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Whose House? A Dual Profile of Two Spaces for Writers in Camden, New Jersey

Catherine Buck and Leah Falk

Abstract

The leaders of two Writers Houses in Camden, New Jersey, examine the intersections and divergences of their programming philosophies and practices, as well as their spaces' identities as rooted in, and in collaboration with, the communities they serve and the institutions they are part of. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, they also explore what distanced programming has meant for the accessibility of their programs and strategic planning of their organizations.

Keywords

writers house; new jersey, neighborhoods, accessibility, generative writing

Creo que el mundo es bello,
que la poesía es como el pan, de todos.
Y que mis venas no terminan en mí
sino en la sangre unánime
de los que luchan por la vida,
el amor,
las cosas,
el paisaje y el pan,
la poesía de todos.

I believe the world is beautiful
and that poetry, like bread, is for everyone.
And that my veins don't end in me
but in the unanimous blood
of those who struggle for life,
love,
little things,
landscape and bread,
the poetry of everyone.

— “Como Tú” [“Like You”] by Roque Dalton, trans. Jack Hirschman

Introduction: What Is a Writers House for?

Camden, New Jersey boasts a unique and strange literary distinction: not one, but two Writers Houses. Before looking at the shared and divergent philosophies of the two houses, we'd like to ask: what is a Writers House for, anyway? It is not, in either Camden case, a writing center; though one House is located on the Rutgers University—Camden campus and one is on the corner of a residential neighborhood in south Camden, neither students nor residents drop in or make appointments explicitly for writing assistance. Neither is a Writers House a presenting organization alone, although both houses offer calendars of readings and workshops by published authors. When we examine the intertwining history of these two spaces, we find a hybrid architecture: one that inherits ideas from the academic writing center model, from the evolution of civic engagement on college campuses, from community organizing and from models of writing generatively and creatively together as a group. In their first years, we've seen these models adapt and transpose to meet the needs of their most ardent participants and to reflect the training and influences of the teams that lead them. Both houses have also been challenged to adapt their missions and programming models to the needs of their constituencies in response to the multiple community crises springing from the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Writers House at Rutgers—Camden: From a Legacy of Faculty Literary Events to Programs Rooted in Community Interest and Partnership

Director introduction: I'm Leah Falk, and I direct the Rutgers—Camden Writers House. My academic background is in English literature and creative writing, linguistics, and Spanish language and literature. My work has found me teaching in the university classroom; supporting staff building literacy programs in out-of-school-time contexts; implementing an urban environmental studies curriculum; developing poetry curriculum for in-school programs; and managing programs and volunteers in a variety of nonprofit contexts. At the Writers House, I develop and sustain programs and partnerships, communications, and funding strategies, within the campus and externally. I work closely with the English department and Creative Writing program but also partner across the campus with faculty, staff, and students from Biology, Africana Studies, History, Psychology, Robeson Library, Veterans Affairs, and Civic Engagement, to name just a few. I also collaborate with community partners ranging from Camden after-school programs to informal coalitions of nonprofit directors.

The Writers House at Rutgers—Camden, located in a refurbished Queen Anne home in Camden's historic downtown, began as a faculty dream of a campus and community space, modeled on joint university-community spaces like the Kelly Writers House at the University of Pennsylvania and growing out of decades of English department programming that brought novelists, memoirists, and poets to campus for talks and conferences. At the beginning of its life in 2015, the Writers House housed the Writing and Design Lab, the campus writing center, but since that center

moved in fall of 2018, the house has offered no one-on-one writing consultancy model. Instead, its programming has centered on workshops that introduce participants to fiction writing, political poetry, business writing, and other topics, often as requested by participants; public readings and discussions; and multi-format programs that call attention to the role of writing and storytelling in particular communities, such as veterans and LGBTQIA people. The House also runs two youth programs: one on-site, the High School Writers Conference, dedicated to introducing high school students to the ways writing plays a role in a range of professional careers; and Growing Great Writers, an off-site program that gives elementary and middle school students in Camden dedicated, guided time for creative writing during after-school programs. For the above programs, the Writers House has established partnerships with Warrior Writers, a national nonprofit dedicated to veterans' creative expression; the Salvation Army Kroc Center; and the after-school program affiliated with Camden-based Catholic Schools Partnerships.

