

Side Hustle: Napa Valley Writers' Conference

Many UH CWP students are literary citizens with leadership positions in nationally-renowned nonprofits, workshops, conferences, and academic societies. We spoke with Charlotte Wyatt, third-year MFA candidate and the fiction director/director of admissions for the Napa Valley Writers' Conference.



Student Profile

How did you get involved with the NVWC in the first place?

I was still pretty new to writing when a Tin House workshop leader suggested I check out Napa. It turned out to be a great fit, and I attended three years in a row, which I really couldn't afford to be doing... so I asked if I could volunteer for tuition remission. Just before I was offered a spot at UH, I was offered a position in admissions and what's called our "Community Housing" program. I told them I wanted to move to Houston for the program, thinking I would lose the job, but I've been lucky to work remotely and return to California in the summers.

What is your role with the conference?

I started as the director of admissions, which sounds Very Powerful!, but really means I make a lot of spreadsheets. I create applications, track them, act as point person for all applicants, and follow through with acceptances, offers of financial aid, and workshop placement. As of last year, I also direct the fiction program, so I coordinate juried readings for fiction applicants, which ultimately determine what offers we make, including financial aid. I solicit fiction faculty, guests, and speakers, and act as their liaison.

For our Community Housing program, we have a lot of locals—sometimes as many as forty in a summer!—who offer a guest room or guest house for a participating writer (a stranger!) to use during the conference week. Staying in the Napa Valley in July is expensive, so these donors make an enormous difference in making the conference affordable to as many folks as possible.

How does working for a summer program complement your lifestyle as a graduate student?

I work NVWC deadlines and timelines around the semester schedule, so I'm not spending too much time processing applications before the spring semester is over. It limits some of my options – I can't teach Inprint summer courses because I know most of July will have to be in Napa. But working there widens my community of other writers and allows me to travel. I also get lots of professional experience, from admin-

istrative work to admissions coordination to event-planning and donor management. The rest of the staff are all incredibly smart, accomplished women, and they've been amazing mentors. I mean...I also get to go be in the Napa Valley every summer. It's not awful. We host all our evening readings at partner wineries, and throw two parties dinners on campus for the participants and faculty during the conference week.

Why is NVWC a good fit for you?

Napa was a home for me when I was figuring out my relationship to writing, and it created a community who understood the joys and pains of what felt pretty isolated otherwise. I met a lot of faculty and staff who went to bat for me, some of whom still do, and it's made a huge difference in my creative and professional life. Many participants have had that same experience.

We all—staff, faculty, participants—hang out with each other all week long, so there's no hierarchies or anything. People make huge, long-lasting friendships there every year and it's a real privilege to see those communities take shape. One of my favorite people here in Houston I met through Napa—we both happen to live here now—and I regularly hear from people I met there six years ago.

What makes NVWC unique among summer workshops?

We differentiate ourselves, and create enormous cohesion with returning writers—anywhere from 20 – 40% of participants are returnees—by not focusing on professionalization. We don't invite editors or agents, not because we don't like them, but because we try to make the week purely about craft and community. Poets share generative workshops while fiction writers use more traditional workshop models. This summer, we're introducing a new workshop in translation and I can't wait to see how that can grow.

We offer lectures every day in poetry and fiction. On Friday morning, we invite participants and alumni to tell their stories, panel-style, about the journey of their first full-length publication. We've hosted writers like Yiyun Li, Jamel Brinkley, R. O. Kwon, and Javier Zamora for those. (And our current Executive Director, Angela Pneuman! That's actually how she got to know the conference in the first place.) It's great to hear such different stories that offer emerging writers an idea of how varied the process can be.

Oh, and did I mention the wine...? Also, Napa and Sonoma counties are crazy beautiful, and even for folks who don't drink, hiking, restaurants, and all around gorgeousness are magical. People fly in through San Francisco or Oakland, which are also wonderful places to visit.

Conference info: <http://www.napawritersconference.org>
Conference faculty: <http://www.napawritersconference.org/meet-the-2019-faculty/>

Should you have queries or wish to support the cwp: cwp@uh.edu