

M.F.A. in Creative & Professional Writing program hits five-year mark



Anne Witkavitch '08



Lisa Siedlarz '09

By Sherri Hill

Lisa Siedlarz, a loan administrator, and Anne Witkavitch, a corporate communicator, are two people who might never have crossed paths, even though both live in New Haven County, Conn. The county boasts a population of almost 850,000 people, but Siedlarz and Witkavitch are members of a very elite group: both are graduates of WestConn's Master of Fine Arts (M.F.A.) in Creative and Professional Writing program.

The low-residency program, in its fifth year, has conferred degrees upon nearly 40 students thus far, with another half dozen scheduled to graduate in 2010. And though they are a small group, the program's alumni are quite diverse, hailing from Connecticut, Pennsylvania, New York, New Jersey, and places as far away as Hawaii and Puerto Rico.

Brian Clements, coordinator of the M.F.A. program since its inception, says another variable that affects the degree of diversity is the way the curriculum is structured.

"Our program is the only M.F.A. in existence that requires the students to study both a creative and practical genre," Clements says. "Most of our students write their theses in the creative genre, but a few have opted to write more practically oriented theses. About half of the theses among graduates have been fiction; about a quarter have been creative nonfiction; and the rest have been split among poetry, screenwriting and practical genres.

"Our mission is to produce writers who can immediately begin building professional careers without having to rely upon the adjunct teaching treadmill to support their creative writing," Clements explains. "Successful professional writers must have both creative skills and practical knowledge of their fields, and must be able to move easily among genres. We are the only program that takes those realities as central points."

Siedlarz, a poet who graduated from WestConn's M.F.A. program in 2009, works at Southern Connecticut State University where she received a Master's in English in 2007. "One of my SCSU professors told me about the program at WCSU so I looked into it and decided to apply," she says. "The low residency was especially appealing to me because I could structure my course work around my full-time work schedule. The M.F.A. is a lot of work, and you get as much from it as you put in to it. In the end it is well worth it."

Witkavitch earned a Bachelor of Arts in English with a specialization in professional writing from SCSU in 1984. She's built a career in marketing and corporate communications. "I was an executive in corporate communications," she says. "I had always wanted to return to school to earn a graduate degree but wasn't sure if I wanted to pursue an M.B.A. or something different. My love and passion for writing led me to pursue the M.F.A. in Creative and Professional Writing.

"I had spent years looking at graduate programs," Witkavitch continues. "The WestConn M.F.A. attracted me because it was low residency and self-directed. It was flexible enough that I could pursue my degree while working and raising a family — not easy, but more doable than classroom studies. I also liked that I could mold the program specifically to what I wanted to achieve for my writing goals. When you are returning to school in midlife, you want to be sure that what you learn and apply directly correlates to what you want to accomplish."

The acknowledgement that most potential M.F.A. students, like Siedlarz and Witkavitch, are already

employed and therefore unable to attend regular classes is one of the things that makes WestConn's program unique. Students and faculty come together at biannual residencies — which Clements calls "the heart of the program" — and conduct the rest of their interaction during the semester online.

Besides the wide-ranging hometowns represented and writing genres pursued, Clements says it's difficult to characterize a "typical" student in WestConn's M.F.A. program because of the diversity of ages, writing backgrounds and professional experience among the students.

"We have students coming directly out of undergraduate programs, we have people like Lisa (Siedlarz) who have been writing for a while on their own but have been working professionally in other fields, we have established professionals like Anne (Witkavitch) who come to the program looking to enhance or change their professional lives, and we have people who have always wanted to write that novel or book of poems but need the structure of a program to get the task done. What is common among all of the students in our program is that they're serious about their writing and they want to take advantage of the great resources among our faculty and their peers."

There are half a dozen full-time faculty members, six writers-in-residence and more than 30 writing mentors who teach in the program — and all of them have successful, established careers in a variety of creative and practical areas.

Clements says the real test of the program is whether it is producing good writers who are advancing professionally.

"It is clear that our students are publishing and finding jobs in the real world, even before they graduate," he says.

Siedlarz can attest to that.

"I had my first book of poetry come out back in April, just before I graduated, and I've been nominated for a couple of awards," Siedlarz says. "I've been appointed editor of the poetry journal Connecticut River Review, and I also facilitate writing workshops with veterans, which is very rewarding." 🌟

W Read the full story about WestConn's M.F.A. in Creative and Professional Writing program at wcsu.edu/alumni.