Although the Writers House's four classrooms—converted from their residential use with historic details preserved—are used for university classes, they are not in constant scheduled use, and increasingly, students can be found in an empty classroom or lounge space, taking advantage of the quiet atmosphere to study. Attendees of community workshops, which often occur on weekends, are invited to make themselves at home in the historic space. Impromptu library spaces on the first and second floors are stocked with books, periodicals, a computer, typewriter, and coffeepot, inviting un-programmed engagement on an individual or group basis.

Nevertheless, it usually takes intensive stewardship and design to promote the kind of engagement we would most like to see, and to make the space central to the mission of the center. This stewardship comes in the form of in-person greetings, whiteboard messaging, and events that may be less structured than a class and that embrace a spirit of improvisation, but still have a set time, place, and theme. We've seen participants take ownership of these events in small ways: at a recent tribute to the work of Toni Morrison, participants were invited to bring and read their favorite passages from the Nobel Laureate's work; when we ran out of chairs, guests helped remove the cushions from the lobby sofas so people could sit comfortably on the floor. With the Free Library of Philadelphia, we hosted a book discussion of Tommy Orange's debut novel *There There*; a small group, made up of residents of Camden and surrounding suburbs as well as Rutgers staff and students, moved from reading passages from the novel to discussing whether an author has a responsibility to write representations of his community in a positive light. Even when programming is more audience-oriented, most important to the Writers House identity is that participants have their own motivation for being there, and that moments of collaborations and discovery, such as the ones described above, are possible.

Our programming philosophy began with an informal assessment of which populations on campus and in the community might be receptive to programming that invited them to use writing to reflect upon their identities, experiences, and interests. Early on, veterans were an obvious choice for pilot programming. Rutgers has seen an increase in student veterans, active duty military, or dependents every year

since tracking began in 2008, and Rutgers has the distinction of being named a Purple Heart University, noting its support of student veterans and active duty service members. New Jersey has close to half a million veterans, with many concentrated in nearby Cape May County.

As a programming curator and leader approaching the new project of the Writers House in 2016, I also tried to understand the legacy of faculty programming that inspired the space. I brought with me influences from the worlds of generative community creative writing workshops and museums: specifically, the work of Nina Simon, author of *The Participatory Museum* and CEO of OF/BY/FOR ALL, and Pat Schneider, author of *Writing Alone and With Others*. I learned about Ms. Simon's work and influence on the museum world while employed at the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, and about Ms. Schneider's while I was a volunteer workshop leader for NY Writers Coalition.

Simon envisions museums as not merely cultural institutions to experience passively, but rather places where people can actively connect to culture and other people, often across social differences. As director of the Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History, Simon and her team examined ways people participated in cultural activities outside of institutions, and imagined ways for institutions to reclaim that participation: for example, inviting amateur artists to paint together on weekends, using the museum's collection as inspiration. In this way, she writes, the community becomes a "co-creator" of the significance of the museum's collection.

Simon's idea of the community as co-creator was an essential pivot in my thinking as a program curator. I had long looked for ways to position reading, especially the reading of complex literary works, as a creative act. In my workshop facilitation and teaching at the high school and university levels, I have seen participants and students become more empowered as readers and writers when they feel invited to create original interpretations of the work, rather than seek a supposedly hidden, single meaning of a text. For example, at our 2017 panel discussion highlighting the narratives of medical professionals in the military, audience members waited for the invited speakers to finish, then during the question and answer session stood up to give testimony about their own service, often at length. Simon might refer to a discussion that prompted such a response as a "social object," a concept she discusses in *The Participatory Museum* (ch.4, "Social Objects.") Social objects are cultural touchstones that makes participants feel invited to share their own reflections and make new connections.

Simon stresses that this fruitful community collaboration doesn't come out of nowhere: institutions must create well-designed opportunities that facilitate meaningful, creative participation. "If you give someone a special tool...it transforms what they do in return," she says in her TED talk "Opening Up the Museum" (Simon 05:45-05:53). Although Writers House programs began with a legacy of traditional author talks, readings, and workshops, we've expanded our programming to try to honor this principle of quality participatory design, especially through our veterans' programs and our High School Writers Conference.

