

UNIVERSITY of HOUSTON

CREATIVE WRITING PROGRAM

The Harris County Jail Creative Writing Workshop

Kaj Tanaka (PhD 2021) taught workshops in both an Illinois county jail and a prison education program in Massachusetts through Boston University. One of his first questions after being accepted into the CWP was whether or not there would be opportunities to do the same in Houston. Happily, he enrolled here and, with the great help of Inprint, is now hard at work at the Harris County Jail, teaching without a desk or room—in fact, in a prison “tank”—with his materials held in the crook of his arm. He loves the work as do his students.



What is the workshop officially called?

It's called “The Harris County Jail Creative Writing Workshop,” but most of us just call it “creative writing class.” There aren't any other creative writing programs at HCJ, so you can be pretty general and still everyone knows what you're talking about.

What's the depth of your experience over the years?

I started a similar program in 2014 at a small county jail in Illinois. From 2015-2017 I worked in a prison education program (PEP) in Massachusetts through Boston University. That program was a fully-funded, degree-offering program, where students could earn a BA in about 6 six years for free. It really opened my eyes to what a serious PEP can accomplish. The graduates of that program often went on to do great things in the community, and their recidivism rate (chance to reoffend) was virtually 0. The writing classes I taught in that program were some of the best classes I've ever taught in 10 years of teaching college English. We were reading graduate level material, and they were yumming it down. As a teacher, it was a dream job.

How many workshops have you had?

I did one 6-week workshop last fall, and two 5-week workshops in the spring.

Under which auspices do you work? Directly for the prison? Through a nonprofit?

I'm working through Inprint, though I also spend a lot of time communicating with the jail. Technically speaking, I'm designated as volunteer with the jail. But I get a lot of help and support from Inprint. They've been really useful as advocates for this project. It helps to have as much community support as possible.

Where is it held?

At HCJ, I teach in my students' living quarters, which everyone calls “tanks.” A tank is a large dormitory that houses about 30 people, and that's where my students spend their days. Sleep, bathroom, food, meds, classes—it all happens in this one room about the size of a big studio apartment. Right now I'm teaching a pair of tanks reserved exclusively

for veterans called “Stars and Stripes.” There's another pair of tanks reserved for recovering drug users called “Freedom Project,” where I also teach.

What prompted you to spearhead this project?

A few reasons. It's something I can do—I feel pretty strongly about volunteerism as a practice, but I don't have many hard skills. I'm kind of useless that way. Teaching creative writing is one of the few things I can do to improve our community, so I do that. As for the venue—I think we, as a society, are too quick to give up on incarcerated people. I'm not trying to say that our correctional system is full of innocent men and women, but it's a dehumanizing environment, and it doesn't need to be that way. In my limited experience, I have seen little evidence that we have anything like a “correctional system.” We are much more interested in punishment than we are correction. This leads to a huge waste of human capital. We collectively turn our backs on talented people, who we could have empowered to make positive contributions to our communities, and while I get that teaching a few creative writing classes probably won't undo years of systemic injustice, it's what I can offer.

What's the typical demographic that you serve? Women, men, and children? Old and young?

I only teach men right now, though I've taught women in the past. My youngest students have been 18, my oldest have been in their 80s. Often you get that kind of range in a single classroom. It makes for a great teaching environment.

Do you have a sample sample you could share?

Sure!

MY GOAL YOUNG

Anonymous

In mid laugh from the mock game
of ground polo we made up
as the sweat rolls down
my face kinda like tears
my skin is crying from
the heat of the ultra brite
glowing sun we travel
down the street for
another round now
the grass is high dapping
the side of our pants
like some kind of woosh
of belt from stern parents'
discipline hard teachings falter
I move into position to score
seeing I was the quickest
on our field with cheers
from comrades from the goal
only a brief moment of joy
as the wind rush from our bodies
we go fourth into the rain
come sliding down
calling us to dry places

What supplies do you wish you had?

