PhD Student Teaches Creative Writing at Women’s Prison
by Stacey Stevens

Being a graduate student can be demanding and time-consuming. Between work, research, and class, few students find time for extracurricular activities. DU students tend to manage this juggling act quite well and Brandi Homan, PhD student in creative writing, is one such student.

“Brandi is an exemplary student,” said Selah Saterstrom, associate professor and director of the creative writing program. “She does so much positive community work. She spearheads and directs a prison education and creative writing program in her spare time.”

Homan, along with several other current and former DU students, volunteer and teach creative writing to inmates at Denver Women’s Correctional Facility (DWCF).

“We believe it’s important to give back to the community that supports us,” said Homan. “Teaching creative writing at DWCF is one of the most invigorating and rewarding experiences I’ve had in a writing workshop setting.”

In addition to her volunteer work at DWCF, Homan has worked as a writing consultant in the writing center and served as an editorial assistant for the Denver Quarterly, one of the top creative writing journals in the U.S., which is hosted by the creative writing program. This year, she will be acting in a new role as the assistant editor for Denver Quarterly.

Homan also enjoys playing roller derby with the Rocky Mountain Rollergirls.

“Derby is the perfect sport for people, like me, who live in their heads most of the time,” said Homan. “In derby, there's no time to think about anything else or you will get killed! Plus, it's a consciously feminist sport and organization, and I love that.”

Although Homan is heavily involved in the community, she considers herself first and foremost a writer.

“I sometimes remind myself that writing, being a writer, is my number-one goal in life,” said Homan. “The creative writing program is great because this approach is understood and expected.”

Homan’s research focuses on cultivating her creative writing skills. Currently, she is interested in the idea of a Midwestern gothic literature, which is work dedicated to and inspired by the Midwest, an area of the United States that is often dismissed.

“My writing projects revolve loosely around a group of somewhat-troubled teenagers,” described Homan. “These teenagers are on a crew that detasses corn during summers in the Midwest.”

“Writers like Donald Ray Pollock and Sherwood Anderson embody the movement and ideas of Midwestern gothic. These authors do this in a way that gives this area, with its history and mythology, a voice,” said Homan, who aims to immerse herself in this type of work.
“Brandi’s stories are rural, farm-based, and that might seem like a recipe for a certain kind of regional fiction,” said Brian Kiteley, professor in the English department. “But Brandi writes of that world inside it, outside it, and above it. She takes very inarticulate and even apparently stupid characters and she lets them live and breathe and manage in the world with a kind of integrity and intelligence.”

“She does not condescend to characters that most writers would condescend to,” Kiteley added. “She sees into their lives and desires. I am impressed by how much Brandi knows of literature and philosophy, but if you read only her fiction, you see a writer very concerned with a small slice of the world and its inner workings. This is the sort of writer we look for in our PhD graduate students.”

Homan chose the creative writing program at DU for its reputation. The program was recently ranked as the number-one creative writing PhD program in the country by Poets & Writers magazine.

“I’m interested in the academic job market, so a program’s reputation is important,” said Homan. “But much more important is the overall experience of the program. The English department and creative writing program are a good fit for me because there is a good balance of traditional scholarly work with experimental creative work.”

Earning her MFA in poetry from Columbia College Chicago, Homan found it imperative to find a program with an experimental culture and to continue in the tradition of being surrounded by innovative writing and writers, both peers and faculty.

“The faculty at DU are world-class, internationally respected writers,” said Homan. “I wanted to study with them (Selah Saterstrom, Laird Hunt and Brian Kiteley, to name a few) based on their written work, of course, but I had heard from other DU students how invested these faculty are in both their students and their students’ work.”

As for the future, Homan hopes to pursue an academic career and teach creative writing at the university level. For now she hopes to garner creative writing teaching experience in the university setting, grow her editorial capabilities through her assistant editorship at Denver Quarterly and finish the program with a strong dissertation.

“More important than any of these quantifiable goals,” Homan explains, “is my desire to learn to be a better writer.”