

WV Wesleyan's MFA in Creative Writing Opens Surprising Doors: *MFA Alumni on where they are now & how the MFA helped them get there*



AMANDA JO SLONE, Draffin, KY (MFA in Fiction, 2017)

When I began the MFA program, I was teaching full-time at a private university. I entered the program not with a desire to gain credentials for a new career, but with a desire to make my writing stronger and to learn to give myself permission to make my art a priority. *During my time at WWWC, perhaps the most beneficial thing I learned was the ability to grant myself the confidence and legitimacy required to prioritize my writing as work.* The MFA program helped me combine my two passions—education and writing. In the past, I allowed my creative work to stay in the shadows of what I considered my professional work. The MFA helped me break down those barriers. Since graduation, I have taken on several projects that allow me to focus on my creative work along with teaching. I continue to write and publish short stories and essays, and I have been commissioned to write readers' guides for

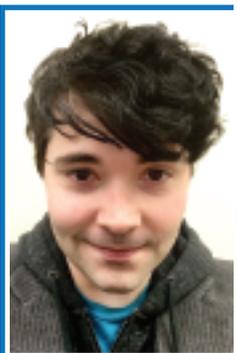
new publications, review manuscripts for publishers, and to judge writing contests. I am also currently working on a novel manuscript, something I would not have considered pre-MFA. This year I enrolled in a doctoral program in Educational Leadership. I credit my time at WWWC for the skills I need to be successful in this pursuit. Thanks to the MFA program, I am a better writer and a more critical thinker and reader, and I have the persistence necessary to complete this program and further combine my passions for education and writing.



MARY IMO-STIKE, Scott Depot, WV (MFA in Poetry, 2015)

Since earning my MFA, I served as poetry co-editor for *HeartWood Literary Magazine* for the first four issues. The opportunity to work with the program's alumni magazine pushed me to swim in the overflowing pool of amazing poetic talent burgeoning today, which inspired my own writing. A direct result was my first chapbook, now forthcoming with Finishing Line Press: *In and Out of the Horse Latitudes*. The collection is a labor of love; its seed was planted while I was an MFA student and cultivated by the *HeartWood* editorial experience. The poems contained there tell my life story. I have also co-created a monthly community literary event, More Than Words, which grew out of a desire to retain the experience of the visiting author readings I was treated to while a student at Wesleyan. With the goal of reaching the community, we chose our current hometown of Hurricane, West Virginia for its location, and the series is in its second year. Post-MFA, my identity as a writer and my personal identity as a Native artist have also further emerged. During my first semester in the program, I began to extensively explore American Indian literature which drove me to a new awareness of the depth of connection I have with my ethnic roots, my ancestors, and their lives on this earth. Poetry gave me a spiritual continuity that had been absent in my life. *My MFA has given me confidence to open new doors—not the degree itself, the three new letters after my name, but the experience, the milieu, the relationships. Having my life change significantly for the better intellectually, socially, and spiritually after age 65, after “retirement,” was something I never imagined would happen.* But it continues to happen. None of the successes I am living today would have come to pass without my MFA experience at West Virginia Wesleyan College.

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JAMES SIDERS, Columbus, OH (MFA in Fiction, 2015)

I am currently working as a full-time lecturer at The Ohio State University at Newark where I teach courses in the first-year writing program and an Introduction to Fiction course about Appalachian Literature. In addition to my teaching career, I have several short stories floating around, waiting for news of publication, and in the meantime, I am polishing a completed draft of a speculative fiction novel. *My MFA not only gave me the credentials I needed to be a professor, but it helped me learn to communicate and discuss language.* English is a dangerous subject, one that can give shape to many emotions, and I couldn't have accomplished such facility in utilizing words and, in turn, teaching others how to use them without the program. I gained confidence in my voice in the realm of writing and education.



