

## M.F.A. COMMUNITY



**“MY MOST REWARDING RELATIONSHIPS HERE** have been other people in the program, other poets in the program. And those relationships are something that’s fluid, like, within the workshop and outside of it. Like, we’ll walk over from our office, talking about our work, and enter the workshop setting, through the workshop setting — which is, of course, a little more structured, you know — and then out to a bar. The relationships are fluid. They’re not faked. There’s not some sort of weird disconnect between having a beer with someone and talking about work with them, between being in an academic space and being in a social space. Those situations all seem, I think, in the best way, pretty much the same, in terms of the dynamics of people.”

- VIRGINIA

**“I REALLY LIKE THIS PROGRAM.** I think it has to do with being in a small town sort of environment. People are fairly close to each other geographically, and I just spend a lot of time at other people’s houses, hanging out. The summer here is amazing. I remember one of the first things I did when I moved in here was have a water balloon fight with the third years, and that was just such a memorable way to start this experience. It’s so small here that I really feel bonded to the people, as fellow writers and as friends. I can’t really emphasize that enough. I mean, you can romanticize the solitary writer bullshit all you want, but when it comes down to it, writers form communities. And I think that’s the way it should be. And this is a really strong community. Why else would you want to go to an MFA program, really? For me, at least, that’s what I wanted more than anything, just to be around other people who are serious about writing, and who are cool people. I can’t really emphasize how important that aspect of the program is to me. Because, I mean,

writing can be really isolating. It can be a really lonely thing. And I think we're better writers, and better people, when we're able to have this social element to our lives. That's a really good part of the program for me."

- MARTY

"WE'RE LUCKY. We're just lucky. Everyone gets along, we all have different ideas, we're all reading different work, we're sharing books, we're reading poems to each other, we're workshopping outside of workshop, we're worried about what each other's doing, we're worried about each other, just in general — like, 'How are you doing?' — all that stuff. We're close. And that is just *luck*. I don't know what that is. But we get along. There's no one here that I would even say isn't a friend. Everyone's friendly to me, and I'm friendly with everyone else. I've talked to people from other MFA programs, and they're also surprised. I had one person tell me, I forget where he was from, but he was like, 'You guys talk about poetry? And philosophy and stuff?' I was like, 'Well, yeah, of course we do.' Apparently, that just didn't happen at his school. They just didn't talk. Which seems terrible. I mean, the teachers definitely matter here, everything that I've mentioned matters, but the student body really matters, maybe more so than anything else."

- ANDREW

"I ALWAYS FELT LIKE I COULD ASK almost anyone in the program to read something for me outside of class and they would. In some ways workshop is the least important part of the program. You know, there's a sort of workshop formula, or a rehearsed speech that becomes predictable. But once you've seen all your colleagues' work, and how they react to your work, you just have all of these resources, people who you can ask to read. I've found that in workshop we all read for what's wrong with each other's work; that's our sort of agreement, that's what workshop is for. But during my second year I started to want us to read each other's work for what was good in it, too, and so outside of workshop we read our stories aloud to one another, and that was really valuable to listen

to what was working, or to take risks that workshop discourages. And I think that camaraderie is a product of the program being so small, and lasting three years. If I had left at the end of my second year, I wouldn't have known the other people in the program, or their writing, nearly as well. I really needed the third year. I think that's a huge advantage of the program. I spent my first year just kind of stunned, sort of figuring out what I wanted to write. Then, in the middle of the second, I started to feel proud of what I was writing. And then I needed, like, a lifetime, or at least one more year of school [Laughing] to really, you know, build that momentum.”

– MCKAY

“IT WAS A REALLY EASY PLACE to come into. As a new person, people are really open to meeting new people, be it accepting your work, getting down to the nitty-gritty with your work, but also, like, having a beer with you or having you over for dinner. People are open to embracing newcomers, and embracing people that are associated: people here have been really great about embracing [my boyfriend] as a part of the community, and that's really nice.”

– VIRGINIA

“I THINK IT'S GREAT that we're all friendly and we like each other. I mean, I don't know how you sustain that from year to year — like, [Laughing] ‘Come on strangers, come on in!’ — but I think for the most part we all like each other. There's no one that I'm like, ‘Screw that person, let's kill them.’ [Laughing] Not that I would ever think that anyway. But I feel like if I'm at a party, I would like everyone in our program to be at that party. I think that's good. I really like our program. I'm going to be really sad to leave, actually.”

– LIZZIE

“YOU'RE AUTOMATICALLY PUT in this tight-knit literary community here, and that aspect of it is really powerful for me. And I just like the people a lot. There are a lot of really great

individuals in this program. It was sort of a surprise to me. People are serious and driven without being obnoxiously competitive. Part of that has to do with the aesthetic diversity. Because I feel like in a school where there's more of a 'type' [aesthetically], people are fighting over who's doing that thing better. But I'm not going to compete with people who are already doing things differently, and that's been really good for me." - **MARTY**

**"NO ONE IS PISSED** or jealous of somebody's success. That does speak well to the community, you know: somebody had something good happen, somebody had something big happen for them, and everybody was genuinely excited. And mostly just concerned for his safety, I think [Laughing]."

- **JIMMY**

**"I'M FRIENDS WITH A LOT** of English department people, and I feel like in general the department's really friendly. Like, genuinely friendly. Even in the office, you know. I've heard that's an anomaly, actually. For English departments, university departments anywhere. Hiring politics and funding politics, things like that, but we're pretty good about it, I think. And I think we're all genuinely excited about other people's success. Like, when I hear that someone's been published, or hearing about their projects, I'm actually, I mean, I *am* excited for people. For real. Because it makes the program look good too."

- **LIZZIE**

**"WE'RE NOT EVEN REALLY COMPETING** against each other. We're all trying to just make it happen. One person comes up with a good book, and that helps everyone else. Because they're coming from our program. And you can't help but be happy. Maybe jealous [Laughing], but still happy. And I think that's great. I love the students that are here. I count myself as lucky to have them. And it's just a fluke accident, really. It's just one of those things. We just happen to be really lucky here with that."

- **ANDREW**

“**THE OUTSIDE-OF-CLASSROOM DYNAMICS** are great. That’s the best part of this program. You do wind up having a lot of friends. And they’re not, like fake friends. They’re, like, friends who will drive you home when you’re too drunk to drive, and read your manuscripts. Fiction people tend to get along really well. The poets do too. There’s occasional drama, but for the most part everyone’s really supportive. People seem to like one another, you know. Everybody’s planting gardens. That’s a thing. But, yeah, the social aspects are great. Some of my best critiques were outside of class. Some of my best reading was done outside of class. Everyone — well, not everyone, but for the most part the students are so obsessed with writing, and being good at it, that everybody seems to be wanting to make each other better. It’s not hard to get somebody to read your stuff outside of class. Or stuff you’re not comfortable turning into class. You can get five readers in a second. You know, people would read ‘em, edit ‘em, give you thoughtful critiques, and buy you a drink afterwards.”

- JIMMY

