

Both Sides of the Track

By: Stevi Riel and Meaghan Pear

“It started with reading” he says when asked how he got to where he is, which is in a brightly lit, second story office in Lake Ontario Hall. Bare of personal touches, with exception of the acoustic guitar waiting quietly in the corner, Matt Mullins is a visiting professor of the Writing department, new to Grand Valley State University. And it started very early. As a 3rd grader, testing at a college freshmen reading level may have been unheard of except for the fact that he comes from a history of literary mindsets. His grandfather worked on the printing press and his father was an award winning reporter for the Detroit Times. Growing up in an Irish Catholic family and attending boarding school would prove to be influential themes on Matt’s future writings but it wasn’t until he started out as a communications undergrad, taking a creative writing elective, that he realized he was truly a writer.

And a teacher. A musician. A reader.

“I love words,” he says simply. “The sound of them, the way they look on paper, the way they are constructed, the romanticism-all of it. I love words.”

And he isn’t picky. His work includes poetry, fiction and screen writing. He has spent time doing freelance,

writing reviews for concerts, books and films. Published in dozens of different literary magazines and newspapers, his writing has appealed to a variety of masses.

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After earning his bachelors of English from Michigan State University, Matt found himself in Kalamazoo at Western Michigan University where he taught a variety of writing classes, both creative and professional while he worked on his master’s degree, which he finished in 1993. With a MFA in Creative Writing and content with teaching, Matt stayed on board at Western to pursue a doctorate in literature with a creative dissertation. In 1997 he obtained his Ph.D., but unbeknownst to him, it would be seven years before he began teaching again.

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Having spent a large amount of this absence working in the corporate world as a “glorified copywriter,” he is able to tell the tale of a writer from either side of the track.

Matt found himself working alongside a handful of his friends at an up and coming company that developed

websites for clients. Sigma Six, an innovative marketing firm marked Matt’s time as a professional writer. Being the only technical writer in the company, Matt was the go to guy. “They called me Doc, since I was the only guy with a Ph.D.,” he says to explain the camaraderie he had with his colleagues. And initially the job suited him, although it wasn’t the creative outlet he would soon realize was an essential part of his life.

Matt spent the majority of his day at a desk working on writing copy. In the morning he would go to group meetings to figure out what he should be writing, and then he would head to his desk to start working on websites or writing copy for brochures, banners, or anything else that needed to be done. Often, his days would stretch far beyond the expected nine to five.

This was tough, especially after spending a large amount of his life in an unconventional schedule; teaching different classes at different times each semester and of course spending time developing his own creative work. He describes his years in corporate America with a bluntness that helps us to understand the dissatisfaction he had during this time. “I mean, how excited can you get, describing the interior of a Buick? Essentially I was a part of the materialistic, corporate world, selling things that weren’t

important to me.” But this lack of creative freedom professionally only forced Matt to seek alternative outlets.

Always a musician, he started to dedicate more time to understanding music, learning to fine tune his skills on the acoustic guitar, writing lyrics and playing gigs with his band. He says that looking back he can definitely see a change, musically, that took place.

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Ultimately, working in the professional track wasn’t what Matt knew he needed. He wanted to write things that mattered to him, which didn’t include making luxury vehicles or mass market products appealing to the average consumer. When asked, he agreed that he needed his work to be important. “Writing ad copy or marketing material just wasn’t it,” he tells us “I went home at night almost feeling dirty or guilty because I wasn’t doing what I felt good about.”

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After the company went through several different ownerships, Matt decided to leave, and return to teaching. With a teaching style that reflects his easy going, deliberate personality, Matt appreciates the fact he has a job where he gets to “sit around reading

and talking about great writing.” His enthusiasm is evident in the way he conducts a class. Whether beginning class with a personal anecdote or teaming up with a student during a writing exercise, it’s easy to slip into his world where a great piece of writing is something of value and stimulation.

Also, having quite the learning experience transitioning from the professional to the creative side of writing, Matt can certainly offer advice to future writers.

“Get your routine down. Its all about doing it,” he says.

Matt also strongly emphasized that all writers need to learn to value objective criticism.

“Don’t be afraid to be bad.”

As for now, he’s happy with his decision to return to teaching, with his wife across campus in the sociology department and the city of Grand Rapids in his backyard. “I’m glad to be back” he says with an easy smile.

Undoubtedly, his prospective writing students will agree.