

Featured Writer Ricky Bealer-Casias

Ricky Bealer-Casias, 58, was born in Colorado on the Ute reservation. He was diagnosed with HIV two weeks before his 21st birthday. Ricky is a long-time volunteer within the HIV-positive community as well as Portland's Two-Spirit community. Last fall, Ricky participated in a Write Around Portland creative writing workshop at Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon, HIV Day Center. Ricky loved taking a workshop with other long-term HIV survivors, who helped to create a safe space for him to share his story. He firmly believes that the skills and connections he made during his time in the workshop will help him leave a legacy of hard work and resources for his friends and family.



Papa's Heart

Ricky Bealer-Casias

This story took place in 1980. It started in Goldendale, Washington at the Native American Sundance. I met a special person named Papa Tyler, who was one of the elders there. As a Native American myself, we connected, we built a strong relationship, and he was a person I considered family. I was twenty-one years-old at the time and newly diagnosed as a person living with HIV/AIDS. I had been told repeatedly from my doctor that I was sick and was going to die. This led me to a life of drinking and drugs, not by choice, but because as a Native American, I was never educated in the Western setting, and this is how we cope. I really thought I was going to die, but Papa Tyler was the person who accepted me for who I am, and loved me unconditionally. This was exactly what I needed, since I had very little support from my own family. And because of this, I hold Papa Tyler in such high regard.

Each year when I visited the Sundance, he got older and sicker, but still managed to make the stretch from Bonners Ferry, Idaho. Although this one particular year, Papa Tyler was not able to make it because of the health condition of his heart. Thankfully, through the compassion of a family donor, he was selected to get a transplant. However, time was very crucial. This meant that we were racing from Idaho to Kentucky before it was too late to save Papa Tyler. On the way there, a bunch of obstacles came into our path, but we were determined to get to our destination in a timely manner. We dealt with multiple issues with transportation, before finally driving through a blizzard. *Papa Tyler, I don't know these mountains*, I said. *Nephew, don't worry. It's in Creator's hands*, he replied.

Because these words came from Papa Tyler's mouth, I instantly became calm and focused and the storm was tolerable. What I learned from this experience was: not to panic, don't take life so seriously, and that time is a sacred thing. When we finally made it, the weather was beautiful. The land was too. Indescribable. We met with the Mingo Tribe, their land, their reservations and that's where they set up lodging for Papa Tyler to receive his new heart. It kept Papa Tyler alive much longer, and I was eternally grateful for that because through him, I was able to return to my native roots, and learn how to live as a Native American implementing traditional practices and a whole new way of living life. It also provided balance and grounding, which has helped me survive much longer, better and traditionally. I have to walk this way, because it's who I am, and it works for me.

I will never forget this story. I have many to tell, but this one in particular was the one that helped me embrace who I am, my extended family, and the importance of helping one another. I would do anything in a heartbeat for those that matter the most. Just think of the impact this could make, if everyone was able to adopt this as their way of life too.

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Interview with Featured Writer Ricky Bealer-Casias

Interviewed by Write Around Portland volunteer facilitator Allie Vasquez.

How did you first hear about Write Around Portland? What drew you to join the workshop?

I heard about the workshop off and on through the years through the community, through the Day Center. I was excited and so eager and willing to do it, but what was stopping me was that I was born with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome so I'm not able to read and write as well as I wish. It was a challenge I wanted to take, and I was scared and I quit, and then I came back, and then I quit, and then I came back. Through it all, I stuck it out because I wanted that experience of being a writer/poet. I wanted the experience of being able to go into another environment, like a classroom, and not be nervous and scared and panicked or have a meltdown. I wanted to be able to sit with the people in the workshop and share and let go and open up my heart and really tell stories I never really told anyone in my life. And that's what Write Around Portland brought out of me. It brought my inner soul out, and it brought my spirit out, and it brought my voice. And it brought a picture or a face to Ricky Toby Luke Bealer-Casias. It brought who I am out. This workshop made me feel whole because it was something that I was lacking all my life since I was in kindergarten. But to be able to sit in a group with other writers...it was a blessing. I didn't think I'd ever get to do that because of my not being able to read or write that well.

What was your experience like in the workshop?

Funny, scary, exciting, nervous, anxious. It was brilliant because everyone has something to bring, even the quiet ones. The teacher was great, because she didn't push us. She pushed us a little, because that's how you have to do it at certain times in the program, like you might have five minutes to do a piece, or you might have three minutes to do a piece, and that might be nervous or anxious, but at the same time thrilling because you're doing something that you think you can't do, but you get through it and it's over and everyone is happy and laughing.

It was nice to have Nevin [a Write Around Portland volunteer scribe] come in and do the writing for me because I can say my words, but I can't write them because I wasn't taught how. When I was in school, I was passed on because of my age. It was a hard life for me because I couldn't read or write. I couldn't go the movie store to pick out a movie, because I couldn't read the titles. I couldn't go to restaurants because I couldn't read the menus. I couldn't do job applications. I mean, there was things that I wanted to do but I was not able to do and it altered my life. But here I am, 58 years old, have maybe a 6th-grade education, but here I am!

