

## **A Tribute To Rough Writers**

**By Patricia Heineman**

Rough Writers has become much more than a writing group. We have developed friendships, and I believe most of us have an enduring affection for one another. We gather to share our work and members help us improve our efforts. How did this come about? As my own participation is coming to an end, I thought it worthwhile to record our history from my perspective.

We began by individually signing up for a writing class offered by the Emeritus program at Cuesta College. We met in one of the bungalows behind the old grammar school. We had different reasons for being there but all wanted to write. That program ended in 2010.

How fortunate we were to have Paula Cizmar as our instructor. She established the guidelines which we've tried to maintain today, even though we often stray from them. Paula lived in Cambria with her husband but commuted weekly to teach at USC.

Most of us had little or no experience in writing when we began. To Paula's credit she taught us basics while encouraging and accepting the efforts we made. No matter what the content was, or how poor the writing, she had the skill of seeing the good in any effort, and gently guided the writer in how to improve the work.

Paula transformed us newbies. She began each class with a poem and discussed it. She stressed constructive feedback, and used it as an example after someone read their work. She gave handouts on particular subjects, often the ones

she used with her students at USC. Character development, use of adverbs, archetypes, point of view, editing, rewriting, and much more.

When the Emeritus program ended, we didn't want to terminate the group or lose Paula. We put our heads together and agreed to find a location and pay Paula the same paltry amount she was receiving from the college. We ended up in the conference room inside the old Grammar school. That was years before it became the now Cambria Center for The Arts. The school had been vacated after students moved into their new location, situated on the hillside which one sees when they first arrive in Cambria.

The old grammar school remained part of the County School District and was used for administrative offices. Many rooms remained empty. To use the facility we were required to submit an application for each and every quarter. It was a tedious process and the school staff were unhelpful.

With our new location and being an independent group, our first task was to get organized. Barbara Snyder became our first President, Linda Parr became Treasurer, and I the scribe (which we now often refer to as keeper of the list.) We then established monthly dues which would cover the room rental and instructor. In a short time Linda resigned and I took over the Treasury position, and Sherry Eiselen became the Scribe. Years later, Robbin would hold that position. Of necessity the people with roles took on the responsibility and leadership of Rough Writers, under Paula's guidance.

Our group size varied. At one time there were twenty of us. That was when it was necessary to meet expenses from our dues. They ranged from \$35 to \$65 per

quarter, based on our projected costs. We paid Paula \$80. per session and the school \$21. per session.

When Barbara stepped down as President in 2011, the group wanted John Lamb to replace her and we voted him in as our President on a day when he was absent. John will often refer to our tactics with a smile, and often warn people not to miss a meeting less they too would find themselves with a job. We were fortunate that John accepted the position with grace, and we have benefited from his leadership for many years

Over time working with the school became difficult. We were not allowed to have a key to the conference room and often the door was locked when we arrived. We had to scramble to find someone to let us in. They were annoyed, and we were annoyed.

Most of 2012 was difficult. As treasurer, it was my job to project costs to set the dues for each quarter. We needed to maintain twenty people to cover expenses, but that created the issue of running out of time for everyone who wanted to read. Some readers would have to wait the following week to be heard, and this caused discontent. Pressure was put on the Scribe on how to manage the list fairly. Some wanted to read weekly, some had long pieces while others read infrequently. We weighed the importance of hearing a complete chapter instead of adhering to the seven page, double spaced, twelve point font maximum. Somehow we managed to survive.

The balance of class size and costs was constant, compounded by several members failing to pay their dues. Yes, that happened and John and I had the

unpleasant task of bill collecting. Those people were usually less active and their membership was short lived.

Things changed again. Allied Arts became the Cambria Center for the Arts and they took over a huge part of the school. Their need for security caused inconvenience to our group. We were asked not to use the front entrance but rather a rear door. That door required a few steps and a combination lock to gain entrance. That made it difficult as we had two people recovering from surgery, Robbin and Drexel, and one blind person. They needed to use the ramp at the front entrance.

