



Write Around Portland workshop inspires youth at MacLaren Youth Correctional Facility



Gustavo

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Experts estimate that nearly 74 percent of Americans, or three out of every four people you meet, suffer from the fear of public speaking, also known as glossophobia.¹ As if public speaking isn't nerve-racking enough, now imagine standing at a lectern on a podium and sharing innermost thoughts you've written in poetic verse, to an audience made up of mentors, peers serving time, campus security, people who have never served time, and peers who have transitioned out of a correctional facility.

As daunting as this may sound, 10 youth did just that May 30 before an audience at MacLaren Youth Correctional Facility. Some even made it look easy. But what the crowd of 60 didn't know was that these youth weren't lifelong writers or public speakers, or that some

had declined stepping up to the microphone many times before they finally did. Their writing was published in the [Write Around Portland](#) anthology entitled, "Toward the Sound," the culmination of a spring workshop produced with Hope Partnership and Oregon Youth Authority (OYA) at MacLaren. Based at MacLaren, Hope Partnership provides services that engage youth with community members through special workshops, groups and classes.

OYA's culture of Positive Human Development (PHD) supports youth in its custody by encouraging new skill development such as creative writing and public speaking. Skills like these are important to youths' growth and helping them become productive members of society. They also fit nicely as level three of the [PHD pyramid](#), Caring and Supportive Relationships, in which youth are encouraged to learn new skills and achieve higher performance in the safe environment of their community of peers.

Hope Partnership's Kathleen Fullerton hosted the reading event, which included youth who traveled 150 miles from Camp Florence Youth Transitional Facility to see their peers read their works. All had participated in the prior 10 workshops, with one Florence youth returning because he wanted to read out loud. Hugs, high fives and even some tears were abundant as youth reconnected for the first time in months between MacLaren and Camp Florence.

Said Fullerton: "The mission of Write Around Portland is to create community with writing, and that's what it does for us."

Topics ranged from missing parents and grandparents to how losing their freedoms makes them feel. Moderated by Ed Kline, a volunteer facilitator, the workshop progressed as each youth read his published works, and the audience then asked questions, eliciting almost as much constant applause as the readings did.

¹ National Institute of Mental Health, November 11, 2013

“Any opportunity for youth who have gone on to transitional facilities to revisit crossover youth and reconnect delivers a large amount of motivation and hope to youth in close-custody facilities,” said a staff member who observed the workshop. “It’s one of the best things possible we can do for our youth.”

When asked their inspiration for participating in the writing workshop, answers from youth were diverse. One said he was inspired by the feedback he gets for his writing. Another said his heroes’ writings, such as those of Mahatma Gandhi, motivated him. And a significant number of youth credited Noah, a Camp Florence youth in the audience, as the main reason they decided to participate.

When asked how writing makes them feel, youth were quick to answer, some jockeying for position at the microphone. “Writing makes me feel free,” said one youth who faces many more years in custody.

Another responded, “Writing makes me feel like I’m listened to and that I can express my feelings while still remaining calm.” Another said, “I can be who I really am when I’m writing. It keeps your mind flowing.”

Gustavo, 19, has been at MacLaren for two years and cites his family as his main support system, followed by his treatment manager, volunteers, and OYA staff, who are helping him “to do good,” he said. Fullerton helps direct him to positive groups and good environments. In fact, he took the writing workshop because he knew that he’d need to write two essays of three to four pages apiece to pass the test for his diploma. Never having been a writer before, this task seemed impossible to him. At the urging of Fullerton, he took the workshop.

Gustavo was surprised to find he could communicate on paper. “I saw that I had great ideas and good writing skills,” he said. “I was able to express myself well through writing and I found I enjoyed it. After the workshop, I started writing in a journal and writing down my poems.”

Since taking the workshop, Gustavo received his GED and high school diploma. He has applied to Janus for a college scholarship and is taking college courses. Although he didn’t imagine himself in college, he is the first one in his family to graduate from high school and now the first one to go to college.

As a bonus to what was already turning out to be a great day, Noah, inspiration for many youth, stood up. “I want to give a shout out to my brothers here, up on stage,” he said. Noah is known throughout OYA as an excellent writer, a frequent winner of poetry slams and [writing contests](#), and a youth on the verge of transitioning back to society within a year. He’s also one to take advantage of the many opportunities that come his way at OYA, and serves as a mentor to many of the MacLaren youth.

“I am taking so much away from your writing today,” he continued, addressing his peers on stage. “Words that we speak are fleeting, but what we record is eternal. So take your pen and your paper and never look back.”