What a spring! This season has been full at the Writers Guild Initiative, with writing workshops with two new populations whose voices urgently need to be heard. In April, thanks to a major gift from Norman Lear and your generous support, we hosted a writing workshop for twenty immigrant youth in partnership with United We Dream, the largest immigrant youth-led organization in the country. Participants worked with writing mentors digging into the craft of writing and storytelling and discussed how to expand their own personal narratives beyond their immigrant experience and share them collectively. In May, we hosted a writing workshop at Pendleton Correctional Facility in Pendleton, IN for seventeen offenders; providing space for them to enhance their writing, build community, and have personal breakthroughs as they shared their stories. One participant stated the experience gave him “the ability to feel human, even if only for a brief time.”

In March, we celebrated our work and raised critical funds for our programs through our annual Spring Gala. The evening was a celebration of the power of the written word. As Gala Chair Frank Pugliese remarked, “I believe in storytelling: be it the story told at a Sunday dinner table, or one you hear from a stranger in a book store or on a subway, or here, tonight. It’s an opportunity to know your neighbor, your city, your country… to know you’re not alone.” At WGI, we give people the tools to find the powerful stories in their lived experience, hone them, and share them with a growing community. To learn more, turn the page...
From May 19-20th, six professional writers and two staff members had the privilege of bringing our writing workshop to seventeen offenders at Pendleton Correctional Facility. This was our first time bringing our workshop to this population. Our writing mentors worked with the participants in small groups to develop and enhance their writing. They all had a chance not only to share true stories from their past, but also to delve into creative writing exercises and create fictional characters, situations, and stories.

For one participant, this was significant as it was the first time he had ever written creatively. He was energized by the end of Saturday by the freedom of “just making stuff up.” In one group, the mentors were reading the participant’s work off the page, until one offender boldly volunteered to read his story from the front of the class, which prompted everyone else to set aside their fears and read their writing out loud to the group – it was a breakthrough. In another, the participants connected as a community, especially when discussing the work and their lives since coming to Pendleton. One mentor asked their group if their outlook has gotten better since coming to prison and was amazed when all overwhelming said, “yes!” Such optimism and purpose of life within each of the participants was remarkable to see, particularly given their circumstances, and the mentors were moved by it. Overall, everyone made strides in honing their voice and crafting their stories.

Writing mentors wrapped up the weekend by giving participants prompts to help them continue their writing until we return in Fall 2018.
WGI Writing Workshop for Immigrant Youth with United We Dream

From April 14-15, 2018, twenty young immigrants convened in New York City for a weekend-long writing workshop. The group included both documented and undocumented immigrants, including many whose protection under the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals or DACA program is threatened by the Trump Administration. Led by experienced writing mentors, the group tapped into their complex experiences as immigrant Americans. Two writing mentors reflect on the experience of teaching this remarkable population:

Meeting the mentees from United We Dream felt like meeting family. I was undocumented up until last year, so the organization and I had a long history of parallel struggles. To be together in a room and say “Forget about that. Write creatively about anything else,” felt like communion of the holiest kind. The privilege of listening to the roots that sprouted from that, and contributing to the process where needed, is one I’ll never forget.  

Jorge Corona, WGI Writing Mentor

At the beginning of the second day we did an exercise in which we asked them to write a letter to “anxiety.” It yielded writing that defied my expectations. Whereas I thought their letters would be loaded with animosity and anger, they were actually quite kind. Each of them treated anxiety as a misunderstood friend that needed attention but still needed to be told what’s what. In response, they wrote letters back to themselves as “anxiety” that were heartbreaking. Anxiety wasn’t a savage monster, but more of a misunderstood Grendel figure. More interestingly, they were all so open minded about the way anxiety had helped them as a kind of warning device throughout their lives. That whole exercise really moved me, and if I’m honest, showed me a lot about how I might want to manage and reconsider my own anxiety. It was really beautiful.

David Crabb, WGI Writing Mentor
WGI 2018 Gala

At March 12, 2018 Gala, performers Brandon J. Dirden, Crystal Dickinson, Ed Harris, Amy Madigan and Parker Posey read work written by participants in our Writing Workshops on the theme of *The World Turned Upside Down*. Following is an excerpt from “Army and Aid Work,” by Jacob Meeks.

*Hi. I’m a schizophrenic. I’m a schizophrenic because I do schizophrenic shit. For example I was in the infantry in the Army and then I became an international humanitarian aid worker... In the Army, we might blow up your house. In the aid world, we’ll re-build your house! That the Army just blew up! We’re like hey, here you go, I know they just blew it up, but they’re paying for a new one! It’s gonna be nice! It’s got one floor! Schizophrenic.*