Those things along with negativity of the school personnel, prompted us to relocate. I spoke with the Joslyn president and discussed our group with him. I learned our usual Monday time slot was open and conveyed the information to John. In January of 2013 he submitted a Request for Recognition to Joslyn. In turn we were informed of what would be expected of our group. We discussed the requirements and initially were concerned about cleaning the facilities periodically, participating in fund raisers, and baking cookies for an annual open house. Many members did not want to take on the extra responsibility but Paula helped break down what it meant. While a few people had reservations, we agreed to make the move.

No longer would we have to deal with the school, and the cost was eliminated along with our aggravation. I think most would agree it was a good decision to find a new location, even though there were annual dues required by Joslyn. We settled into the Joslyn conference room and it has been our home for many years.

We have been a varied group of people with different goals. but rarely has there been a "misfit" that challenged the cohesiveness of the group. Our rule of voting to

accept a new member is a good thing. A silent ballot allows for a “no” vote to be cast for potential member without peer pressure or judgement. I recall only a couple times when there were two no votes which excluded membership.

We have been memoir writers, and for some it’s been cathartic. Many novelists, science fiction, mystery, poetry, travel, and reflections. Many of us completed novels and had them published, most being self published.

In 2014 Ted Siegler replaced me as treasurer and remained until there was no longer a need for that position. That was also the year that the County Library agreed to put our books on their shelves as “local authors.” Initially six of us donated a copy of our books to the library: Sherry Eiselen, Darrell Gusner, Patricia Heineman, Nancy Moure, and Ken Renshaw. While I don’t have a record I believe others followed including Anne Bennett, John Lamb, Donna Kean and Diane Tappey. Later, a few of us had our books sold at Linns Home Style store, which is now Linns ala Carte.

Just as we were well settled, another change was forced upon us. In 2015.

Paula left us. She accepted the position to become a full time professor at USC in the Creative Arts Department. It was a dream fulfilled for her. She expressed confidence that the group could continue without her, using the guidelines already established.

We did continue alone and often struggled with an issue. Our honest discussions in the group allowed us to resolve most of them. Proof is we exist today.

The years passed without significant change. That is, until Covid swept the nation in late 2019. It changed every aspect of our lives. We began masking, distancing, and Zooming in 2020. Ted kept the group from falling apart by becoming

our Tech guy and set up the zooming connection. He has continued faithfully to keep us connected to the present time. I personally believe much has been lost without our weekly face to face gatherings. The conversation is less spontaneous, and some of us never meet in person resulting in less meaningful connections. Six years after covid, we are still meeting with about half the group zooming, including two of us who have moved from Cambria. We lost two significant members recently., Sherry Eiselen and Barbara Snyder. Then not much later we lost a newer member, Bob Sidebotham.

Our story isn't finished. Susan is working toward her memoir to be published. John is writing a sequel to the Storm Drain Murder. Michele is fictionalizing a history of her ancestors. Mike and Patrick are working on novels. Ted is experimenting with play writing, and Donna is delving into the lives of three members of the transcendentalist movement. Juan shares his life through poetry. Diane continues to share her travel experiences, which are on hold until she has a new hip. Leslie shares her exuberant adventures in travels and about her family. Newest member Jacqueline is writing about events surrounding William Hearst. Anne Bennett and I still write from time to time. Finally, we have bullied Robin without success to have her delightful stories published.

Hopefully our group will continue to reinvent itself and live on for years to come. For me, it has been a group I treasure, a group where I've learned so very much, and helped me do something I never thought possible—publish a story.

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## Do You Remember

When **Michele Oksen** and **Tom Harrington** teamed up to write a cowboy novel? Each chapter alternated with the writer. Same story—two authors.

When we gathered at **Sheri Bell's** home on Moonstone Beach to celebrate the launch of Paula's play "Seven". It went on to be produced and toured several countries.

Christmas parties at the homes of **Diane Tappey**, **Anne Bennett** and now **Susan Chase**.