Pat Schneider, who founded and helped to spread the Amherst Writers and Artists workshop method, has been a more indirect influence on the way I've gone about seeking partners for Writers House programs and looking to create an environment of trust and cross-community participation. In her book *Writing Alone and With Others*, Schneider lays out a set of values for community writing workshops. I've taken to heart two in particular: that of eliminating the hierarchical structure or spirit of writing workshops and other programming, and that of encouraging facilitators of writing programming to generate work alongside participants in order to build a trusting environment where everyone, including the "leader," has something at stake (Schneider x)

I consider these two philosophies as I conduct evaluations and needs assessments, as I assemble speakers and workshop leaders for multi-format programs, and as I develop partnerships with departments and individual faculty members on campus as well as community members. The questions I try to keep front of mind include: does this program have a barrier to entry, in the form of physical spaces that are not universally accessible, inconsistent transportation, unexpected/inflexible/inaccessible costs, or technology that not everyone may be practiced in using? Does this program center perspectives that matter to audiences that may or may not be fluent in the shorthand of academic research, storytelling, and work products? Does this program allow participants the chance to give testimony about their own relationship to the kind of writing, reading, and/or storytelling being discussed? Do the speakers and workshop leaders I invite or hire understand that they are working in a context where all of the above is important?

Who Participates and How – Cultural Differences and Identifying Expertise

In a survey of a representative sample of participants taken in spring 2020, we found that students make up about twenty percent of Writers House program participants, but the majority of participants are not Rutgers affiliated, and live in Camden or other South Jersey communities. They are primarily young, between ages twenty-five to thirty-four, though these respondents may be the ones most comfortable with online surveys. Some participants are veterans who do not primarily see themselves as writers, but who crave a safe and like-minded community to reflect on and share their experiences of service, post-traumatic stress, and transitioning back to civilian life. Others have careers as healthcare professionals, early childhood educators, or entrepreneurs, but write novels and poetry after the workday is done. Still others may be college students—no less part of our "community-based" model for being degree-seeking—who show up to workshops to practice the storytelling skills to turn their knowledge of biology, public policy, or environmental studies into advocacy campaigns, grant proposals, or opinion-editorials.

Often, the above participants may share space without explicit acknowledgment of the different cultural values and experiences they arrive with, or without discussing the a priori assumptions they may have of a university space, or that the univer-

sity may have of them. What does this look like? A middle-aged man who owns a small contracting company, attending our email and business writing workshop a couple years ago, apologized for his lack of facility in “writing,” by which he might have meant crafting a fluid argument or an aesthetically beautiful sentence. This apology might reflect his perception that the university holds those values as the principal hallmarks of good writing. But when a facilitator asked about the kind of communication that was important to his business, he shared a few oral techniques he had for assuring prospective clients that he was experienced and trustworthy; the facilitator encouraged him to make these the foundation of a writing exercise that would provide copy for his business’s Facebook page. This example embodies Pat Schneider’s anti-hierarchical workshop value. When participants look to a facilitator for expertise or the guiding values of the institution, the facilitator’s first technique can be to flip the request and ask for participants’ expertise. In future programs, we hope to encourage participants to reflect on and identify their expertise and values as a first step in any workshop.

With staff at Mighty Writers Camden, the organization that operates out of the other Camden writers’ house, we’ve discussed the value of different programming models for our overlapping but distinct constituencies. Should a Writers House that aims at value for a community with wide variation in experience and cultural values be approaching programs with a curatorial or responsive eye? That is, should we be creating offerings that seem relevant and exciting to us, given our understanding of our participants; or should we be asking participants explicitly what they want at every turn? Is there a middle road between these programming philosophies that can offer participants valuable experiences that may be unexpected, but still respond to expressed need and interest? The key to identifying this middle road, I believe, is constantly reiterating the model in the example above: by asking participants about their values and experiences, and assessing together the relevance of what we have to offer, we can fulfill their needs and interests while participating in a more equitable community exchange.

