Co-Founder Reflects on a Decade: Introduction to the spring 2009 anthology, *North of North, by Liza Halley*

In 1999, Liza co-founded Write Around Portland with Ben Moorad. Liza now lives with her family in Arlington, Massachusetts, and she is a member of our Resource Council.

Liza Halley (right) with Write Around Portland Executive Director Robyn Steely and Co-Founder Ben Moorad.

Every time I am asked, how did you begin *Write Around Portland?* I smile and think two words: magic and love.

Ever since I can remember, I carried a magical seed. A gorgeous, bright, shiny seed. Sometimes I think the angel who showed me my entire life before giving me a little slap that made me forget the whole thing gave me the seed right before I came into this world.

Sometimes I think I found the seed the year I turned twelve. Sitting alone in my bedroom, listening to the fog horn blast its warning call late at night, I took a red pen in hand and wrote my first poem, tears streaming down my face. The poem was about a heart torn apart and when taped together love was missing. Within the sadness that magic seed took hold and propelled me to find love, a big, open love that included me and tons of other people, people who were also seeking to connect, to discover and to create something bigger than themselves.

Sometimes I think I found that seed on the first day I became a VISTA (the domestic Peace Corps) volunteer in New England. That's when I met Enid Santiago Welch, another VISTA who was working with Pat Schneider, founder of Amherst Writers and Artists. Enid said she was going to change the world by bringing writing workshops to low-income women. What a thing to do with one's life! Create together. Write with people who often can't afford to take writing workshops. Share stories. Cross unnecessary borders to listen and learn from one another. Help people to find their voices through the power of writing.

No matter its origin, I carried that seed with me everywhere I went. Even across the country in 1997 when I moved to Portland to be with Phil, my then fiancé. I eventually found a job coordinating programs at Outside In, which provides safety off the streets, food, crisis counseling and activities that build skills to promote alternatives to street life for homeless teens. In walks Ben Moorad looking to volunteer. He says he wants to lead writing workshops with homeless teens a few times a week. My heart did a big jump that day; I discovered a person who shared my passion for writing, for poetry, for rolling up his sleeves and helping out in the community. I showed him my magic seed and he pulled an almost identical seed out of

his pocket as well. And we decided to plant. Within months the roots took hold and there you have it.

It took a lot of other people to help Write Around Portland to grow; people like our first board members, Jenny Levison, Ed Johnson and Tiffany Fleischer. It took the support of friends and family, like Phil. It took our first corps of volunteers and our first partnering agencies. And an amazing grant from the city of Portland. That's only in those first few months.

Throughout every step of the way, Ben and I met people who shared our passion and our vision: we are stronger people, community members, relationship partners, society in general, when we listen. When we get people in the room together, in front of the blank page and we offer the space to explore, to learn, to grow, to listen. And we're even stronger when we get those words out to other folks, when we publish the writing, when we hold readings. When people feel the confidence to read their own words in front of other people who are holding the space, who are listening, cheering, nodding their heads, whose hearts are touched by the poem or story just read. Ultimately, we all gain: more people know that their voice matters, not only in a workshop, but in their own lives, in their homes, with their friends, in their places of work, in the voting booth.

Now Write Around Portland is 10! Ten years of love, of careful tending, of sharing the passion. Ten years of gorgeous writing and readings, of trainings and incredibly dedicated staff, volunteers and funders. Ten years of people who found their own voices through their own words. Those magic seeds brought forth this gigantic, beautiful plant that keeps climbing and spreading well beyond the clouds. And if this is your first Write Around Portland anthology or your 29th. I am confident you'll find your own magical seed within these pages. I hope it inspires you to go forth and plant, to put your voice, your words on paper.

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