

WRITE ON

Honors Interns and the Iowa Youth Writing Project

By Hannah Cargo

Is Iowa City a City of Literature for all ages? The Iowa Youth Writing Project (IYWP), a community-based program, hopes to address just that. Sophie Wagner, a first-year honors student, notes that “writing can feel inaccessible when you’re a kid,” with programs being either expensive or far away. IYWP remedies that by connecting children and teens with volunteers of all backgrounds. The goal? Fostering a love and skill for writing. This fall, IYWP began its programming again with help from the University of Iowa Honors Program.

As a part of the honors program, students can gain experiential learning credit. This allows students to take a more adventurous, hands-on style approach to learning. Serving as an intern in IYWP is one of those opportunities. Student interns work with kids of many ages and backgrounds, as IYWP extends from kindergarten to twelfth grade and across eastern Iowa. Volunteers and interns in the IYWP regularly host writing events, after-school programs, or other artistic events in classrooms. They also plan for larger community events, like author visits or college admission essay courses. As Camille Socarras, Associate Director of IYWP put it, “Who doesn’t want to spend an hour a week with funny kids?” The focus for honors students is adaptivity. They serve as a bridge between the Magid Center for Writing, which is the project’s university partner, and the larger community. Like any other internship, students are building skills like communication, event planning, and flexibility, but they also get to build exciting relationships.

“IYWP shows kids that it is possible to get your work published [...] that writing isn’t as unattainable as it’s sometimes made out to be. Or it just shows kids that writing is fun.”

- Sophie Wagner

To the students working with IYWP, the internship is an exciting new way to interact with their community. Wagner is a newly accepted member of the programming and coverage crew team. This involves photographing and arranging media output for IYWP events. Wagner hopes to improve her skills in journalism and said she is “excited because [IYWP] gives me an opportunity to see a lot of different places.” Although most of the activity within the IYWP is still adjusting back to in-person events, interns and volunteers can expect to travel at least weekly to school events.

When it comes to volunteering at IYWP, there is also a deeply emotional impact. Many people feel a sense of dedication to the community, the craft of writing, or children’s well-being. Socarras said, “As an Iowa City native, it’s important to me to actively contribute to my home community.” The University of Iowa, being a creative writing hub, is full of students who were fortunate enough to be encouraged in their youth. Many feel they should return the favor. Wagner, who also calls Iowa City home, remembers once being a student in the IYWP. She said, “There was a day when we had to walk around Iowa City and write about what we saw. We did a similar thing in Honors Primetime, and it brought me back to that.” Creating that timeless love of learning is a crucial part of IYWP.

The Iowa Youth Writing Project is especially important now; after the past few years, many children are eager to take part in school programs. If IYWP’s printed collections of youth writing show anything, the kids are



Pictured: Students at Horace Mann Elementary embrace an IYWP volunteer, 2015. Provided by Camille Socarras.

brimming with creativity. Wagner finds the program’s work inspiring, which is just what the community needs: “IYWP shows kids that it is possible to get your work published, and that writing isn’t as unattainable as it’s sometimes made out to be. Or it just shows kids that writing is fun.” Socarras thinks that kids need creative collaboration even though it is often dismissed in favor of scientific fields. She said, “I think it’s so easily forgotten that creativity is a

skill. Being able to express yourself—knowing yourself—also contributes to being a successful STEM [Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math] person.” Socarras believes that honors students are working to make sure that children feel heard and seen, both artistically and personally. Volunteers remind them that they matter.

So is Iowa City a City of Literature for all ages? IYWP answers with a resounding “yes!”

For those interested, the IYWP volunteer form is open to anyone and located on their website:

<https://iywp.org/work-with-us/volunteers>