



University of Pittsburgh Greensburg

Creative & Professional Writing Alumnus Testimonial

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Class of 2007

Suffice it to say that without the writing program at Pitt-Greensburg and its faculty, I wouldn't be a publishing writer and a professor of nonfiction writing. The narrative arc from my first day on campus at UPG to publishing a collection of short fiction and my current position as a visiting associate professor at the University of Iowa is as uncomplicated as real-life narrative arcs can be.

Though I didn't know anything about what it meant, I knew when I came to UPG in the fall of 2004 I wanted to be a writer. My first writing class, an introductory course in poetry with Judith Vollmer, was at first, quite frightening (technically, I didn't have the course's prerequisites of Comp I and II, but was registered anyway due to clerical error). The level of discourse, the vocabulary of poetry criticism, and the quality of my peers' work conspired to invoke in me an acute sense of self-awareness and anxiety. My first attempts at writing poetry, like everyone's, were decidedly awful, full of histrionic declarations of love and longing. But Professor Vollmer praised what little there was that warranted praise and gently corrected the nauseating bulk of it. Sometime in October, I gave her a poem about chewing tobacco, a habit indicative of my roots and cause for so much of my sense of alienation in a poetry class, and to my astonishment at the bottom of the page the words "lovely poem" were scrawled in Vollmer's hand. This small gesture was all I needed, at eighteen, to become convinced of my latent genius—a useful delusion for a writer just starting off.

In November, I submitted a few poems to UPG's student-run literary magazine *Pendulum* and their acceptance a few weeks later was further evidence that I was being swept up into my own destiny. Upperclassmen friends suggested other writing courses I should take—a memoir class, a string of journalism and newspaper classes (I ended up writing for and eventually editing the *UPG Insider*), a poetry workshop with since-retired Richard Blevins, a fiction workshop with Gary Lutz—each class was intimate, populated by friends familiar with my work and professors who distributed praise and keen prescriptions. I never took a writing class at UPG in which a one-on-one conference with the professor wasn't required, and those conferences provided insights I still return to. The program provided ample chances to read my work at well-attended

events: the yearly writers' festival, the capstone reading series, the Pendulum readings, and end-of-semester class showcases. Those frequent readings fostered in me a sense of being a writer at a time when such a prospect is intimidating and hugely important.

At the outset of my senior year, it occurred to me that there was nothing I could be but a writer. By December 15, 2007, all eight of my graduate school applications were in the mail. Iowa was the first to accept me early in February. It took three separate people explaining it to me that getting into Iowa was a Big Deal before the good fortune that had befallen me started to sink in.

My earliest publications have similar roots in the generosity of Pitt-Greensburg faculty. After writing four short stories for Professor Gary Lutz's short fiction workshop in the spring of my senior year, I asked him in our last meeting if he could give me some recommendations for places to send my work. "Only one," Gary said, "NOON." I would learn later that night, after a google search, that NOON was where Gary most often published his own work. NOON took two of my stories from Gary's class that summer. Three of those stories ended in my first collection, including the title piece. My publisher, the editor there a frequent reader of NOON, first noticed my work in the journal. Instead of having to submit a manuscript unsolicited, my publisher, Short Flight / Long Drive Books, asked me for one.

My good fortune since graduating from Pitt-Greensburg are entirely predicated on my experiences there. I think that not for the program and the people who work in it, my vision wouldn't have become so clear so early on and my successes so unexpected. Ultimately, I'm still certain I've gotten lucky, but I've had a lot of brilliant help along the way.