

BusinessWeekly

Self Discovery Through the Written Word

the bridge between **workplace** and **workforce**

By Ann Krajewski

With institutions of higher learning all around us, writing workshops are nothing new in Tompkins and surrounding counties. One particular workshop is called "Writing through the Rough Spots," the brainchild of educator Ellen Schmidt of Ithaca, who offers courses through her business, Writing Room.

"It's different from other writing workshops in that the focus is not on perfecting style or with an eye on publishing, but instead, it's about the process," says Schmidt. "While a fair amount of my students are in fact published writers, I have just as many who have never written anything that's personal to them."

After teaching at many venues over the years, including 15 years as education director at a crisis center, Schmidt developed her workshop concept when she realized her own education and personal background, as well as her career, put her in a strong position to offer people knowledge that could improve the quality of their lives.

"The idea originated from my own experiences with the benefit of writing during challenging times throughout my own life, and Writing Room braids together the strands of my life's work in writing, teaching, leading workshops and counseling," she says.

In describing what one should expect from attending the 10-week course, Schmidt says, "I wanted to create an atmosphere in my classes in which I would feel comfortable if I were attending myself and to make others feel welcome. Working through the Rough Spots is intend-

ed to be personal rather than academic."

In what way, exactly? "Writing is different than speaking or thinking," she explains. "By putting memories and emotions into written words we give them parameters, size and shape, and they become more manageable." Schmidt offers a favorite quote from E.M. Forster: "How do I know what I think until I see what I say?" That really speaks to me about what it is I'm putting forth here."

While the writing has a therapeutic effect, she emphasizes that the course is not group therapy. There is no discussion of people's situations, no problem-solving, no advice dispensed.

"The class provides an opportunity and tools to create fresh, illuminating writing," says Schmidt. "How to bring an experience closer or farther away, or how to create greater clarity by writing from another's perspective are among these tools. One gets to know oneself and others in new ways."

Schmidt notes that each class offers what she calls windows and mirrors. "What I mean by that is windows into others; gaining someone else's perspective through reading aloud to each other and having it down on paper before your eyes is like looking at your own reflection."

The subjects written about are personal and diverse, she says. "Employment concerns, old struggles and new ones, relationships, losses, fears, memories, hopes and dreams."

Participants are encouraged to write fiction, non-fiction, or a combination of the two for their weekly in-class and at-home assignments, or "sparks." Sometimes writing fiction makes it easier to address tough



Photo by Ann Krajewski

Ellen Schmidt says her Writing Room students often find humor in complex personal situations.

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The course has attracted attention from Cornell, which has asked her to bring "Writing through the Rough Spots" to the campus so that students and staff can use the class as a means to creatively handle stress.

While Schmidt works with people individually, some of whom are preparing to publish, she smiles when expressing a particular interest in what she calls the "midwifery" of writing.

"Whether in my one-to-one work or in classes, students make discoveries about their lives and often find humor in complex situations," she says. "I love people's stories and hope to help in each person's unique unfolding process."

Students include restaurant servers, office workers, teachers, beauticians, artists, professors, people struggling with serious ill-

ness, health professionals and social workers among others.

"Because we live in a small community, each person's writing is better with the knowledge that what is written and said remains confidential within the class."

Participants introduce themselves by first name basis and then more through the content of their writing over the 10-week course. As each session is different, many participants continue or return to the next or subsequent series. Schmidt says it doesn't matter whether you're a scholar or a blue-collar type.

"This is so different from a typical writing class," she says. "Anyone can write if they want to. My goal is to make them feel that way."

Contact Ellen Schmidt by calling 273-4489 or by visiting www.writingroomworkshops.com