How did you feel about writing and sharing with other people? Hearing others' stories?

I was excited and I was nervous, but every time I went into the workshop, it was the same people. We became closer and then their stories became more personal. It just made me feel like we were all family and that we all had something to bring to the table. And we were bringing it to the table because we wanted to offer it in a good way. It was fun.

People were really interested in my stories. I had another Native brother in the same class with me. It was like we had two different ways of bringing things out. It was really nice because people wanted to hear our stories and we wanted to hear their stories. It was a good switch-over. You tell me your story and I'll tell you mine. I heard a lot of beautiful stories other people wrote. And if I hadn't shared my stories, they might not have shared theirs, and I wouldn't have been blessed with their beautiful words.

How did you feel about being published in the book?

It made me feel honored. It made me feel gifted. It made me feel like, "Oh, wow, I didn't think anybody would want to listen to my stories." But I would recommend it to anyone who wanted to do something different in their life. You don't know what it could open. It could open just you. I mean, when you put words down, they're magic. It could be a story, it could be a poem, it could be a song, it could be a letter. They're all magic.

How did you feel about reading at the anthology release party?

I was able to see [people from] other workshops and some of the workshops had the aunties that I do Meals on Wheels with, and so it was really nice because it made me more comfortable. I had no family members there, so I invited my friends and my cousin. Then also the Day Center directors were there, and it was just nice. I was able to read and I didn't think I would be able to get up in public and read. I stumbled a little bit, but it's okay. You stumble in life. I was so excited. I felt like a celebrity. Some people asked me to sign the book, autograph it. And I felt like a celebrity, but I didn't feel cheesy, because I earned it. I earned this. I was like, "Wow, I did this!" It felt good.

What specifically did you get out of the workshop experience?

It was an honor to be able to write with others and help bring out their voices, to be able to sit around and joke and laugh, and sometimes even cry, because that's how sensitive and heart-wrenching those stories and poems were that people shared. It was a beautiful experience. It just brought me back, like I want to go to college. I want, I want more. This is what this class/workshop has brought out in me. I want more because I have more. I learned that other people have more, too. That people can put things down on paper that can take you to another dimension. Some people put their spirits in their pieces.

The workshop was magic to me. It brought something out of me that I let go to sleep, and that was my reading and writing. That workshop got me to go and get a book and try to read it, even if it's a kindergarten book. Even if it's a child's book, even if it's a storybook. I don't care. It opened doors in me. It brought out the happy, little kid that was lost. When I was little, I was a dummy, I was stupid—these are names that were thrown at me because I was not able to do things like the other children. It hurt. All my life, I took that as who I was. But this workshop proved me wrong. I proved to me that I could go and seek more. Put more into it and you'll get more out of it. I'd never been to a library, but since this workshop, I went to a library. I borrowed a book! I've gone into a restaurant and ordered food and wasn't disappointed that it wasn't what I wanted. I went to see a movie and that's the movie I wanted to see! These things that people think are trivial, they think they're not a big deal. But I couldn't order food and have it be the food I wanted; I couldn't use the ATM or pay the rent. These are challenges that I'm doing. Now my partner says, "I can't stop you. You want too much. You want more." I feel like I've been asleep for maybe 30-some years and I got woken up. It's opened a lot of doors for me and I'm happier. It's like the light that was lit in me had been blown out and now it's been lit again.

What was your favorite part of the workshop?

Seeing who was going to come, who could make it, and the struggles they went through to be there. To hear things like, "I rode three buses to be here." The initial gathering, it was sort of frightening at first, but as the weeks went on, we all seemed to bond. The people weaved together and became one big, happy family. Whatever we said there was not taken outside that context. It was a safe place and it was a friendly, happy place and it just seemed like everyone just fit. Everyone was just so nice.

I liked that everyone in my group had [had] HIV for a long time. It felt good, because these were the stories that I wanted to bring out and not be ridiculed for. For me to have peers of HIV was really comfortable, because it was stories I wanted to write about, about why, and when, and doctors. It was beautiful, because there was no stigma in the workshop. It felt good to be around my peers, to be able to hold my head up high as I say, "I have HIV and I'm a long-time survivor." It felt so safe.

Would you recommend Write Around Portland to other people? If so, why?

I would do it again, and I would bring my friends! I have a few friends who are in the same position as me. They don't read or write so well either, but they want to do it because it's a door and it might open other doors for them, like maybe even college or school or GED. We don't know what this is going to do for others, but I know I would like to invite people who are like me, who can't read or write that good, to this class so they can learn that they can do it, like I learned.

I would like to see more people become involved because this is a thing that won't quit. It's like a rash you get that won't go away. I got a tool. Now I got a tool and I can go further. It's my choice. I could even go get my GED. Even my partner says that's I've changed. Before, I would let him do all of the reading. Now, I challenge him, and he likes that.