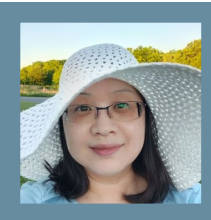


# WORD!

## Inside *WORD!*



PRWR director  
retires, pg. 8



Dr. Jianfen Chen  
joins faculty, pg. 10



Congrats to PRWR  
spring class 2024!  
Spotlights, pg. 12

## PRWR student's grant writing work wins \$82.5k for area nonprofit

by Daniella Bacigalupa

On a fall afternoon in September 2023, Will Eichler went for a ride in a rickety, borrowed van that picked up children from Franklin Square Elementary/Middle School and went to St. Luke's Youth Center's temporary home on Lafayette Avenue in Baltimore. Once the after-school program ended, Eichler rode the van as it dropped each child off at home.

Eichler had just begun his fall grant writing internship for St. Luke's Youth Center, also known as SLYC, and sometimes affably pronounced "slick". SLYC takes care of kids after school: feeding them, nurturing them, educating them. It's a safe place where children in West Baltimore can feel welcomed.

During his internship, Eichler took the lead on three grants that won awards totaling \$82,500.

The grants were \$50,000 for a new

van from the Baltimore-based Middendorf Foundation, \$20,000 from Baltimore Community Foundation to support collaboration with community partners, and \$12,500 to support after-school tutoring from Becton Dickinson, a multinational company.

Eichler says that listening is key to being a successful grant writer. Riding in the van was a way that he connected to the SLYC community.

"I got the opportunity to interview and speak with a lot of the people that work there," says Eichler.

"I've become pretty familiar with the story of how it started. Everybody there is very passionate. Listening to that and gaining all of that information and making sure I was internalizing all of that was really crucial so that I could write

(continued on p. 2)

## Three PRWR alumni authors: Q&As with *WORD!*

**Matt Lee** (2020) mixes disability and horror films in his memoir, *The Backwards Hand*.

**Mahdis Marzooghian** (2014) chronicles a story of an immigrant family confronting a murder, with a backdrop of ancient Persian tales, in *Death Has None*.

And **T. Madden** (2019) celebrates publication of *The Cosmic Color*, a transfem mech/kaiju novella; and *The Familialists*, a second novella featuring a villainous sociopath.

These three authors sat down with *WORD!* to talk about their forthcoming publications, their inspirations, and their motivations as authors.

(Q&As start on p. 3)



## PRWR student wins grants (cont.)

about it effectively while conveying all the passion that the people feel for St. Luke's."

Amanda Gardner Talbot, executive director of SLYC, says Eichler understood that part of his role "was not just to take existing language and adapt it to the grant at the time, but to really dive into the work that we do and get to know us first."

Eichler says that his experience with the creative writing track in

**"It was very clear in the language that he understood why it was as important as it was, and he was able to communicate that."**

— Amanda Talbot, director  
St. Luke's Youth Center

PRWR helped him learn to form narratives, which are a crucial part of every grant. He also says that taking the Rhetoric course taught him how to write persuasively.

"The main thing," says Eichler, "is trying to convince people to give St. Luke's money so that they can keep doing the good work that they do."

Talbot says that Eichler was open-minded and quickly learned how to tell St. Luke's story in an authentic way. She asked him to learn about the SLYC community, and he did so by doing the van ride. On the ride, he spoke with children

and asked questions of parents, then followed up with more questions of staff. This work culminated in the successful grant for SLYC to buy a new van.

"When he drafted that grant," says Talbot, "it was very clear in the language that he understood why it was as important as it was, and he was able to communicate that."

After Eichler's internship ended, Talbot asked him to stay on as an independent contractor and help as needed with research for grant

opportunities and other grant writing duties.

"Her asking me to stay on," says Eichler, "that was the moment when I felt the most accepted into the fold of St. Luke's."