**Sheri Humphreys**, our only romance novel writer, and published author.

**Richard Hannibal**, a retired policeman from Morro Bay.

Summer gatherings at **Mike Broadhurst's** farm to enjoy a picnic under age old trees. Cool lemonade and a giant blueberry pie made by his wife Carol.

In **2010** a group of us did a reading of our work to the public in the Center for the Arts Theatre? I remember it, and the stage fright I felt.

In **2016** five members read to the audience at the Harmony Cafe. Those participating were: Sheri Humphreys, Donna Kean, John Lamb, Helen Mandlin and Robbin Miller.

**Darrell Gusner**, a prolific science fiction devotee. The years we met at his home to decorate his Christmas tree. Although blind, he insisted upon a tall live tree every year. He cooked and cared for himself in a two story home. His guide dog Limo was ever present by his side

**Franny Hudzinski**, whose house we held our meetings one summer. She travelled back and forth to West Virginia and eventually moved there.

**Jennifer Smith**, whose poetry flittered and danced among the stars in the galaxy.

**Kerry Cox**, who was a published author. We enjoyed hearing Money Bear as he wrote it as part of the Nick Tanner series. Next was Canned Hunt and Cold Blooded Trade. As a professional writer he was very helpful when critiquing our work.

Those who became authors and published one or more books.

Anne Bennett  
Kerry Cox  
Sherry Eiselen  
Patricia Heineman

Darrell Gusner  
Mary Ann Grau  
Sheri Humphreys  
Donna Kean  
John Lamb (under Jack Cameron pen name)  
Helen Mandlin  
Michele Oksen  
Ken Renshaw  
Ted Seigler  
Jennifer Smith  
Diane Tappey

These are some of the highlights that I recall, but here are many more. Each of our members are unique in their own fashion and each brings a gift to the group. New people continually join us and become part of our tapestry, woven in the life and experiences of Rough Writers.

### Notable Quotes

**Richard Hannibal**, a retired police officer from Morro Bay. His thought of who should be included in the group. “I think it is very important that they don't run with scissors, share their toys, look both ways before crossing the street and don't eat their paste.”

**Paula Cizmar** - “we are critiquing, but we're not tearing down when we offer our thoughts on people's writing.

**Ted Siegler**, on accepting the role of treasurer: “I'm happy to if you really want to pass the task on. I'd hate to insert myself into something that's already working well for the group (and usually don't you have to miss a meeting to be appointed to a new responsibility?).”

**John Lamb** in an email: Driving back with Darrell yesterday, we talked about what a good group we have. Knowing and working with everyone certainly has made a huge difference in my retired life, and my experience living here, and I imagine others feel the same way.

**Paula Cizmar** - on leaving as our instructor: Whether I'm at Rough Writers or not is not important. What is important is that you have all built a strong community of writers. You have supported each other through “just dabbling” and into the process of

creating full-length work. You have gained skills and practice in how to offer constructive critiques to your fellow writers.

We've all come a long way from the early days years ago. Now, not only have you all acquired knowledge on how to shape and focus your work, and not only have you created a body of work, you've also gained the ability to help each other through the process of raw draft to revision. YAY!

### **In Memoriam**

**Tom Christian** - an excellent writer. In his novel Aegis he attempted to write the entire book in dialogue only. One of his characters was Spot, a cat.

**Ann Dennis**, a former teacher who was great in correcting grammar.

**Linda Parr**, our first treasurer and candy maker. She died shortly after she moved from Cambria.

**Drexel Richardson**, an original member and dearly loved by all.

**Ken Renshaw**, man of science who wrote about Crop Circles and remote viewing.

**Sherry Eiselen** who wrote mysteries. She was a strong voice in our group and a voice we respected.

**Barbara Snyder**, our former leader and gracious friend who wrote a remarkable memoir of her long life for her family.

**Bob Sidebotham**, a newer member. He was writing a gentle reflection of the character that portrayed his life.

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