mami Rody
I love you Grandma
Gracias por todo
Thank you for everything
Te veo el próximo año
I'll see you next year
as I wobble to my gate.

Reflections: Wow! Another very moving poem. Is there a list of principles, values, and/or practices that inform the work of the NYWC that you could share with Reflections readers?

AZ: This is the belief statement that we drafted in 2001. After all these years, it remains true, though there are certainly more that we can add, based on what we've learned over the years:

We believe:

- Everyone is a writer, regardless of prior writing experience and formal education.
- Through encouragement and support, people grow as writers and artists.
- In the value of the uniqueness of every individual's voice.

- Each person's experiences are a source of strength and power as a writer and an artist.
- In creating and maintaining a non-judgmental, open and respectful community where everyone is encouraged to support and listen to each other and to take risks and grow as writers.
- Each person, through writing, can shape and influence the lives of others.
- We can achieve social change by providing access and opportunity for all writers, regardless of race, ethnicity, class, age, gender, sexual orientation and physical ability.

© 2019, Aaron Zimmerman. This article is licensed under the [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License \(CC BY\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). For more information, please visit creativecommons.org.