ELIZABETH GAUCHER, Hamilton, VA (MFA in Nonfiction, 2015)

Prior to earning my MFA, I had established a small business in content development and editing. My clients were mostly other small business people in need of website improvements, press releases, and marketing materials. After earning my MFA at WVWC, I shifted my focus to building an online literary journal that would allow me to support other writers in improving their creative work and in bringing narratives about formative childhood experiences to a wider readership. *Longridge Review's* mission is “to present the finest essays on the mysteries of childhood experience, the wonder of adult reflection, and how the two connect over a lifespan.” We have published and supported almost 80 writers and a handful of visual artists since we started in 2015. We just added a column called “Ask the Editor,” in which I take questions about creative nonfiction by e-mail and answer them online. The column will become a banked

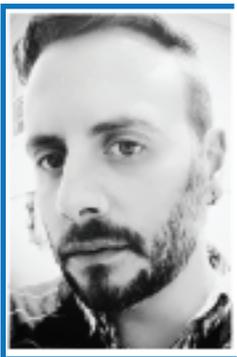
resource for curious essayists that I hope will serve a range of writers. Operating *Longridge Review* is the most rewarding and satisfying creative endeavor of my life, and it would not be possible without my WVWC MFA experience. That experience is a tapestry of threads: working with accomplished writers; learning how to give and receive constructive feedback; understanding the nuts and bolts of craft; being encouraged to submit my own work for publication; and, perhaps most importantly, becoming a member of a community of writers who practice supporting one another. That support is sometimes specific, as when I knew I could contact a friend I made in the program or a professor for quick feedback. The best part, however, is the circle of creative people that only grows and becomes stronger. *My MFA is a life-long investment in personal growth and human connection.*



SUSAN GOOD, Williamsburg, VA (MFA in Nonfiction, 2015)

I spent my MFA thesis semester in Spain and Ireland, and after graduation I lived in Cork for over two years. Last May I moved to Virginia with my husband and I currently work full-time as a Massage Therapist as well as co-edit the creative nonfiction genre of *HeartWood Literary Magazine*. For two years after graduation I volunteered with the PEN Prison Writing Program, working closely with an incarcerated fiction writer. I also volunteered with a hospice organization, and I had the honor of recording conversations with a woman and writing a memoir essay for her in her final weeks. I plan to continue writing, working as a Massage Therapist, and to one day teach Creative Writing and Literature at the college level. The MFA program helped me focus my interests in nonfiction on the physical world and people, interpreting memories and present-day experiences and making connections between the two.

Through seminars and workshops at Wesleyan, I developed my sense of listening and interpretation, and that has led me to work directly with people. Although I stay as present as possible with my massage clients, I often experience moments when I can't help but remind myself of an essay that has been dormant for too long—when I see a client's tattoo, or her wrinkled hand, or during the moments of complete silence and solitude I get while resetting the massage table. Even if pen doesn't touch paper that day, my mind makes the connections between the world and my essays until I sit down and map them out.



VINCE TRIMBOLI, Elkins, WV (MFA in Poetry, 2013)

All my students are convicted felons. The academic space that I currently occupy, post-MFA, is strikingly different than that of most of my peers that have transitioned into teaching in higher education. I am currently teaching writing, literature, and public speaking in a medium/maximum security prison nestled in the hills of rural West Virginia. The school I am affiliated with (Glennville State University) offers degrees to prisoners serving long-term sentences. The idea is that, by educating inmates, we can lower the rate of recidivism. Although that is an important aspect of what I want to accomplish, I see my role as an educator in the system serving a deeper, more primordial need: the need to share our story. *I stand in front of classes of thirty-some inmates and teach the basics—thesis statements, sentence structure, outlining—but I am also there to witness.* I am there to say, “I see the work you are doing, and I

appreciate it.” Most of these men have never had someone in their lives take time to notice them for anything other than their convictions, or to listen to them and take time to understand their stories. I start every class by asking my students, “What is important to you today?” Moments like this help a very guarded group of men lower that guard, in both their essays and class discussion. One of the intentions of the MFA program is always to make students the best writers they can possibly be. Our mentors never try to push us to be anything other than our own personal best, and that is something that I strive to impart to my students. My goal is to make them competent and confident in their own voices. I hope, by giving witness, to help these individuals see that the one resource you always have, and deserve to have, is your own beautiful and strong voice.

For more information, please visit the MFA website: www.wvwc.edu/MFA
or contact MFA Director Jessie van Eerden: vaneerden@wvwc.edu, 304.473.8329.