About Heartland Housing

Heartland Alliance is an organization with the mission to end poverty. Heartland Housing is one division of Heartland Alliance, working toward that mission. Heartland Housing develops and manages sustainable, innovative and high-quality affordable housing. We build communities. We create housing where the most vulnerable can live with dignity. We apply what we learn to identify emerging housing needs and meet them. We help create life-changing opportunities for our residents, and we educate policymakers and civic leaders.

About the Community Writing Project and Real Conditions

The Community Writing Project offers writing workshops to people who ordinarily do not consider themselves to be writers, and publishes their reflections and stories about everyday life in *Real Conditions* magazines. Because only the collective efforts of ordinary people can make a better world, we are interested in the creative expression and unique understanding of those who have been relegated to the margins of society, including the poor, the oppressed, immigrants, and those who risk their privilege to join them. Their stories are found in these pages.
THE WRITERS

Stacy Brown
Janet Matthews
Christine McClinton
Stephen Swierczyna
INTRODUCTION

The stories you are about to read were written in January and February of 2017 in a writing workshop with residents in a Heartland Alliance Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH) program. PSH combines affordable housing with wraparound services for people who are at risk of or have experienced homelessness.

The authors came together once a week for two months to talk, reflect, and write about their lives. They shared insights about struggling to deal with mental illness, life in and out of emergency shelters, childhood memories, trying to connect (or reconnect) with their families, and overcoming addiction.

Almost everyone spoke about wanting to tell their stories so that people could better understand them, their lives, and what it’s like to live through struggles like theirs—reminding us that stories are a powerful way to challenge stereotypes and transform perceptions.

—Dana and Kristin, workshop facilitators
In the time I have spent with Christine, Stacy, Steve and Janet, I have been consistently inspired, surprised and warmed by their generosity of spirit and their resilience. Every writing workshop was a balance of humor and candidness that was truly genuine. For these four people, the journey to healing is an ongoing one, and that is clear in the poetic honesty that they use to describe their situations.

I am truly grateful that I have been able to get to know these four individuals. Their presence is evidence that we could do well with showing a bit more kindness to everyone that crosses our path. Their liveliness evokes an energy that can brighten any dark corner.

I know that those who read their work will feel a similar light inside them. And I hope you are all as inspired to share, express, create, and care for yourself and one another as I have been in their presence.

— Nicole Maldonado,
Heartland Alliance Resident Engagement Coordinator
I have a lot to say. I love my life now. I think over obstacles in my life which would have been far different without my daughter. But the most important thing that I’m grateful for is change in my life for the better. I think the real reason people act different toward me now is because I have grown in my life to be more independent and more responsible and more mature.

When I was younger I suffered from mental illness. I grew up a wild teenager. When I was a student I got good grades but I was wild. When I was a kid they made fun of my friend and I took up for her and then they left her alone.

I found out I was bipolar at 18 years old. It’s different being a psych patient because you are being judged and made fun of. But I feel better taking the meds.

Being different is fun. Me and my boyfriend also get along now because he studies my illness.

It was hard dealing with mental illness. My family don’t understand my illness. But my grandmother helps me deal with my mental illness.

My family reunited in the summer up in my Auntie’s yard. We party. When my family gets together we laugh, have fun, and we just love and care and party all night.
My sister just found out how to deal with my mental illness. She just found out at 27 years old that she is bipolar too. Before she was judging me and making fun of me. Now she understands what I went through. Before she didn’t understand. But we are best friends now.

When I found out I was pregnant I was happy but I was sad that I had to quit school. I was almost at graduation. But when I was pregnant I was so happy. I had to bet my child’s father that I was having a boy. But I had a girl and I was so happy. I had my twin.

They had to give me medicine to go into labor because she was taking all of the room up in my stomach. To me she was the most beautiful baby in the nursery.

My daughter Antoinette Brianna Bolden is a good and loving and sweet and caring daughter. She also helps me with things. It is always fun when I see her. We talk and laugh, and one weekend we made pop cake. We went to Disney on Ice. We have a good relationship but we don’t live together. She does my makeup. She gets good grades. She is a cool kid and she is the most marvelous daughter and smart person and she is brilliant. She is the most important person in my life.
Due to the fluid nature of Wikipedia, here’s what Wikipedia had to say about Dorothea Lange. She was born in 1895. And worked during the Social Realism and was best known for her Depression era photographs. The most renowned of the bunch is called “Migrant Mother.”

