

Q&A

By GRETCHEN STONE
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Melissa Fraterrigo, the director at the Lafayette Writers' Studio, and her husband found a waypoint for their lives in Lafayette, between his hometown of Cleveland and her family roots around Chicago.

Since Fraterrigo founded the studio in 2014, about 80 students have come through its doors to enhance their writing skills and workshop stories, novels, memoirs, and poems. She is currently shopping around her second book, a novel-in-stories titled *Teensy's Daughter*, and revising a new novel. She is at work on two unrelated essays, one about a difficult time in her family and the second regarding a back accident that "segues into a reflection on body image."

Upcoming classes and events at the studio are Poetics of Place on Thursday, April 14 from 6:30 p.m.-9 p.m.; an Open Mic on Thursday, April 28 at 7 p.m., which is free and open to the public; and Cross Training for Writers on Wednesday, May 25 from 6:30 p.m.-9 p.m. The studio is online at <https://www.lafayettewritersstudio.com>. You can also learn more about Melissa at melissafaterrigo.com

The following interview took place with Fraterrigo during an email exchange and has been edited for space considerations.

What brought you to Lafayette? Why start a writers' workshop here?

Lafayette seemed like the perfect location to be close to our families, yet also chart our own course. When we first moved to the area, I was working as a freelance writer while also working on my own fiction. At the time, someone very dear to me was diagnosed with cancer. This uncertain time forced me to look at my own life and how I was choosing to live. I love teaching and have secretly always wanted to teach writers in my own design.

What drew you to work with students in a private business setting?

I have always taught in some capacity from high school English and tutoring to college-level creative writing—I love the liveliness that unfurls in a classroom. I love interacting with students and working with them to make a piece of literature come alive during our discussion. I truly believe everyone has a story to tell. In my own way, I think our community can be a more hopeful and fulfilled place if each and every person were to take the time to truly reflect and write her story. I opened a writers' workshop business because I thought I could help accomplish this. From the get-go, I decided that no matter what, I would at least be able to say that I tried to create a writing studio. I'm still trying.

Are there added challenges compared with teaching in a university?

I've taught creative writing and composition at two campuses of Penn State and Southern Utah University, and one benefit to teaching in the university system is that there are a variety of resources to support educational objectives. Universities offer an array of programs from student disability services to tutoring centers, so if a student needs additional support, there are programs already in place to assist them.

Melissa Fraterrigo, from the Lafayette Writers' Studio

As the sole proprietor of the Lafayette Writers' Studio, it is dependent upon me to help students succeed despite their specific challenges. For instance, I've had several students in class with visual disabilities—I've had to work to secure audio texts or provide enlarged texts so that they are still able to participate in class discussion. And yet, because I'm advocating a community-based writing studio, I'm able to draw a truly diverse mix of students, and I think that is one of the reasons these classes are successful—the classes are open to all. I really think everyone has a unique voice and I want to help students develop that voice and become the writer they want to be.

Have you always worked out of the space at Matchbox? What led you to lead classes there?

The first classes were held at Red Poppy Studios in downtown Lafayette. When Red Poppy closed, I later rented classroom space from a local church. The environment in which I teach classes is almost as important as the makeup of the class. Classroom space needs to be accessible to a wide variety of students. It needs to be centrally located and offer a quiet, comfortable space conducive to writing and thinking about literature. I have offered classes at MatchBOX since fall 2014 and I can't say enough good things about the space. It is the perfect place to teach creative writing—there's a great energy and optimism at Matchbox, and I think my students thrive in such an inviting environment.

My students are retired teachers and high school students, police officers, insurance salesman, stay-at-home moms, graduate students and more. It is an honor to work with all of them. My students have great hearts and rich experiences—all of them have something meaningful to say, and I'd like to think that these classes help deepen their understanding of how best to say it.

Is there any difficulty in connecting with students and their work when their styles are wildly different from your own? Or when they're just developing voice or style?

Even when a student's work is vastly different from my own, I still work to understand the piece on its own terms. I'm pretty militant about respecting the author's vision and helping them deepen their own understanding of their piece. I do this when I respond to student work and I teach my students to do the same when we workshop pieces in class. It is not up to me or the rest

of the class to rewrite or rework a piece. Rather, it is our responsibility as writers and readers to offer thoughtful comments and reactions to the piece and let the writer ultimately decide how this fits with her goals for the project.

Do you envision any additional classes or plan any changes in the near future?

I have so many ideas for ways that I would like to grow the Lafayette Writers' Studio—really, my only limitation is time. I'll again teach two creative writing summer camps this summer at the Morton Center, but I'm also interested in providing a workshop to teachers and parents who home school on how to introduce students to creative writing in the classroom and beyond. I'm still working to understand the types of topics that are of interest to writers in our community. We are offering a poetry class



this spring, and I'm eager to see what sort of interest that generates. As I mentioned, I have many more ideas, but I'm also adamant about continuing to carve out time for my own writing. Part of my success as a teacher of writing stems from the fact I am actively writing as well—I'm trying to strengthen my skills as a writer and face the same blank page and the same insecurities as my students. We are all in this together—the joy the fear and uncertainty that surrounds writing—I think my students sense this as well.

Can you tell me a bit about your experience as an Innovator in Residence at the Purdue Honors College?

I taught an eight-week class titled "Writing Your Childhood Story," and we spent the first part of the course exploring different memoirs and stories about childhood, while also discussing various attributes of what makes a story effective. We then segued from reflecting on our own childhoods to interview a resident of Friendship House, a low-income senior housing facility in West Lafayette, about their childhoods. Students then "took on" the persona of the person they interviewed and offered a glimpse of this resident's childhood in a brief essay. The Tippecanoe County Public Library is in the process of gathering stories of residents in our community for Indiana's Bicentennial, so we shared these interviews with them and they will go on to be housed in the Library of Congress and archived with Storycorps, a nonprofit organization that is dedicated to preserving the stories of everyday Americans. I cannot say enough about how fulfilling it was to watch the Purdue students interact with these residents. They were simply outstanding. And the residents of Friendship House absolutely beamed as the students read pieces about them out loud. Many of the students said this was the most meaningful component of the class because it really helped them see the importance of writing and storytelling, and they had the opportunity to collaborate with someone in our community.

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