

Writing the Way to Regeneration

How the Minnesota Prison
Writing Workshop (MPWW)
is instilling hope in
incarcerated inmates

BY SKYLAR MITCHELL



In 2011, Jennifer Bowen Hicks had been writing to prison wardens for months to no avail. The new Minnesotan and veteran writer had been teaching poetry and creative writing around the country for years already but was looking to extend her services to a different group of students. Hicks was known in the writers' circuit for her successful festival and magazine submissions. Her work has previously appeared in literary journals such as *Orion* and *Kenyon Review*.

When she wasn't perfecting her own skills, she was sharing what she knew with others, as her title as a writer existed alongside her role as a teacher. So, in 2011, she decided to share them with a new group of students: inmates at the Minnesota State Prison at Lino Lakes. The then-warden was the only warden in the state who responded to her letter campaign and he enthusiastically welcomed her proposal to teach.

It is in this facility that the Minnesota Prison Writing Workshop (MPWW) was born. Hicks taught solo for that first 2011 class, but thanks to help and cooperation from the Minnesota Department of Corrections, she was able to bring in seven additional instructors back for round two.

Today, the workshop's staff of writing instructors have taught over 100 creative writing classes to over 1,000 students in all the state's adult correctional facilities. The program offers long term ongoing courses in fiction, poetry, creative nonfiction and playwriting, and the classes aim to teach the "habit of art," in the words of author Flannery O'Connor. By empowering students to tell their own stories and believe in the validity in their voice, the workshop not only teaches creative writing and poetry, but offers rehabilitative mentorship that extends in and outside of facility walls.

When asked what compelled her to this work, Hicks recalled the experience of an old writing mentor, a man whom she admired and respected. She was deeply touched by the stories of her mentor and his incarcerated students and related fondly to the notion of helping people behind bars. She herself had family members who'd been incarcerated and often looked for ways to help people living in prisons. Though she did not originally intend to make this mission her life's work, she found herself falling in love with it everyday thanks to her students.

Hicks attests to her students' raw talent and commitment to the course. Every year, at every state prison in Minnesota, the classes fill up almost within hours of registration becoming available. The students who have the opportunity to matriculate are enthusiastic and engaged at every step. Those who want to stay connected even further can participate in the MPWW Mentor Program after completion of the class. In this program, incarcerated writers are paired with writers and editors in the outside literary community. Mentees send 10-40 pages of creative work each month, and mentors respond with detailed feedback, writing exercises, reading assignments, etc. This provides an opportunity for students to continue to receive guidance outside of the classroom and grow as writers independently. Outside writers and educators in the state of Minnesota who cannot teach in-class are encouraged to sign up to be mentors and support the organization on their own time.

On the MPWW website, their testimonials line the home page, espousing the ways that the program has enriched their lives and given them motivation to be even better citizens upon their release. One student describes

"While incarceration is often voiceless, MPWW gives us the opportunity to have a voice. Writing gives value to our lives and allows us to see we are bigger and brighter than one felony."

— Student, Minnesota Prison Writing Workshop

how the program gave him back his voice through writing. Creating work gives “value to our lives and allows us to see we are bigger and brighter than one felony,” he stated.

These uplifting reflections challenge the notion that inmates are not capable of appreciating complex literary work behind bars. Despite its limited recognition, the history of art in prisons is a long one. Prison arts programming operates in at least 48 states, according to the Justice Arts Coalition. The availability of literary and arts resources lay at the intersection of human rights and creativity. One of the largest coalitions of arts advocacy in correctional facilities is PEN America, which was founded in 1922 to allow incarcerated writers the opportunity to share and showcase their work. Following is the mission of these predecessors, the MPWW offers a bridge between incarcerated adults and the Twin Cities outside of literary organizations and artists.

Artists on the outside

The MPWW is the largest and most comprehensive literary arts in corrections organization in the country. The workshop services every adult state facility in Minnesota

year-round and follows a unique structure with a focus on community building as well as education. Each year, the MPWW hosts a public reading of student work at Hamline University, usually on the third Saturday in October. Friends, family members, and MPWW teachers and mentors read on behalf of incarcerated writers. Often, former students read their own work, as well. For many community members, this is the first time they have experienced the creative work of men and women writing from prison.

When asked how creating spaces like this improve the perceptions of incarcerated students, Hicks recounts the times she has interacted with people who do not have experience with inmate-writers and creatives. On one occasion, she saw a play performed by a group of incarcerated men and asked a community member what she thought of it. The woman shrugged a little and said, “It was good, you know, for a prison play.” Hicks believes that there is a strong misconception that the men and women her team works with aren’t serious students, aren’t talented artists, or are just in class to get out their cells. However, none of that could be further from the truth. The students she works with are among the hardest working, serious, curious, creative and vulnerable writers



Photo courtesy Anna Min of Min Enterprises Photography

(Pictured Above) An audience listens to MPWW students perform at the 2019 Behind Bars Reading. (Pictured right) The poetry gumball machine in the Milkweed Books bookstore in Minneapolis takes a creative spin on the vending machine concept. Its gumball capsules are filled with poems written by students, instructors and affiliates of MPWW.



Photo courtesy Minnesota Prison Writing Workshop



To learn more about MPWW, check out this video at youtube.com/watch?v=t3zAVYlaoOw.

she has known. She and her colleagues expect high-quality work and their students exceed our expectations every time.

Hicks says there is more student-to-student encouragement and mentoring than any workshop she has worked with outside. “Many people on the outside may also be surprised by how generous our students are to each other,” she said.

The program is so successful precisely because of the students’ commitment to the craft of writing and the pillars of community. In order to make the class work, each party must respect one another and truly believe in the goal being attempted. The program continues to thrive thanks to cooperation across the Minnesota arts, education and corrections communities.

Instructors tend to notice a marked difference in the students by the end of the workshop. Of course, their writing improves dramatically, especially for those who work in class and with a writing mentor through the mail. Many of these students eventually publish their work, win prizes, and articulate difficult stories, often for the first time. This year, Hicks and her fellow instructors expanded the program to include another new, more whimsical component. Inspired by an Instagram post of a prose-dispensing vending machine, she thought of the idea of selling her students’ poems in the same way to bring light to the workshop and incarcerated literary talent. So, the staff devised the plan of placing small

**Writing is a profoundly empowering,
regenerative practice.**

— Jennifer Bowen Hicks

printouts of poems into capsules and making them available for sale in vending machines. One vending machine turned into what is now over a dozen currently operating in bookstores from Minneapolis to Northfield, MN.

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Hicks is proud to have created a space where her students are able to find hope in an otherwise dreary reality. She says, “Writing has more tangible benefits than just the glory of a good publication or even the deep satisfaction of finally telling an untold story. I think reading and writing for anyone — incarcerated or not — fosters a healthy way of living in the world. When we read, we’re immersed in empathy, others’ lives, new ways of seeing and being in the world.”

Toni Morrison once said, “Narrative is radical, creating us at the very moment it is being created.” Hicks says the workshop and its programs “speaks to the cycle of self-discovery that takes place in the writing process.” Through her own writing processes, Hicks has been able to tap into this deeply personal, empowering process. Her hope, with the Minnesota Prison Writing Workshop is to extend it to others. Hicks and her team feel this process of self-discovery should be open to all, incarcerated or not.

“I believe in extraordinarily high expectations, careful seeing, and unconditional positive regard. And humor,” Hicks said. “Those are conditions under which we [MPWW instructors] flourished most as a student and the conditions I hope to set for my students.”

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