Forthcoming Challenges: Remote Programming and Equitable Accessibility During the COVID-19 Pandemic

During regular programming seasons, the Writers House faces challenges familiar to many joint campus-community spaces, including infrastructural barriers, such as limited public transportation; lack of universally accessible physical spaces; and limited opportunity for reflection on and discussion of cultural differences between participants and the institution that hosts them. We’ve also experienced the challenges of asserting a community identity in the context of a university whose campus has a mixed imprint on public memory in Camden. In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, however, these challenges have changed shape, and in the immediate future we’ll be focusing on addressing new questions of accessibility and equity.

Our historic building is not universally physically accessible – a chair lift brings participants with accessibility needs up to the first floor level, but not beyond, posing

limitations for programs based in the Writers House, such as workshops. Additionally, some participants coming from Philadelphia or from elsewhere in New Jersey find the financial and time burdens of a toll bridge and parking to be a deterrent. In the spring, we piloted online workshops for our veterans program, in collaboration with partner Warrior Writers, and saw a dramatic uptick in participation, not only from our local participants but from all over the country. We were encouraged by the idea that remote programming might decrease the barrier to entry for public programs.

Planning for an all-remote fall season, however, I worry that the absence of in-person programming will limit access for the part of our constituency that lacks reliable internet and/or device access, or for whom in-person events are the best way to build connections and trust with an institution that can feel distant and inscrutable. Also, of concern to me is the elimination of the “browsing” element for our participants, which the pandemic has eliminated elsewhere. By “browsing” I mean the opportunity for someone to happen upon a discussion or reading because they are nearby, to drop in to the house and look around, to make a commitment to a workshop because they have talked casually with a workshop instructor or with me at a festival or other neighborhood event. Browsing makes it possible to bypass the many steps—or “conversions,” in advertising language—between a participant’s learning about a program and making a plan to attend it. Prior to spring of 2020, I could expect a community member or student to wander into the House once a week or so, allowing us this opportunity. Other times, a phone call occasioned this kind of impromptu connection, often accompanied by an exchange of ideas about possible programs or a participant’s needs. As with the leaps in ideas that often come about in workplaces because of casual hallway or water cooler discussion, I believe that this browsing element helps form stronger and more enduring connections between the house and students, community participants, and others.

Two Houses, Both Alike In...?

The creative energy that made the Rutgers Writers House possible can be found in abundance elsewhere in the city. After an initial plan to collaborate with the campus on a single Writers House structure, the Nick Virgilio Haiku Association instead put down roots in the Waterfront South neighborhood, just two miles south of Rutgers—Camden. Early cross-pollination between the people responsible for the acquisition and refurbishment of both spaces still engenders fruitful relationships: former Rutgers faculty sit on the board of the Virgilio House, an annual Rutgers event celebrating contemporary practitioners of haiku attracts members of the Virgilio association, and program directors at the two houses have ongoing conversations about the overlap between their respective programs and constituencies. The geographic and institutional divide between downtown Camden, where Rutgers resides, and Waterfront South, a primarily residential neighborhood, means that the two houses serve somewhat different populations and operate with distinct pressures and concerns, despite intertwined missions. Since 2018, Philadelphia-based nonprofit Mighty Writ-

ers has operated the principal programming at the Virgilio house, which is discussed more below.

Mighty Writers at the Nick Virgilio Writers House: Haiku House to Community Resource Hub

Director Introduction: My name is Catherine Buck, and I work as the Program Director of Mighty Writers Camden. Our youth writing programs are located in the Nick Virgilio Writers House, as described earlier. I run Mighty Writers' Camden-based programming and collaborate with seven other MW locations across Philadelphia. From 2016-2018, I was part of the creative writing MFA program at Rutgers—Camden and found a home in their Writers House as a student and teacher. There, I organized the Growing Great Writers After School Program that pairs MFA students as teaching artists in Camden elementary schools. Outside of writing, I have led youth volunteer initiatives in El Paso, Texas, and Leon, Nicaragua. My BA is from La Salle University, where I studied English with a multidisciplinary social justice and international studies minor. This background serves as a foundation for my current work with Mighty Writers.