Talbot and SLYC got connected to PRWR through the Towson University English department's program G.I.V.E., Giving in Valued Environments. G.I.V.E. is led by PRWR professors Dr. Zosha Stuckey and Dr. Carrie Grant and is supported by several PRWR

*(continued on p. 3)*



St. Luke's Youth Center students and staff gather around the organization's new van, purchased with a \$50,000 grant written in part by PRWR student Will Eichler. Photo courtesy of St. Luke's.

## PRWR student wins grants (cont.)

students who serve as interns and part-time staff. In the Spring 2024 semester, PRWR's Chandler Vicchio interned with St. Luke's to assist with marketing.

"Will was the first graduate student grant writing intern from TU to work with St. Luke's Youth Center," wrote Stuckey via email. "He was crucial to making that partnership grow and thrive."

Thanks to its own grant funding, G.I.V.E. has record numbers of interns and part-time employees this semester and by May 2024

had submitted more than 15 grants in the past academic year. Grant's students in the course Grant and Community Writing have been writing on behalf of Neighborhood Companions, a nonprofit that works in Turner Station, a historically black neighborhood in Baltimore County. Neighborhood Companions provides transportation for people who are at least 60-years-old.

PRWR students Stephanie Anderson and Samantha Park have also worked as recent graduate

assistants for G.I.V.E., particularly with its community partners Family Survivor Network and Northeast Towson Improvement Association.

After his internship ended, Eichler attended a St. Luke's Christmas event. Because much of his work had been remote, he hadn't met many people, so he introduced himself around the room.

"I said, 'Hey, I'm Will, I'm the grant-writing intern,' and a woman on the executive board said, 'Oh, you're Will! You got us a van!' And she gave me a hug."

## PRWR alumni author Q&As

*"This book honestly caught me a bit off guard."*

**Matt Lee, *The Backwards Hand***



Matt Lee

Matt Lee (PRWR 2020), a co-editor at the online literary journal, *Ligeia*, welcomes his first creative nonfiction book, *The Backwards Hand*.

Lee credits his experience as an editor with *Ligeia* for maintaining his excitement for writing. *The Backwards Hand* is a memoir about disability written in a "literary collage" style, by which he delivers swatches of several

separate narratives, glimpses that build into a coherent whole.

Lee has bilateral radioulnar synostosis, a malformation of the radius and ulnar bones that limits his arm mobility. His memoir examines how history views those who are differently abled.

Lee also published a novel, *Crisis Actor*, and has written and produced work for the stage. Northwestern University Press published *The Backwards Hand* in May 2024.

**WORD!:** How long had you wanted to write this book?

**A:** This book honestly caught me a bit off guard. I don't know that I had ever planned to write a memoir, to tell you the truth. It was part of an assignment when I was in Jeannie Vanasco's class, to write the first chapter of a memoir, and initially, I was going to write about something

completely different. But at one point Jeannie said something encouraging us to both write about subjects that made us uncomfortable and at the same time telling the story that only we could tell, finding that singular story that was unique to us. And it sort of just clicked that my disability being a somewhat rare condition would be good fodder to write about. And on top of that, it was something I had gotten increasingly cagey about discussing with people. I was actually quite shy about it and wouldn't bring it up unprompted, so I wanted to kind of interrogate why that was, that I had become so uncomfortable about this condition that I've lived with my whole life. And then when I tied it into horror films and—more broadly—depictions of disabled people and

(continued on p. 4)



## PRWR alumni author Q&As (cont.)

### Matt Lee, *The Backwards Hand*

abnormal bodies in horror. That was when the light bulb went off, and then it sort of just took on a mind of its own, and I followed it from there. I think that's how I knew I had something, was that the work itself was really pulling me and propelling me forward. It was like the work had to get out. It wasn't like I was necessarily in control.

