

Cultivating Community through the Women's Writing Circle



Jason Shum Photography

Nancy Johnston, Associate Professor, Teaching Stream, and Writing in the Disciplines Coordinator for Writing Support at the Centre for Teaching and Learning, and **Shehna Javeed**, Assistant Registrar, Petitions, Office of the Registrar, are the recipients of UTSC's **2022 D.R. Campbell Merit Award** for their work as co-facilitators of the Women's Writing Circle. Since 2014, the circle has provided faculty and staff with a safe space for women to share and express themselves through the power of writing. Johnston and Javeed received their certificates at the Awards of Excellence ceremony on Tuesday, April 25, at UTSC.

The D.R. Campbell Merit Award is presented for an outstanding contribution in support of UTSC's mission. Recipients demonstrate exemplary service that extends beyond their normal role and improves the quality of life on campus.

Below, Johnston and Javeed talk about the Women's Writing Circle and what it means to participants – and to them.

How did the Women's Writing Circle come about?

Nancy: The group began as a conversation between Prof. Sarah King of the Centre for Teaching and Learning and Tanya De Mello, who worked in the Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Office at the time. Shehna was one of the earliest and most active participants. In any artistic effort to create community, you need participants who are committed to the vision. Shehna was one of those people.

Shehna: Nancy and I had a real interest in how writing and journaling can support the creation of a community of women. As it turned out, many of the participants did as well.

Can you describe the writing circle and some of the goals?

Nancy: Our goals are to write for personal expression, create community connections and build our resilience by writing about experiences, ideas and emotions. From an organizational perspective, we are providing a space for health and wellbeing and where people can be themselves. For many, the group is a safe haven, where they can have time for creativity in their lives.

We meet six or seven times a year, and we have a large event – which is also open to women students – on International Women’s Day in March.

Shehna and I always write, we’re always members of the group and we’re often prepared to share to get things going. But it’s important that we’re writing *with* the group, we’re not *leading* the group. We’re facilitating the space, but it’s not ours alone.

Shehna: The staff-faculty collaboration is a very important piece. I think there are very few groups out there that exist that are a collaboration of both staff and faculty.

Do you need a certain level of writing expertise to join the writing circle?

Shehna: No expertise is needed; this is a space for all women. When we say a writing circle, people may think that there’s a high expectation of writing. What we do is provide a comfortable space for women to be expressive.

Not everyone’s job is to write, so many people don’t see themselves as writers. For the staff constituency in particular, I think there are folks who might be afraid of the idea of having to write or that someone’s going to critique them. I would say that Nancy and I have built a space where people have come in that are not that comfortable with writing or that have many things to say, but they don’t know how to say them. They get started, they write and then it takes them places. We’ve had people who’ve gone on and done other creative pieces outside of the writing circle, which is really special.

Nancy: This is not a creative-writing class or a deadline-based academic classroom. This can be early writing where that you can experiment or play without criticism or critique.

Can you talk about the prompts you use?

Nancy: We acknowledge the world outside the circle in our prompts. We're not going to the Internet and finding the hot daily prompts of some organization. We're crafting them. So we're very interested in, for example, a moment that supports and empowers women around something such as thinking about Black History Month – and making it not just an acknowledgement of a month, but what is it in the lives of many of the women who are coming. We try to have at least one prompt that potentially has a bit more gravitas or there's a potential to reach someone who has been thinking about things in their own life, in their own trajectory.

Shehna: On International Women's Day, for example, we laid out pictures of women from across the world. One of our activities was to pick a picture that struck you as having a story behind it. We had pictures of women showing up at protests, women having babies, women doing a variety of different things. This was a way to integrate women from across the world and the many ways that women show up in the world, and not just think about women in one role.

What are some of the positive effects that this circle has brought into your own lives?

Nancy: Shehna and I jointly published an article about the writing circle called "The Women's Writing Circle: Creating a Community Space Through Writing and Sharing" in the book [*Transformational*](#)

[*Journaling for Coaches, Therapists, and Clients*](#) edited by Lynda Monk and Eric Maisel. The article is about the power of community and it gives a background of what we do: we talk about the practicalities of how we organized, why we organized and what it looks like.

Shehna and I also wrote separate articles in the recent book [*The Great Book of Journaling*](#), also by Maisel and Monk. I wrote “Journaling in a Group: A Facilitator’s Perspective” and I had Shehna’s feedback on it: about when to step back, when to be involved, how to respect people’s boundaries and all kinds of things. The article is meant to share this experience.

Shehna: The chapters in those books are a huge deal for me. The fact that Nancy and I wrote together and that I was able to submit a separate piece that was a lot more personal around journaling, “Journals as Intergenerational Storytelling” – about finding my late father’s journal written in India as a young man – is a big win for me.

Also, working this closely with a faculty member was new for me when we started. I’ve learned so much. There have been ideas that I bring up that come from real life and then we massage it to craft a prompt. To ask: ‘What is going to be useful for the group? How do I craft something so that it becomes something that someone else can take and run with it?’ is something that I’ve learned from Nancy over the past few years.

Nancy: I think that without Shehna, we wouldn’t have continued. She has a drive and creativity, an idea of the long term, and the leadership qualities to keep us motivated. She reminds us that even when there’s only a few who can come, they all want to be there.

What is one thing that you hope people who attend the Women’s Writing Circle take away from it?

Shehna: I want them to discover their creativity in expression – whether it is in words or in other ways. If someone said to me, ‘I am now doing this,’ or ‘An idea came to be because of the writing circle,’ it would be very satisfying to me that they found their creativity. And this has actually happened and it is quite gratifying.

Nancy: Also, the belief that they are permitted to take some space. I don’t think it’s a cliché that a lot of women spend the majority of their time supporting other people, and that can be exhausting. We should each be able to take time to think about our own life and our own expression. I’m interested as a teacher in supporting other group leaders and writing groups, including student groups, to create their own circles and events. I’m open to hearing from the community and sharing what we’ve learned from facilitating this writing group over these last eight years.

The Women’s Writing Circle resumes in the fall and continues with a team of facilitators from the circle: Nancy Johnston, Nisha Panchal, Chanda Chandalala and Nisbeth Ahmed.