Like the Rutgers—Camden Writers House, the Nick Virgilio House serves as a 'third space' for the Camden community. For its founders, the house upholds the legacy of Virgilio with a small museum alongside a living room, kitchen, and library space. For many local residents, the house is just now fully opening up to community-driven possibilities. Since summer 2018, adults have sought out programming based around haiku and personal writing, and students ages five to seventeen have participated in Mighty Writers' creative writing workshops, mindfulness programs, tutoring, and mentorship. For young students, our writing programs also functioned as a social hub with peers as much as a site of academic enrichment.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the space has evolved to be a major distribution site for meals, diapers, and literacy resources for the Waterfront South community. Beginning in spring 2020, Mighty Writers has used this house to distribute weekly supplies of five thousand diapers, six hundred lunches, 210 boxes of produce, face masks, and baby formula, and a constant stream of books. Considering this year's changing demands on education, all writing workshops have moved online, and the 'lunch and literacy' distribution will be operational for the duration of the school year.

Mighty Writers' mission is to ensure students "think and write with clarity." In our current moment, this is understood with the premise that children can't do either if they're hungry. So, we've pivoted, and as a result, have seen a huge influx of new visitors to the site, including a marked increase from a Spanish-speaking immigrant community. While one primary motivation for guests is the diaper and food distribution, we're also focusing on our core value of literacy education by ensuring that books and learning packets are readily available. We've been able to do this with the support of strong community partners, like the Camden County Pop Up Library and Book Smiles NJ, both of which 'redistribute book wealth' with donations from neighboring suburbs and bring gently used children's books for us to share at the Writers

House. We also create in-house activity packets and have a full roster of free online workshops readily available to students, along with writing contests and one-on-one mentoring.

These online offerings are possible only through the robust network of staff and partnerships developed over Mighty Writers' eleven year history as a major metropolitan-area non-profit. Before the pandemic, there were seven youth writing centers across the greater Philadelphia region, each operating relatively independently. Camden had its own standalone programming and creative direction, which continues now at the Writers House through food and diaper distribution, while the writing programs themselves operate mostly merged with other sites.

There are two notable exceptions of Camden-specific programming. In our Camden site, we were particularly concerned about regular students who may not have reliable internet access when we closed in-person programs. We had until that point been building a robust sense of community among these young writers and did not want to lose that momentum. To create some measure of continuity, we developed Mighty by Mail, a themed box of books and writing exercises sent to this group of forty students each month. Along with personalized notes from their instructors, these boxes included fun and useful materials, including candy, art supplies, and MW-branded face masks. One of our most consistent goals is in meeting students where they are, and at this time, that's at home.

The other initiative comes through a partnership with a local cornerstone, the Heart of Camden. Primarily an affordable housing non-profit, this organization has close ties to the Catholic church and school which many of our regular students attend. With their support, we brought on five teenage summer interns to assist in running distribution efforts. Along with sorting thousands of diapers and walking the neighborhood to spread the word, these students are also now engaged in an intentional reflective writing practice. Each afternoon, they journal about their experience and goals for community growth, which we then share as a small team. They've also penned their own notes of encouragement for younger Camden students in the Mighty by Mail boxes.

I came into the position of Program Director at Mighty Writers Camden in the fall of 2019. Before then, this location had only part-time staff and limited after school programs. The majority of students came directly after school, walking over together as a group. Many students did not live in the immediate neighborhood and travelled due to the school's high reputation. One of my primary goals from the beginning was to reach local kids who lived on our block, which we've now accomplished in this twist of circumstance. When we switched to offering distribution of goods and resources, a neighborhood parent joined our efforts as a community liaison. He's been able to spread the word effectively, reaching far more local residents through social media and long-established connections than any other communications initiative. When families arrive for food and diapers, they're also handed books and stacks of flyers about online classes and writing contests. There's an explicit focus on making the experience of picking up resources a positive one, attempting to limit the stigma often attached with receiving free meals. When needed, we engage visi-

tors in Spanish. By pairing writing education along with food, we can concentrate on helping make the kids excited to pick out a book and emphasize a future-focused vision for parents. We want to celebrate the active role parents are taking in their child's success as supportive partners, rather than through top-down directives.

