



**AROHE**  
*Brief*

**Community Building and  
Shared Writing Groups**

AROHE Briefs identify programs and practices that support both retiree organizations and individual faculty and staff retirees.



# COMMUNITY BUILDING THROUGH SHARED WRITING EXPERIENCES

An AROHE Educational Brief

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## Introduction

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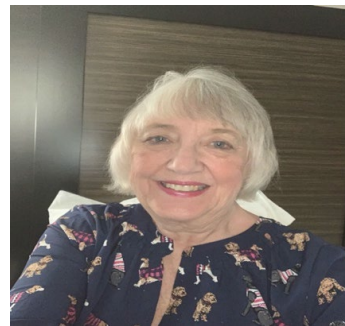
As active retirees, we all agree that AROHE and other retirement organizations play an important role in the lives of retired individuals. Financial and health issues arise as part of the aging process, and we can provide educational seminars, webinars, and other forms of information to assist in those areas indirectly. *However, as indicated by Dr. Debbie Jackson, the one area that retirement organizations can make a direct impact is that of social engagement--- building a sense of community and belonging for each retiree.*

In this Brief, we offer information on the value of shared writing groups as a means of community building for retirement organizations. Contributors to this special brief include Clemson Emeritus College leadership and their two Memoir Writing Groups and a contribution by the University of Minnesota's Women's Club Creative Writing Group. In addition, we provide resources that will support and encourage retirement organizations through shared writing, including *Memoir on Retirement*, a book by AROHE Board Member Dr. Kaye Jeter.

We wish to thank everyone who has contributed to this Brief. We believe that retirement is an important phase of our lives that benefits from a community of shared learners. Our goal is to describe ways that retirement organizations can bring individuals together around shared writing experiences. In this way retirees can find new friendships, share intellectually stimulating conversations, and even publish their shared writing through books, briefs, and other publications.

- Shared writing groups can create their own goals, agendas, and delivery formats.
- These groups can also provide social support and enrichment for diverse learners from varied backgrounds.
- The common focus centers around a chosen topic that brings the members of the group together.
- Shared Writing Groups are open to the creative process, both in writing and social engagement.
- Writing groups can include shared meals, tours, travel, and other forms of exploration.

In my own experience with the writing groups, I have made lasting friendships with members from very different backgrounds and academic departments. We hope this Brief is interesting and helpful to you and to your retirement organization, and we invite you to contact any of the authors who have contributed to the Brief. You will also find links to access publications shared by the authors of this Brief.



**Dee Stegelin, AROHE Board Member**

## The Critical Role of Community Building in Retirement Organizations

**Debbie Jackson**, Executive Director, Clemson's Emeritus College. [dbj@clemson.edu](mailto:dbj@clemson.edu)

Successful retirement requires three main components: *financial security, health and well-being, and meaningful engagement*. Of these three, AROHE and retirement organizations can make a significant difference in meaningful engagement. We can provide opportunities for our emeritus faculty to belong, to find new communities of common interest, and to contribute. We can also provide education and information on financial and health issues, but we may not be able to directly impact either. *One way that retirement organizations can make a positive impact is through Community Building.*

Clemson's Emeritus college serves as the academic home for retired faculty engaging this community of scholars to enrich their lives, serve the university, and serve their extended communities. We have an advantage. We start with a common bond of having worked at the university, we may not have known each other, but this common bond links us into an existing "community" upon which we can build new friendships, new interest groups, and a sense of belonging. Clemson's Emeritus College and all retirement organizations have an opportunity to foster a healthy environment of genuine concern for the well-being and continuing success of our members. How we do this will vary. Clemson's Emeritus College is supported by the university, and we document our engagement with and contributions to the university. The College encourages and enables its members' meaningful engagement in university affairs and champions their continuing role as a resource for faculty, staff, and students through teaching, research, service, and mentoring.

### Building Community and a Sense of Belonging

In order to build a sense of community within our emeritus college, we look for ways to bring

diverse faculty together by finding common interests. The opportunities are unlimited but do require nurturing by the members. Some of our common interest groups include birding expeditions, weekly and special music events, travel and tour experiences, individual and group trivia events, and shared writing groups. Emeritus college members may choose to be part of many interest groups, but there is room also for a person to belong to a single interest group. Other individuals choose to participate in weekly lectures or seminars but not join an interest group. ***The college's goal is to provide a variety of programs and activities from which to choose, but to know they can participate in person or virtually.*** Many of the college's activities are provided with in-person and hybrid formats. This allows our members from other states and extended locations to actively participate in all programs and activities provided by the college.



