



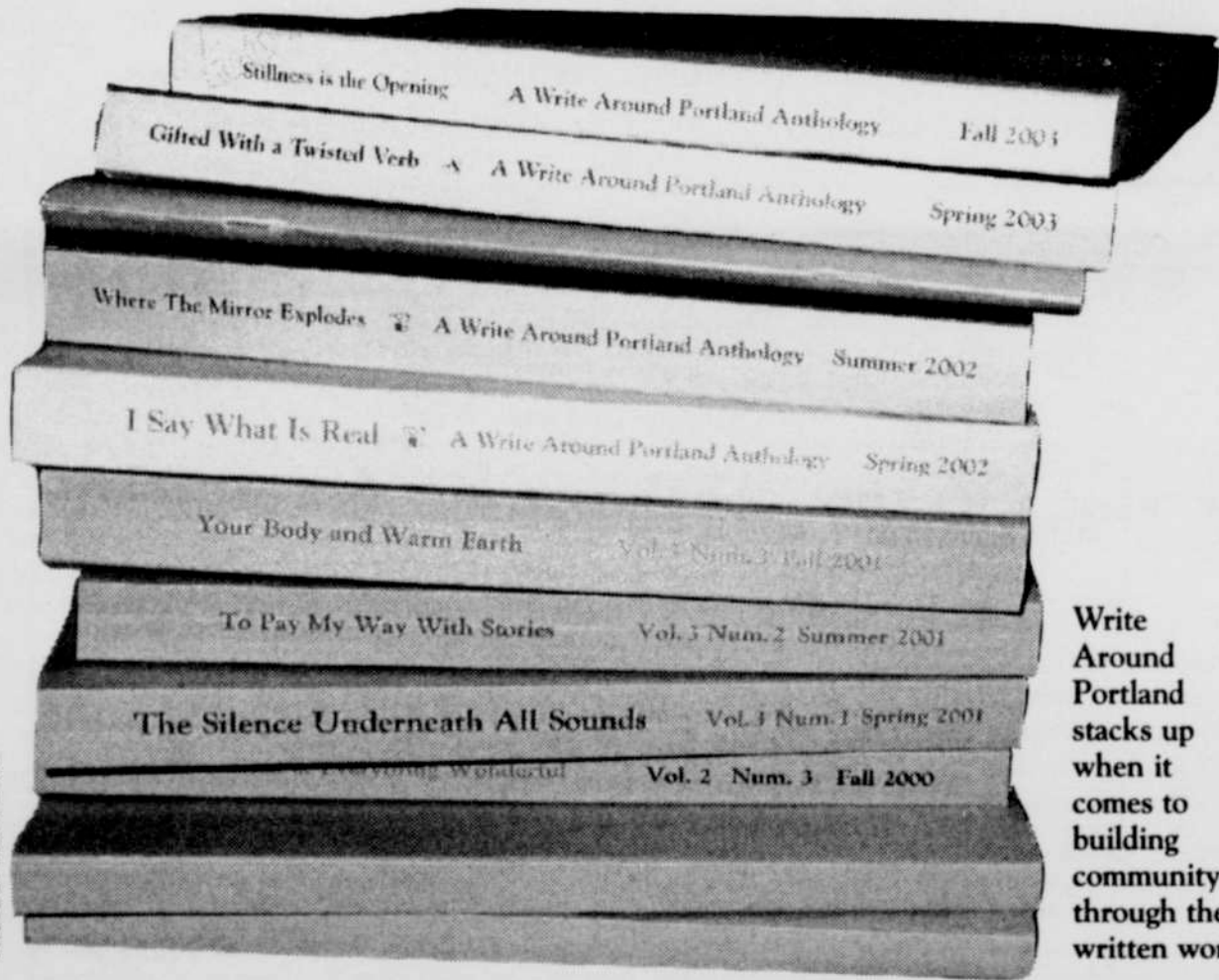
ART COURTESY OF WRITE AROUND PORTLAND

# Pink Ink

## Innovative program helps queers find the write stuff

by Karen Kudej

On a rainy Sunday evening last month, more than 140 people braved the grim weather and crowded into the downtown First Congregational Church for a literary event. The readers at the podium were not, as one might expect, well-known writers. On the contrary, they were all local people whose voices are often not heard at all. The audience was diverse, with hair colors ranging from gray to green.



