An Interview with the Missoula Writing Collaborative
Edited by Emily Pritchard

Caroline Patterson, Executive Director of the Missoula Writing Collaborative, and her staff bring writing opportunities to students throughout western Montana. Interns play an important role in making these programs work while having a great time. “It’s a great organization, the writers are very fun and the work itself is enormously rewarding!”

Briefly describe your organization and the work you do.

“The Missoula Writing Collaborative (MWC) is a nonprofit that brings writing residencies to schools throughout western Montana. We have served approximately 35,000 children since 1994, teaching them the value of curiosity, imagination, connection, work, and play. Our writers conduct 12-week residencies in approximately 24 schools, designing lesson plans help children learn the power and potential of writing.”

How did this program get started?

“Our program was started in 1984, by Sheryl Noethe. She received a grant from the Engelhard Foundation and she worked with the Writers in the School Program in Houston to create a writing program in five Missoula schools. Now, 21 years later, we have been in 28 schools and have served 35,000 children. We are in all nine Missoula elementary schools, as well as schools in Ovando, Potomac, and Bonner and five schools on the Flathead Reservation of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes. We are also in Big Sky High School as well as C. S. Porter Middle School.”

Where do interns fit in at MWC?

“We have worked with many UM interns, particularly graduate writing students. It is a great help to our writers in the classroom and a great way for interns to see and learn what we do and for us to see how these students work with young children. Several interns that we have hosted have ended up teaching for us, several of whom have been some of our strongest teachers. When they worked with me, we worked as a team. After they had had a chance to observe me, I let them lead a class for themselves. I learned as much from them as they did from me!”

What are some of the intern’s tasks?

“Our interns perform a variety of tasks. They help the lead teacher with classroom management and they help the individual students work on their poems; talk out ideas; help them narrow down stories and images; and, as they do, encourage them to use details, images, metaphors, and similes to begin to shapes their poems. They also read out good lines, further encouraging the individual students and inspiring the other students. The interns also can add stories or examples to the lesson the teacher is teaching.”
What is an intern’s schedule like?

“These students work anywhere from 1 to 5 hours per week for 12 weeks. Programs generally take place during the school day. The exceptions are our writing club at Loyola School (afterschool) and at Washington Middle School (noontime) and our two-week summer camp, Words with Wings in July.”

How do you train/prepare your interns for working with students?

“We use a central text, *Poetry Everywhere*, that we have students peruse for lesson plan ideas. We also have them come to meetings with the writers to get a better sense of our organization.”

“While our artistic director or the teacher they are working with gives them basic instruction, much of the learning is on-the-job. We can explain what it will be like, but it is essential for them to see and hear and experience the classroom live. Kids are so lively, so immediately responsive, that you have to be very quick on your feet and respond to what works and what doesn’t work. You have to be willing to try things, to fail, to not take that failure personally, and to be able to laugh at yourself.”

Who generally serves as a resident writer that the interns would interact with?

“Resident writers for the Missoula Writing Collaborative must have an extensive level of publications and/or a degree, usually a Masters of Fine Arts in Creative Writing. We also ask that our writers have experience working with kids, from 4 to 18. Many of our writers we well-known nationally or regionally and well-published: Chris Dombrowski (*Fragments with Dusk in Them, By Cold Water, Earth Again*), Sheryl Noethe (former Montana poet Laureate, *The Descent of Heaven Over the Lake; Ghost Openings, As Is, Grey Dog Big Sky*) Mark Gibbons (six books of poetry, most recently *Mauvaises Herbes* (Weeds) a bilingual edition of his poems), Robert E. Lee (*Bear Holds a Hole in His Paws* and the novel, *Guiding Elliott*), Marnie Prange (*Dangerous Neighborhoods*, won a Montana Arts Council First Book Award) Caroline Keys (published poetry, well-known musician), Caroline Patterson (*Montana Women Writers: A Geography of the Heart, two children’s books*), Dana Fitz Gale (published numerous short stories), Rachel Mindell (*A Tear and a Bullet*) and Alex Alviar (published numerous poems).”

Any advice for UM students looking to do internships?

“Do it! It is such an invaluable learning experience. I wish I had had more opportunities to do internships.”
How do you advertise for interns? Are you looking for any particular students?

“We generally advertise word-of-mouth and through the English and Wilderness and Civilization programs for graduate students in writing, either poetry, fiction or nonfiction.”

For more information and internship opportunities:

www.Missoulawritingcollaborative.org; on Facebook: Missoula Writing Collaborative; or call Caroline Patterson, 406-549-3348.