### Clemson Emeritus Memoir Writing Group Creating Friendships and Fun Through Memoir Writing

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In early 2020, the Clemson Emeritus College began to expand its program offerings for members, and this effort took off once Covid-19 hit as we all were grounded in our homes. Zoom offered new possibilities, and it enabled



## **Building Community through a Creative Writing Circle— University of Minnesota’s Women’s Club**

**Marilyn DeLong**, President, University of  
Minnesota Women’s Club and Co-Leader of  
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Have you ever thought about pursuing a fascinating writing topic of personal interest, but need some motivation? A writing group offers both motivation and support for writing. In addition, it is a great way to get to know others with similar interests in writing.

The *Creative Writing Circle* is a subgroup of women who are members of the University of Minnesota Women’s Club (UMWC). In this special interest group, we focus upon a self-selected topic of interest to write about, i.e. a mother’s memories of life in a difficult context of time and place, the experience of living in another culture, or the opportunities and challenges of living within this one. Such life experiences offer the fodder for exploration and provide a reason to further explore the experience. This recently formed group of creative writers came together as one of 17 interest sections in UMWC. A primary goal of UMWC is to foster community in small groups of women pursuing a variety of personal interests such as hiking, women’s health, art and design, or poetry. All are vital ways of fostering relationships among mature women.

UMWC is a group of approximately 300 women that started as faculty wives in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century but has grown to include all women interested in participating in a social group with other vital and engaged women—all who would like to get to know you better. Additionally, each year UMWC provides scholarships for 10-12 undergraduate students at the University of Minnesota, each at \$5,000.

Members in the *Creative Writing Circle* are engaged in writing memoirs, historical fiction, poetry, or whatever is of interest. We ask for voluntary submissions of 5-10 pages one week ahead, in time to review for the next meeting. We receive 2-3 submissions each month to share with others in the group. At our monthly 2-hour meeting, the group reviews the submission and offers support and critique. Often the reviewers ask probing questions and offer suggestions for further detail and development of the writing. The critique is kind, insightful, questioning, and focused on improvements. We also practice writing prompts, such as “your most demanding teacher,” “your first kiss,” or “the year you were born.” Sometimes these writing prompts become enlarged memories to write about.

In the process of writing something about your life, there are discoveries to be made. For example, we have discovered that remembering induces more memories; the outcome of triggering one memory can be enriched by remembering another. This often happens as we think about either the pain or blessing that we feel in our lives the first time around but realize the impact later in writing about the experience.

Writing about your life is important, especially at a significant life point for this group of women, such as retirement transition. Such a life review can help a person see purpose in what has been accomplished in a lifetime and help with the transition to further purpose. Members who are familiar with helpful references encourage reading about processes and procedures in published works. Reading such references makes a person realize writing is no easy task:

- *Peeling off the layers*: Lillian Hellman in *Pentimento* suggests that writing about your life is like peeling the layers to see what you didn’t see the first time. Perhaps in the process you learn to value in a different but still recognizable way.

This has proven to be the experience of the creative writers group.

- *Finding your Voice*: Writing about your life is not just a matter of remembering. It is a matter of finding your voice and your audience. Mary Karr in her book, *The Art of Memoir*, suggests that the first step is to start with a blank page and fill it with memories. Then in the process of structuring the memories for your intended audience, you must find your voice. If you can't do this, she believes that you might as well relax and go to a movie or have a glass of wine.
- *Unreliable truth*: Maureen Murdock writes in her published work, *Unreliable Truth, On Memoir and Memory* that memoirs are "unreliable truth" because they are focused on one person's memories. Even though the writer tells the story from their perspective, it is still one perspective. Family members who compare the writing of one family member often conclude that they grew up with a different perspective on the family.