Layers of Justice in Writing: Grounding Philosophies and Influences

The personal philosophy that I bring to my community engagement work is that of justice over charity, solidarity over reinforced power dynamics. This is what grounds many of the above choices: framing our work with the expertise of longtime local players and residents, adapting to community needs as they arise, and providing youth leaders with structure to take an active role in their neighborhood's success. My background is in Catholic education, particularly the Lasallian tradition, an order that emphasizes educational equity with a social justice bent.

While these decisions are no doubt based in scholarship and theory, I've been driven to them most clearly through experience. In the first week of our teens' summer internship, one of my colleagues, a lifelong Camden resident, remarked at how much she wished she'd had a similar opportunity as a youth. I was privileged have such experiences: summer leadership camps and a spot in the teen section of the local newspaper. As a volunteer and then a nonprofit staff person, I learned that the most successful programs were consistently those driven in response to community needs, and which stayed committed for the long haul.

Much of my experience has been international. I read Paulo Freire and Ernesto Cardenal while leading volunteer groups in Nicaragua for an organization that makes no decisions without the direction of a locally elected governing board. I learned to push back against a banking model of education, and here, as elsewhere, saw the damage that can be done by well-intentioned visitors with no context for the dynamics of a place they seek to support. Earlier I participated in education-based volunteer trips to Kenya and Tanzania, for which I had no training as a teacher and learned much but contributed little. As an undergraduate, I was fortunate to be part of a program called 'Leadership and Global Understanding,' which framed international justice question first locally. We looked at each interconnected issue, including literacy, first in Philadelphia, then in the US as a whole, and finally in a global context. Two of our framing texts were Jeffrey Sachs' *The End of Poverty* and Hofstede's theory of cultural dimensions.

When I began to formally teach writing while earning my MFA at Rutgers—Camden, I embraced community-engaged pedagogy directly because of these influences. I chose to study in Camden because it was where I wanted to live and work long term. I'd seen that real change could not occur without permanent commitment, and it felt right to pursue this at home. I studied sociolinguistics and implemented understanding of the racism and classism inherent in writing education into my own teaching. As I emphasize with the K-12 students at Mighty Writers, in my composition classes I focused on the process of drafting and revision, along with building a sense of a writing community. I see self-expression as essential to justice.

When I taught composition (English 101 and 102) at Rutgers—Camden, it became clear that many students were more or less prepared for college writing directly because of the funding available to their previous schools. One of my driving motivators in my current role has then become working to supply Camden kids with the tools which they can use to succeed in higher academic settings.

It's also very clear that I cannot be the primary person to do this. Now in a managerial role, I've emphasized finding staff, guest speakers, and instructors who are people of color and, whenever possible, from Camden themselves. I can teach my students Black poets every day for a month, but this is much different than hearing original pieces performed by an artist who grew up three blocks away.

Through everything, it seems that the framing dynamic is power. Who gets to tell the stories, as Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche powerfully describes in her *Danger of A Single Story*: who listens, and who is heard? This is the politics inherent in all rhetoric. Who is the teacher and who is the student, who, even, is handing out the bags of diapers and who is receiving them? This ties into our current situation: who decides where the food bank sends school lunches, and why do we have an endless supply of books in the English language but almost none in Spanish?

These questions are not separate from writing education. In that same Russian doll of interconnected issues, the world, country, and now city have all been turned upside down. Gaps in educational access are set to skyrocket, and the basic needs of our students will likely continue to be unmet and exacerbated. As schools and political powers work to align resources where they deem most necessary, it is impossible to look at any one issue in a vacuum. Yet there is, indeed, a hierarchy of urgency. Our students cannot write if they are hungry, nor can parents and community leaders enter into equitable collaboration if they are facing down challenges that threaten their lives.

The New Normal: Future Plans and Visions

We know that change cannot happen without a sustained commitment, and we are now laying the groundwork for a more durable, locally based education program. There is no shortcut for trust. I hope that the relationships we are now building will continue, that parents who first found us because we were giving away baby formula will one day enroll their children in our Mighty Toddlers early literacy class. I hope the teens who are spending their summer going door to door handing out school supply packs will take pride in their impact, and that each kid who enters an online writing contest will take our words of affirmation to heart.

