Impact Story:

Sage Hill Writing

by

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Saskatchewan Arts Alliance

SAA's Arts Work series highlights an arts organization making a positive impact in its community: The Sage Hill Writing Experience is vital for the literary arts community in Saskatchewan for both emerging and experienced writers. With Sage Hill celebrating 30 years, this article traces a brief history of what it was and what is has now become.

The Sage Hill Writing Experience is celebrating its 30th anniversary this year, but its roots go back another several decades to the start of the Saskatchewan Arts Board's Summer School for the Arts in the 1960s.

A couple of generations of Saskatchewan writers had cut their teeth at the beloved Fort San, in the old TB sanitorium at Fort Qu'Appelle, and were horrified when it was closed in 1989. In late fall, Ven Begamudré, a Regina writer who was

then president of the Saskatchewan Writers' Guild, gathered together a group of writers to discuss the possibility of starting a writing school to replace it. A steering committee was formed and Saskatoon writer Steven Ross Smith was quickly hired to run the show. A location for the school was found at an abandoned military base, part of the old DEW line of radar installations, at a place called Sagehill, near Bruno, not too far east of Saskatoon. Poet Gary Hyland suggested the word "experience" be added to the name.

After three years, the program moved into the more modern, definitely more comfortable St. Michael's, a Franciscan monastery in the Qu'Appelle

Valley at Lumsden. Following a change of ownership and a fire there, Sage Hill recently relocated to St. Peter's Abbey at

Muenster, where the province's writers have been coming for years for summer and winter retreats.

There's been a proliferation of writing programs across the country, sparked by Sage Hill's success, but none are quite like this one.

Current executive director Tara Dawn Solheim, commenting on the "Experience" part of the Sage Hill name, says "it really is an experience, unlike any other. It's a rejuvenating experience."

Smith, who returned to Sage Hill to give a talk at an anniversary celebration this summer, recalls that "We wanted to bring fresh air into the Saskatchewan writing community. We hired quality faculty, local and from away, to enhance attraction. We also maintained a grass-

roots ambience – all writers as peers with no hierarchy or super-star treatments."

The first year, 1990, there were three programs: two in fiction and one in poetry, conducted over an intense, heady five days.

There was "an obvious hunger" for what Sage Hill was offering, Smith says, and "not a lot of competition in those days." The Saskatchewan Arts Board, perhaps feeling twinges of guilt over closing the summer school, was keen to see it going.

In its second year, the program was extended to a full week (in another few years, it was stretched to ten days), and more sessions added, including an introductory workshop. In the twenty-nine years since, over 300 fledgling writers from all over the country have gotten their first real taste of the craft they love in that Intro course alone. They've been joined by hundreds of other, more experienced writers, taking more advanced courses in fiction and poetry, and rotating workshops in children's writing, nonfiction, and drama.

An auxiliary program, the two-week-long spring poetry colloquium became a staple, as did writing camps for teenagers, which were first held in libraries in Regina and Saskatoon and have since spread to Moose Jaw, Prince Albert, Swift Current and, occasionally, La Ronge.

Sage Hill, like Fort San before it, has been instrumental in the development of hundreds of writers. Bernadette Wagner, a Regina poet and essayist who was at the recent spring poetry colloquium (her 5th Sage Hill stint) says "without the guild and Sage Hill, I wouldn't be a writer."

The impact on the writing community, both in Saskatchewan and nationally, "has been enormous," Wagner says.

George Elliott Clarke, a former Canadian Parliamentary Poet Laureate who led the spring gathering, agrees. "This place is magic," he says. "Just look at some of the writing it's produced."

Dave Margoshes is a fiction writer and poet living in the rural Saskatoon area after many years in Regina. He was a newspaper reporter and editor, in New York, San Francisco, Calgary, Vancouver and points between, before escaping to the literary life.