### **Group Members share the value of a Writing Group:**

Many in the group have experience with writing, critiquing and publishing. These experiences range from having been a writing instructor, to being a publisher of books of fiction or nonfiction. But we welcome those without writing experience who are just interested in writing a story about personal life experiences. Here are some of their stories:

*--"What I've found so inspiring about this writing group is the freedom to write about any subject in any genre we choose. Non-fiction, poetry, fiction. You name it. Some of us have a background in only academic writing, and these choices are so much fun. My background is more focused on journalistic writing, and now*

*I'm able to spread my wings to try writing by different rules, or to break a few rules! It's gratifying to be forced to write on deadline, which I'm accustomed to, but also to have a supportive audience that's less judgmental than an editor under the stress of deadlines and with more rigid ideas about form". Louise Mengelkoch*

*--"Mutual support is vital in developing writing skills. Writers gain confidence through encouragement and come to experience the great satisfaction of self-expression and examination. The shared stories of each other's lives are fascinating and draw the participants close as a team". Judy McConnell*

*-- "For years I planned to write about my family's story of displacement after World War II. My background in writing includes personal journaling, and professional writing related to my career in nursing. Several women in our group have vastly more experience in writing than me; however, we share a love of words. After reading each other's submissions, we discuss and offer ideas to enhance our writing. Joining is group has helped me become more disciplined in writing my story, while also expanding my knowledge in how to construct a well written story. This is the first writers' group I ever joined, and I feel lucky to have landed here at the start of my journey". Deb Legan*

*--"I have been an academic all my life with the purpose of writing for objectivity in reporting research. Participating in this writer's group made me realize that writing my memoir is a totally different effort. In sharing my writing, the reviewers continue to ask the question: "But how does it make you feel?" I have come to realize that writing about feelings is not only cathartic but calls for a totally different kind of effort. I find the shared writing experience to be an excellent motivation to rethink my life and is a way to express gratitude for the many important influences from family, teachers and friendly mentors. And YES, shared writing is a*

way to learn about those fascinating experiences of other women in the group”.



**Marilyn DeLong**, President University of Minnesota Women's Club. [mdelong@umn.edu](mailto:mdelong@umn.edu)

### References

Hellman, Lillian. 1973. *Pentimento*. Boston: Little Brown.

Karr, Mary. 2015. *The Art of Memoir*. New York: HarperCollins.

Murdock, Maureen. 2003. *Unreliable Truth, On Memoir and Memory*. New York: Seal Press.

## **Moments and Memories: A Project with Unintended Results**

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### History and Goals

*Moments and Memories* grew out of a discussion in the Memoir Interest Group in connection with the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Emeritus College (EC). Although the discussion began in the Memoir Writing Group, the project involved many more EC members. The goal was to produce a collection of memoirs that would represent Clemson University: a mosaic of university life.

## **Moments and Memories (MMI) Evolution and Publication Description**

We solicited submissions from EC members and held writing support sessions, in person and online. A Taskforce established to guide the project paired authors with partners to help in development and revision of memoir selections. The book was published by Clemson University Emeritus College in paperback form consisting of 280 representing 57 authors. The stories spanned 61 years of university life, from 1961 forward. A few examples taken from that first volume will give you a flavor of the selections.

*“Old historians like myself, it’s said, never die – they just fade into the past they have always claimed is so important.”* (Donald M. McKale, p.28) This initial sentence sums up, at least in part, our goal that Clemson University history is important and should be remembered.

*“Reflecting on my professional journey at Clemson University, I came to realize that the most enduring memory I have is the constant commitment to creating a sense of community.”* (Dolores A. Stegelin, p. 99). This sense of community is one that permeates the Emeritus College.

*“Somehow, our minds curate memories according to their own whims, and often the most sharply recalled particulars are but minor fragments of larger, complex matters.”* (Cecil O. Huey, p. 208). We included selections on major events in the life of the university from several viewpoints, which provided a richness to our mosaic of university life.

## **Moments and Memories II Goals and Current Processes**

We presented copies of *Moments and Memories (MMI)* to University President Clements and members of the Board of Trustees as well as the president of the Faculty Senate. This largesse paid dividends related to EC visibility. When EC members received a copy of MMI at the 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary celebration, many regretted that they had not participated. Based on the response to the first volume of memoirs, we decided to produce a second volume.

## References

We hold monthly writing support sessions, alternating between face-to-face and online. These support sessions provide positive, constructive advice to authors. We have a group of EC members who serve on a review board, providing feedback to authors and ultimately making the acceptance decisions for the second volume. Our goal is to have 80 to 100 memoirs for another book by the end of 2026.