Write Around Portland stacks up when it comes to building community through the written word

PHOTO BY MARTY DAVIS

But what they all had in common was Write Around Portland, or WRAP, a nonprofit organization dedicated to giving typically marginalized people a voice through writing. The reading was the culmination of a 10-week fall season series of citywide workshops. The evening was also an opportunity to unveil *Stillness Is the Opening*, the newest anthology of participant work published by WRAP.

### The rap on WRAP

WRAP was founded in 1998 by Ben Moorad and Liza Halley. The two met while working together with homeless youth at Outside In. They discovered that they shared a common interest in writing and a desire to build community. WRAP was their way of combining both passions.

The concept behind WRAP is simple: use volunteers to facilitate writing workshops in partnership with community organizations around the city. The objectives, however, are more complex: to give voice to individuals who are typically overlooked by mainstream society, to build community, to enhance self-reliance and self-esteem and to promote cooperative diversity.

WRAP has conducted workshops at senior centers, at correctional facilities, at community centers and at domestic abuse shelters. WRAP has served recovering addicts, at-risk youth, low-income housing residents and migrant workers. In addition to the workshops conduct-

ed concurrently three times a year, WRAP also publishes an anthology of participant work and gathers the diverse groups together for an opportunity to share their words with each other and the public.

WRAP tries to make it as easy as possible for people to participate in workshops. They provide child care if necessary, hand out free bus passes and provide snacks and journals for all participants. And WRAP makes sure everyone feels welcome.

Co-founder Halley notes that some participants may "feel marginalized locally. Maybe they were kicked out their house because they were gay or because they had addiction issues." An important component of the program involves going out into the community to places that are already safe and comfortable for participants.

"You have to be super accessible to make community change," notes Halley. Regardless of participant circumstances, an interest in writing and sharing stories is the common thread that links the diverse communities that make up WRAP. Even if participants don't consider themselves low income or on the fringe of society, they benefit from sharing their stories.

### Telling stories that need to be told

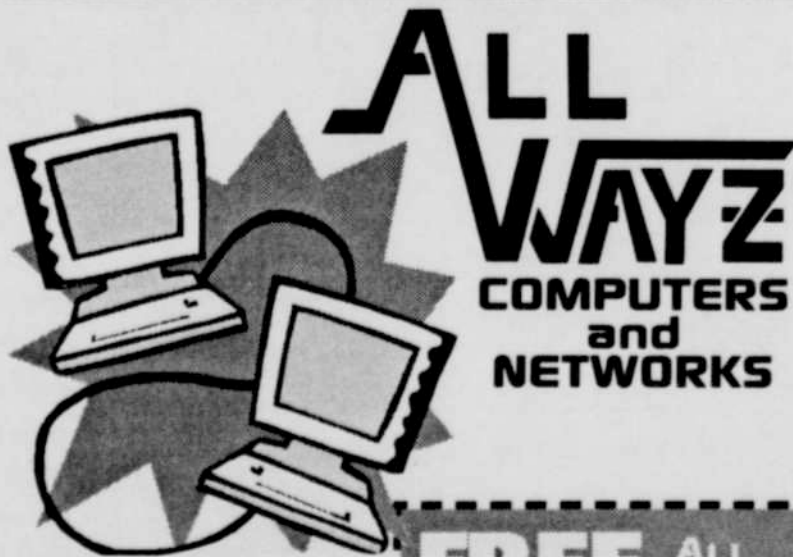
Since the organization's inception, the program has given voice to more than 750 participants, including numerous members

### On the cover

A fragment from the poem "Can You Hear Me Now?" by Aubrey Monroe, Sexual Minority Youth Resource Center writing group participant. Her entire poem has been published in Write Around Portland's latest anthology, *Stillness Is the Opening*.

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