**WORD!:** What movie monster/serial killer do you most identify with and why?

**A:** I have a soft spot for Frankenstein's monster. Having written an adaptation of Frankenstein for the stage, I got really close to the source material. I think that Mary Shelley's book still is just so ahead of its time and continues to be the benchmark for horror literature. The creature who's never really named in the book itself, the creation, is someone I really connect with and can empathize and sympathize with.

There's so many unique layers to that character because he's really sort of—he kind of mirrors human nature in that he's sort of born into the world, and he's totally innocent, and it kind of feeds into the whole nature versus nurture debate, right? He's shaped into this sort of monster because of circumstances. It's not really his fault, per se. He's sort of demonized by society, and that sets him down on this path of

murder and mayhem and monstrosity. But had he been shown some benevolence and kindness from his creator, it probably would have been a totally different story—certainly not as frightening of a story. For that reason, he's a character I've always connected with. Both the book and the film—numerous film adaptations—have always stuck with me. That's a character that a lot of people can sympathize with—especially the film really plays it up as well. You know the famous sequence of him seeing himself reflected in the pool of water, and you know that's when he realizes, oh my god, I'm a monster! Had he never seen that reflection, he never would have known otherwise, right?

So, I think that mirrors (no pun intended) a lot of what happens just in the society we inhabit. You're less likely to be born a monster than to be made into a monster by forces that are outside of your control.

**WORD!:** I loved the way you wove the narrative of your story together. How did you decide to establish the parallel storylines?

**A:** I had been working in this sort of literary collage style for some time. My first book is in the same sort of mode. The idea of a text as assemblage appealed to me as the best way to explain why it is that my mind works in a similar fashion. I'm a total junkie for

research. I'm always reading articles, books, watching films, you name it. And all this stuff just swirls around in my head, so I like to find ways to connect the dots between these seemingly random bits of information, so that when you're looking at it up close it seems sort of jumbled and chaotic but when you pull back it reveals more of a mosaic where it is really one big interconnected picture.

It lends itself to creating interesting juxtapositions on the page, sort of a way to catch readers off guard by putting these disparate pieces together and creating tension when they rub up against one another. So, it's both fun for me to write in this mode and it creates a unique reading experience as well.

— interview by Erin Lynner





## PRWR alumni author Q&As (cont.)

*"Persians are very animated when they're talking, and they love telling stories."*

### Mahdis Marzooghian, *Death Has None*



Mahdis Marzooghian

Mahdis Marzooghian (PRWR 2014) is co-founder and editor-in-chief of *Five on the Fifth*, a literary journal. *Death Has None* (Austin Macauley Publishers) is Marzooghian's debut novel. Her fiction and nonfiction have appeared in many literary journals, including *Heartwood Literary Magazine*, *Welter*, and *Mud Season Review*. She lives in McLean, Virginia.

**WORD!:** Why was it important that you tell a first-generation U.S. citizen story?

**A:** Even though the main plot is very much fictional, I wanted to talk about the overarching immigrant experience: what it's like coming to a totally different country where your parents feel very foreign, and even though you're growing up here you're in the school system learning English at a pretty quick

pace.

I came here not knowing a word of English, because I came here when I was around six. As soon as I started the first grade, I started taking ESOL, and by third grade I was completely fluent.

You're learning all of this stuff, and you're being immersed in the culture, but it's still very difficult. You feel very different. You feel that foreignness from the very beginning.

It's important to have those stories—the U.S. is a country of immigrants. Alongside this plot and this thing that happens to this family that's very much fictional, I wanted to talk about the very real experience of being an immigrant and what that's like growing up here. And I thought that was maybe even more important than the fictional part of the story.

**WORD!:** In *Death Has None*, the family of the protagonist, Cyrus, shares stories as life lessons. Why do you think stories are so important in Persian culture?