### **Tips for AROHE Members in Developing a Memoir for the College or University**

First, be specific about what you want. Our goal was to have EC members write about specific, contextualized moments and memories of their time at Clemson. We did not want a vitae recitation or a lifespan rendition. The goal is reflected in the title of our volume of memoirs.

Second, provide ongoing support, including writing partners and writing support sessions. The sessions need to be accessible, which is why we offer face-to-face sessions alternating with online sessions, led by several members of the Task Force.

Finally, make sharing ones' writing a *safe space*; that is, acknowledge that memoir is a different genre from those EC members have written over their careers, and provide positive, constructive feedback to authors who take the risk to share their writing with a small group of colleagues.

### **Why MMI has been Effective in Community Building**

Small group support sessions engender camaraderie, and sharing memories prompts group members' memory processes resulting in additional selections. In small group sessions, EC members meet and get to know colleagues not encountered during tenure at the academy. Reading others' memoirs spurs discussion and sharing of memories resulting in more in-depth selections. Support sessions provide a safe place to talk about EC members' writing. A feeling of safety in small writing groups supports camaraderie among EC members.

Huey, C. O. Jr. (2023). Possums. In V. R. Gillis, D. B. Jackson, K. N. Headley, & M. Duckenfield (Eds) *Moments and Memories: Reflections of Emeritus College Faculty* (pp. 208-210). Clemson University Emeritus College.

McKale, D. M. (2023). Remembering the change that made a far different Clemson. In V. R. Gillis, D. B. Jackson, K. N. Headley, & M. Duckenfield (Eds) *Moments and Memories: Reflections of Emeritus College Faculty* (pp. 28-30). Clemson University Emeritus College.

Stegelin, D. A. (2023). Clemson's creating a sense of community: Vignettes of my faculty experiences. In V. R. Gillis, D. B. Jackson, K. N. Headley, & M. Duckenfield (Eds) *Moments and Memories: Reflections of Emeritus College Faculty* (pp. 99-102). Clemson University Emeritus College.

**Clemson Emeritus College-  
*Moments and Memories, Volume I***

## Concluding Thoughts

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We hope this Brief is helpful to the retired faculty and staff in AROHE and other retirement organizations. Our goal is to share the importance of Community Building through Shared Writing Experiences. As these authors have described, building a community of writers requires these components:

- Retired faculty and staff seeking new friendships and relationships within their retirement context.
- Leaders who enjoy the writing process and are skilled at connecting diverse groups of individuals.
- Blocks of Time and Space in which to bring retirees together to share their life experiences, plan an agenda to support the writing process, do hands-on work toward writing and publishing, and socialize with one another.
- Technology to support communication among the interested writers, preserve the work of the group, enable the exchange of ideas and writing samples, and reach out to distant retirees through hybrid writing sessions.

Each of these authors demonstrates a willingness to provide leadership and to stay the course over a period of time. From the rich history of the University of Minnesota's Women's Club and Creative Writing Circle to the more recently established memoir writing groups at the Clemson Emeritus College, the energy and commitment of these leaders is unveiled.

Building community takes time and the intentional planning of shared activities. Establishing a creative writing group in your retirement organization is one way to bring individuals together to build relationships that serve as social and psychological gifts in the healthy retirement experience.

In addition, creative writing groups can develop and accomplish meaningful goals such as articles, book chapters, and books. These products provide an enduring way to capture the memories and shared experiences of those in these creative writing groups.



## Shared Writing Resources

- Clemson Memoir Group (in press). *The Sixties: The Long Decade (1954-1974)*. Clemson University Emeritus College.
- V. R. Gillis, D. B. Jackson, K. N. Headley, and M. Duckenfield (2023). *Moments and Memories: Reflections of Emeritus College Faculty*. Clemson University Emeritus College.
- Poets and Writers Groups.
- <https://groups.pw.org/writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/writing...>
- *Thurber House Writing Resources*. Thurber House, <https://www.thurberhouse.org/resources>

*We hope this AROHE Brief is useful to you and your retirement organization. Please share with your colleagues-- **Dee Stegelin**, AROHE Board--Education and Research Committee.*