

Sheryl St. Germain

I know firsthand the devastation that losing a child to drug addiction can cause as both my brother and my son died from drug overdoses.

Reaching out empathetically to other people who have experienced the same pain and loss is a key component in building “a community of we.” I do this through Chatham University’s Words Without Walls program, which pairs graduate writing students with inmates at the Allegheny County Jail and residents at Sojourner House, a residential treatment center for addicted mothers and their children. Many of the Sojourner House residents come in addicted to heroin or crack, and have lost their children. As a co-founder of Words Without Walls, I oversee students and faculty who teach creative writing at these two locations.

I’ve also found myself connecting with other women who have lost children, some of whom I might not agree with politically, but I bond with them because they’ve also lost a child. We have to find ways to genuinely care about each other and build connections among those who are different.

Our graduate writing students read poetry and prose to the inmates and residents, and encourage them to express themselves through creative writing. We write together with the women, exploring difficult issues with respect to recovery. We try to get them to write about the truth of their situation. The writing helps them process their feelings.

Although our nation has become polarized over politics, through my work with Words Without Walls, I see more people engaged and working together. People who maybe weren’t necessarily involved in their community or politics seem to have an energy that wasn’t there previously because there is something they really care about, such as addiction.

— Interviewed by Kellie Gormly

Sarah Shotland

Caring between institutions and people is the key to making Pittsburgh “a community of we.”

I believe leaders in the city’s institutions need to be in touch with what is happening with the people they serve. We have to actually care about each other, rather than just giving the ideas of justice or community lip service.

Our Words Without Walls program fosters this by forcing people out of their bubbles. Participating in the program as a student or teacher guarantees that you will meet and get to know people who are different from you, some of whom you’ll disagree with. And you’ll discover that many of the things you once thought of as differences are actually commonalities.

The inmates in Allegheny County Jail are the canaries in the coal mine of America, personifying societal problems like drugs and foreshadowing the future of these problems in society. But Words Without Walls helps them learn, among other things, to be respectful and civil, even when disagreeing about contentious subjects like politics.

Talking about literature gives people the opportunity to practice disagreements without becoming physical—and many of the people we work with have anger-management problems. So, I think our program helps to prepare them to better interact with others so they can contribute to building community rather than harming it.

At Sojourner House, our students work with women who are in heartbreaking situations, but reading and writing poetry helps the women cope and grow emotionally. My hope is that by doing this, they can contribute to “a community of we.”

— Interviewed by Kellie Gormly

> Sarah Shotland

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GET PEOPLE OUT OF THEIR BUBBLES



REACH OUT WITH EMPATHY

> Sheryl St. Germain

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