

Writing Back Intern Experience

Whenever I tell anybody about Writing Back they always reply with the same answer -why don't they have this project in my area? I originally heard of Writing Back in my first year of University. After signing up to be a pen pal, I was paired with Barry, a local resident with an interest in gardening, textiles and volunteering. We have been writing to one another ever since. Despite the age gap, we have a remarkable amount in common and endless stories to share. Even in third year, when I was studying abroad in Iceland, we continued to email. Opening an email or a Christmas card there made me feel connected to life back in Leeds. More recently, the project has opened up to include postgraduate international students and subsequently, Barry now also writes to Aurelia.



Aurelia, Barry and Eve

Returning home, I saw the advertisement for the project's intern position. Through my grandparents, other older people, and media coverage, I have always been aware that loneliness is common in older communities. From my experience at university, particularly during study abroad, it became obvious that students can be really lonely too. In part, social media is to blame. Everyone portrays the perfect life on Facebook but could be doing so from the phone in their hand as they sit alone in a box room in student residences. Social media is a constant stream of other people's lives in comparison to your own. No one dare confess they are struggling. Students rarely even admit homesickness which is a natural part of the experience.

Sharing stories is how we form connections. After having such an interesting experience writing to Barry, I was intrigued by the influence the project was having on the other pen pals involved. I didn't know just how significant it would be. The feedback Writing Back gets in the media, but most importantly, from the individuals involved, is incredible. Part of my role is posting and transcribing the letters. The connections formed on the page are

unbelievable. Who knew that a nineteen year-old from Beijing could have so much in common with an 85 year-old from Otley?



Pen Pals at the Christmas Event 2018

Writing Back holds two events during the year for the pen pals to meet each other. The Christmas event in December is the first time a lot of the pen pals will meet if they haven't already been writing as a pair the previous year. Georgina, Lipeng (the other student intern) and I organised a quiz and other activities to get conversations rolling. Within the first ten minutes it became clear it wasn't needed because the room was full of conversation and laughter. The photo above is my favourite from the Christmas event – absolute joy!



Eve, Barry and his family tree

For the Easter Event, Georgina suggested that pen pals bring an item with them that represents their culture. Students from all over the world are involved so it was fascinating to see what everyone brought. On the second day of the Easter event, Barry came and with him he brought a family tree stretching back centuries. He also had photographs, poems and letters from his childhood to show me. Other pen pals brought art, tea, snacks, old photographs, songs, etc. Bringing a piece of home to the event helped create even stronger connections between pen pals.



Pen Pals at the Easter Event 2019

Some pen pals have been writing to each other for years now, like the pair in the photograph above, who never stop chatting throughout the whole event; they just seem like old friends. Undoubtedly, they will continue to stay in contact after university. Commonly, students attend university in a new city, complete their three or four years there, graduate and then move home. Writing Back allows students to form connections with not only the people, but the place as well. These students will always have an important and valuable tie to Leeds.

As well as assisting in running the project and organising the events, I also had the opportunity to attend training workshops throughout my internship. Firstly, I completed a training day course in coping with loss and grief. A significant reason for loneliness in older communities is the increase in loss among their social circles. The training was valuable in offering different methods for helping others grieve. Specifically, the training coach offered ways to do so through a written letter. The day improved my awareness of different kinds of grief. It also left me better equipped to guide students if they knew their pen pal was suffering with loss.

More recently, I attended the workshop ‘Well Read: Using Narrative Methodologies to Innovate Co-Productive Loneliness Research.’ The workshop was run by Georgina and her

partner in loneliness research from the University of Northumbria, Katy. There were a diversity of attendees from different charities and companies involved with loneliness in Leeds. The range of projects that are currently running to prevent loneliness was a big surprise for me. It reemphasized how big of an issue it is in every community. The area of discussion I found particularly interesting was surrounding technology. Many projects are introducing radio, skype, and other forms of technology as a way for older people to feel reconnected to their community. Part of my dissertation research, which I'm currently working on, is how harmful social media is for young people. It can cause feelings of dissatisfaction with their lives and loneliness. In our digital age, technology can have a profound effect on our wellbeing. It's interesting to explore how this differs across the generations. The workshop was a valuable experience for me. Most simply, because it showed me the diverse range of careers and corporations there are out there. Furthermore, experiencing how they collaborate in their community work was insightful.

Being part of Writing Back has allowed me to see the level of research and work that universities do beyond teaching. It has taught me that one small idea can have a great impact. The idea to connect students with older residents was a simple but ambitious one, but its effect has been astounding and wide-reaching. The hours alongside my studies were always manageable and flexible. Plus, it was nice to have something different to do, other than essays or exams, which still felt like I was using my time productively.

For my dissertation I am working on a creative writing project. As an aspiring writer I have always been aware of the value of sharing stories. Writing Back, for me, does just that. By enabling people to share stories, Writing Back allows people to feel connected. I hope, as everybody asks me, that similar projects do take-off and enrich other areas of the country too.