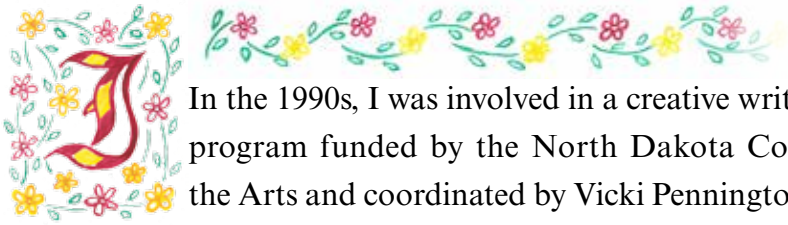


Helpful Hints for Creative Writing at Elder Care Facilities



In the 1990s, I was involved in a creative writing program funded by the North Dakota Council on the Arts and coordinated by Vicki Pennington for the Hill Top Home of Comfort in Killdeer, North Dakota. In 2007, she received a grant to publish a selection of the residents' writing, which resulted in *It Seems Like Only Yesterday*.

That publication is a wonderful collection of the elders' personal experience narratives, both short and long, covering such subjects as childhood pets, love and marriage, home remedies, and holiday traditions. Reading entries from *It Seems Like Only Yesterday* or *Sundogs and Sunflowers: Folklore and Folk Art of the Northern Great Plains* would inspire conversation among elders in other care facilities, allowing their wealth of information to be recorded and made available to their friends and family.

Below, I note Vicki Pennington's tips for successful programs as recorded in the book *It Seems Like Only Yesterday*.

The first tip is that facilitators should use their own personal experiences, and maybe even failed attempts to write about them, as a part of the introduction of activities. This

is a shared experience, and leaders have to share in order to expect the other participants to reciprocate.

Secondly, using dictation as a method of recording for the residents of Hill Top was extremely effective. It involved volunteers in the program, reduced the issues of education and correctness in writing, and contributed to increased communication and reduced loneliness.

The third component that we think contributed to our success was reading aloud to the group the writing that was completed at the previous session. We drafted and copied the dictation and writing from one session and read it aloud to the group at the following session. In many cases, I think the writing of one week was done just so the participants could later listen to it. Several members kept all the copies of the sessions, and a sense of personal significance and empowerment resulted for many of the participants.

We seemed to have stumbled onto several features of the creative program that worked very well, but we did have trained verbal and visual artists, as well as an experienced activities director. However, we also benefited from the experience of

others who had recorded and written about similar programs. In addition to our anthology already mentioned herein, I also used and recommend *Things I Never Told Anybody*, a book about a similar, earlier activity conducted by poet Kenneth Koch, as well as an anthology of writings by residents of Olivia, Minnesota, when poet Joe Paddock was a community writer in residence there. Along with *Sundogs and Sunflowers*, these resources will give multiple examples of writing and arts activities, and will also expand the activities with multiple variations no single program can develop on its own.

AUTHOR • DAVE SOLHEIM

Dave is a Professor of English at Dickinson State University, Dickinson, North Dakota. He holds English degrees from Gustavus Adolphus College, Stanford University, and the University of Denver. He is a veteran of the North Dakota Council on the Arts' *Artist-in-Residence Program*, participating frequently since 1974. During the 1990s, he regularly conducted creative writing activities at the Hill Top Home of Comfort, an elder care facility in Killdeer, North Dakota. Dr. Solheim has taught creative writing to students as young as the primary grades, to secondary and college students, up through graduate students and octogenarians. In 1989, he was chosen to be the North Dakota Statehood Centennial Poet, and is a North Dakota Associate Poet Laureate. Solheim is the author of five books of poetry: *On the Ward* (1974), *Inheritance* (1987), *West River: 100 Poems* (1989), *The Landscape Listens* (1999), and *Green Jade and Road Men: Translations, Commentary, and Poems of China* (2011). Samples of participants' work from writing workshops have been published in three anthologies: *Voices North in Dakota* (1976), *Plainsongs* (1978), and *It Seems Like Only Yesterday: Memories from the Residents of Hill Top Home of Comfort* (2007).