The photo is of a woman and her children. Its setting is California. Nipoma was likely a farming community and overrun with people looking for work and finding it in migrant tasks.

Migrants do a lot of work with so little to show for it. I don’t know what it’s like now, but during the Depression, as I understand it, people were leaving their failed farms because of wind blowing the topsoil away and making farming impossible. Farmers and ranchers have different ways to do things now.

As for the picture—you can imagine the children being clingy, because everything they know is gone and likely the new environment would be hard.
The mother in my imagination is called Gertrude and her children are Naomi and Mervyn. And, picking peas is probably hard work for room and board. I can even imagine her working by lamplight to keep herself and her children presentable.

I’m the first generation on my father’s side of the family that didn’t grow up on a farm. I did spend my summers at Gram’s dairy farm. There is a lot of work involved. My aunt and uncle would get up at four in the morning to start chores. My memories are memories of a child. And that was long ago. There was produce growing, peas among them. In my convoluted way I guess that I should try to describe the plant. They are about a foot tall and seem to spread out. Meaning there was a lot of bending involved in the harvesting of the peapods.

— Migrant Mother by Dorothea Lange
Hi, my name is Christine.

I was living on the West Side of Chicago before. Before I was born, my mother had four daughters then I came on January 19, 1954. We lived in projects at 1111 W. Roosevelt in apartment 507. Then when I was eight years old I wanted to work, so I got a job as a paperboy. I wanted to have my own money. Then I got a little red wagon and I used it to go to the A&P store and asked people, “Can I take your food home for you?” and people said “Yes.”

My sisters didn’t like me very much, but my mother told them, “Leave him alone.”

After that things changed. My mother told me I was going to have breasts like a woman. Before then, I was in the washroom. My brother came in. He saw the breasts were coming out, he said, “You need to see mother about this,” so I did. She told me she heard about this. “When I had you, the doctor told me and your father. Your father didn’t like what the doctor said, he said some bad things to the doctor. Then he said, ‘Not my boy.’” She knew I was going to come see her about this. After seeing her, I went to the doctor on my own. The last doctor I saw told me I’m not a freak. “I can ask this woman to come in
to see you,” he said. He called her and he called me and said, “She can come, can you be there?”

So I came in and he told her about me. Then he went out of the room. Me and her was talking and she said she has both sexes. It was not real to me.

And when I was in high school people called me bad names because I wore women’s clothes in school. So every day I went to my friend’s house to change from boy clothes into girl clothes. People didn’t like this in high school. Then the last year in high school the senior prom came up. My mother said I would put on a tux for the prom, so I went out in the tux but I went to my friend’s home and took of the tux and put on a dress. And I went to the prom. When we walked in the people were shocked. The next day a boy came to me and said, “I didn’t think you was going to do this, it was good because you wanted to be yourself.” So we became friends.

After high school, I went to job corps for cooking. After job corps I went to security school in 1979. After that I went to Washburn School for cooking and I became a chef. After I became a chef I found a job at Marriot Hotel, for five years I worked with the head chef. I was let go because people weren’t coming in to eat. Last to get hired, first to let go.

But now I’m 63 years old. Things are still not good for me, so I moved from south side to 1207 W. Leland. I have been in the building for seven years, but now I want to move out of here because people don’t like me.

So I hope people like my story.
I was born on December 15, 1962. I was born in Grosse Pointe Park, Michigan. Moved to Dolton, Illinois when I was two. I had a wonderful childhood until my mother died. I was her shadow. I followed my mother everywhere she went. She was washing the back windows. She fainted. I ran across the street and told a neighbor. Got her to the hospital. She died within two weeks. Aneurism of the brain.

My favorite memory of my mother is laying on her lap watching Johnny Carson. I love that my mother was very compassionate. A very loving mother.
I was devastated when my mother died. My father’s favorite (and mine) memory of me is at my mom’s funeral. I walked between 10—15 times back and forth at my mom’s coffin at the wake. I just couldn’t believe it. I felt that I was betrayed, all alone. I’ll never forget what my father told me when I asked him why God took Mom away. He said, “God needs Mom more than we do.” I was 11 years old. I couldn’t even comprehend death. I was devastated. I truly believe, through 10 years of therapy, that was the cause of my drinking and drugging. The core of the onion.
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