As of January 2021, it is still unclear what this year will look like for schools and educational nonprofits. The Nick Virgilio Haiku Association, which founded this Writers House and continues to maintain the legacy of their namesake poet, has also pivoted to maintain their mission and build community relationships. From livestreaming a poetry reading at Nick Virgilio's nearby gravesite to running online adult workshops, they too are finding new ways to engage their audience in this current moment. In reflecting the demographics of Camden city, they have also launched a

social media series featuring Black haiku poets and are engaging Camden writers in a group of virtual poetry walks.

For Mighty Writers Camden, we've committed to continuing in-person food and diaper distribution through 2021 along with a full series of online workshops, contests, and individual mentorships. Because of pandemic-related shifts in programming, we're reaching dozens of new families in the community, mostly with young children. It's our hope that when in-person programming does eventually resume, these community members who live within walking distance will be our primary audience, returning to the core mission of meeting kids where they are. In the months ahead, we also have plans for additional formal collaboration with longtime neighborhood institutions, including the Heart of Camden and Sacred Heart School. In all of our work, we'll continue to focus on strengthening our students with the resources directly around them. We are especially looking forward to more focused partnerships with the Writers House at Rutgers-Camden, including joint author events to provide our students and their families access to university spaces and programming. This is one of the primary strengths of having two Writers Houses in one city: the ability to share resources, expertise, and connections to bring together all members of the Camden writing community.

Conclusion

The two Camden Writers Houses share similar challenges: an ongoing negotiation between mission and practice, infrastructural questions of transportation in a city whose residents face ongoing mobility challenges, and the project of helping participants feel comfortable in spaces that are still adapting in response to their needs. Neither space can ignore the grassroots literary/literacy activity happening in Camden, which has been a city full of open mics and informal writers' gatherings, such as the long-running Brigid's House writers' collective run by Cassie MacDonald, before either Writers House was a reality.

Spaces like ours were dreamed of as physical meeting places, spaces to enable the kismet of a connection between readers, writers, and the material that inspires them. Before COVID-19, we navigated the above challenges with the goal of engineering those chance encounters and watching the results bloom in the form of new works created, new cohorts, mentorships, and friendships established, and new resources made available across a wide spectrum of participants and community partners.

In the new era the virus has engendered, we're backwards-engineering those encounters once again, imagining how it might be possible to invite participants to co-create the social, sharing spirit of our programs from a distance. In fact, participant co-creation seems even more vital as programs are removed from our centers' physical houses: the momentary absence of walls and doors makes the creation of a spiritual home for our writers essential. We feel that our strategy as programming directors must be to design programs that invite participants to build such a homelike structure with their voices, faces, and names while such construction is impossible with their bodies. We're in agreement that such an invitation must first acknowledge

and reflect upon participants' primary needs, whether for food and clean water, housing, and reliable income and/or employment. Only when those needs are met can we ask them to reach beyond their own homes and make a meaningful connection to a text, to another writer, and to the world.

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Author Bios

Catherine Buck is the program director of Mighty Writers Camden. She holds an MFA from Rutgers University - Camden in fiction writing. Previously, she taught composition and business writing at Rutgers - Camden, La Salle University, and Rowan College in Burlington County. She ran community service programs at Cathedral High School in El Paso, Texas, and coordinated immersion groups in Leon, Nicaragua. She has served as a board member of JustHope Nicaragua and as a contributing writer for New Ways Ministry.

Leah Falk directs the Writers House at Rutgers University—Camden. She earned her M.F.A. in creative writing from the University of Michigan, where she was a Zell Postgraduate Fellow. She is also the author of *To Look After and Use* (Finishing Line Press, 2019) and her writing has appeared in *The Kenyon Review*, *FIELD*, *Electric Literature*, and elsewhere. Her work has received support from the Yiddish Book Center, Vermont Studio Center, Asylum Arts, and elsewhere. She has been a board member of Emerging Arts Leaders: Philadelphia, a workshop leader for NY Writers Coalition, and a teaching artist for InsideOut Detroit.