I really wish I had a classroom—I know that's not exactly a supply, but I think that's what's really holding us back right now. Teaching in these

tanks is a really chaotic environment. My students sit at a couple of steel picnic table-type things or on their bunk beds, and there are always distractions—correctional officers coming in and out, food, meds, other random stuff. It's always loud—it's not an environment that's conducive to sustained concentration. I don't even have a table to set my teaching materials down on—I just hold everything in my hand or under my arm. You don't really appreciate the value of a classroom as a shared space where everyone can become his or her best self until you lose it.

Poetry and Prose in the Shelter

Over the past year-and-a-half, current and former students from the University of Houston's Creative Writing Program—**JP Gritton, Matthew Krajniak, Dana Kroos, and Jiyeon Lee**—provided free writers' workshops to the Houston homeless community on a weekly basis through The Poetry and Prose in the Shelter workshops. This fall, UH seniors Elysia Garcia and Sara Mirza will build on the success of last year's workshops at the Covenant House—Texas, a shelter for homeless and runaway youth. This initiative was funded through the Cynthia Woods Mitchell Center (Creative Writing is their one CLASS situated field of study), and Inprint has lent its expertise and helped to guide the students. It is our sincere hope that we will find further funding to maintain this program. Here is what **JP Gritton (PhD 2018)** said about his experience.



What was the workshop officially called?

Officially, we were known under the name of Inprint Life Writing Workshops at the Beacon, Inprint Life Writing Workshops at Covenant House - Texas, and Inprint Life Writing Workshops at SEARCH.

Who was teaching?

I led the workshop at CHT, Jiyeon Lee led the workshop at the Beacon Day Center, and Matthew Krajniak ran the workshop at SEARCH.

How many did you have/plan?

We ran two ten-week workshop sessions, one in the fall and one in the spring. Both sessions ran longer than expected.

How did Inprint get involved?

I went to Inprint in the summer of 2017 to pick Rich and Marilyn's brains about organizing and executing the workshop. They were a tremendous resource for us. We also owe a huge debt of gratitude to the Cynthia Woods Mitchell Center for the Arts for their generous support, as well as to CWP alum Dana Kroos for incorporating some of the writing from our workshops into a series of wood prints. Thanks to Dana and the Mitchell Center, we were able to print a beautiful anthology of workshop writing. It has truly been a collaboration of the Houston writing community!

What prompted you to spearhead this project?

While I was working at Real Change News (a street paper based in Seattle), I encountered a writers workshop composed of homeless and formerly homeless vendors of the paper. I felt really inspired by

the way these people combined a passion for writing with civic engagement. The writers were a cornerstone of the Real Change Homeless Empowerment Project, which spearheaded efforts on behalf of the homeless in Seattle and King County more broadly, affecting change through protests of illegal SPD "sweeps" of homeless encampments, leading voter registration drives, and helping to execute a yearly count of people sleeping outside. After I took my last comprehensive exam and had a little breathing room, I decided I wanted to create a program that allowed people not only an opportunity to pursue a passion for writing, but also one that fostered civic engagement and a compassionate understanding of the homeless.

What was the typical demographic that you served? Women, men, and children? Old and young?

Homelessness can happen to anybody, and consequently we reached people of all sorts: old and young, men and women.

Do you have a sample you could share?

I do! I still love this one from my very first workshop:

The Eagle
Does not fly
Truly
Its own weight
is too great
to fly
like other birds.

But they make do

They are born high
And spend the rest of their lives
finding ways to stay up.

What supplies do you wish you'd had?

We were very fortunate to have had the support of Inprint and the Mitchell Center, as they worked to make sure we had all the writing materials we needed.

Post-Script:

I recently learned that two UH seniors, Sara Mirza and Elysia Garcia, will be co-leading a workshop at the Covenant House this semester. It is astonishing and frankly quite humbling to see these writing workshops evolve into something completely new. I think the fact that undergraduates are "carrying the torch" says a lot about the strengths of the CWP community, as well as about this university's commitment to civic engagement. If you'd like to get involved with this workshop, please be in touch with either Sara, Elysia, Matthew or me!

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