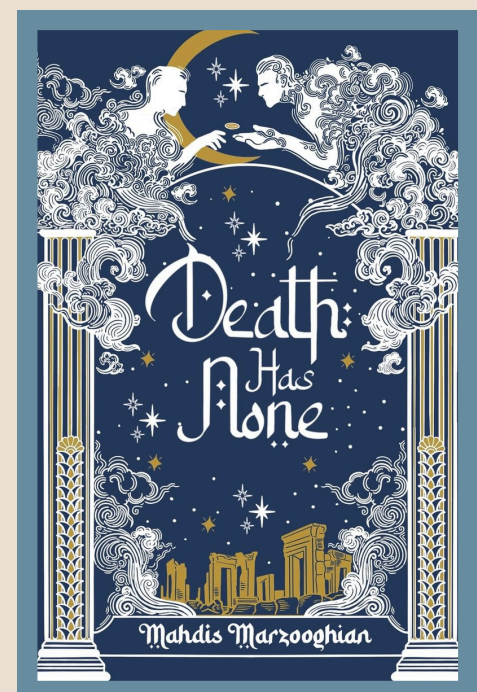
**A:** As I say in the book, they're very much ingrained in us. Every culture has its own stories that you hear, or you tell your children at bedtime, and that you grow up hearing, whether it's a fictional story or a story that just happened in your family. And it helps us to be closer ... especially when we are immigrants, and we live away from

our homeland. It really helps keep that anchor and that tether to your culture and your people.

It was really important to my parents to keep us immersed in our culture, immersed in the stories. Persians are very animated when they're talking, and they love telling stories.

My mother was very adamant—and I do have Cyrus' mother having that quality, too—but she was very adamant about having us learn Farsi. Not just to speak it, but to read it and write it. Because she knew how important it was to be able to communicate with other Iranians or family members back at home in Farsi, in our mother tongue. From pretty much birth, we're growing up hearing stories.

*(continued on p. 6)*



## PRWR Alumni Q&As (cont.)

### Mahdis Marzooghian, *Death Has None*

**WORD!:** How is *Death Has None* different from books by other Persian writers in the diaspora?

**A:** A number of stories that I've read by Persian writers—especially those in the diaspora here—are centered on the Iranian Revolution that happened in the 70s and a lot of politics. I very intentionally wanted to stray away from that. I didn't want to put the spotlight on things that divide us. Because especially with Persians, political topics are very divisive. You can't get a couple of Persians in a room and have them agree on a political topic. They're going to be arguing and everyone's going to have an opposing viewpoint.

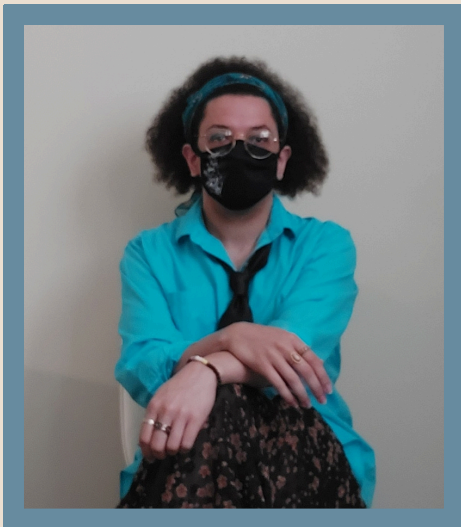
I really wanted to highlight and talk about the things that bring us together rather than divide us. You know: the culture, things we can agree on—the culture, the food, the language, the good part of our culture that we can always be proud of and agree on for the most part.

I didn't experience the revolution; I wasn't alive during that time. And I didn't get to experience the aftermath of it because I was six when I came here. So, I wanted to talk about something I did experience myself firsthand and that was being an immigrant. So that's the story that I wanted to tell.

– interview by Daniella Bacigalupa

*"Horror has always been an outsider genre."*

### T Madden, *The Cosmic Color; The Familialists*



T Madden

T Madden (PRWR 2019) is a horror writer living in northern Virginia. They have been published by *Writer's Digest* and *Castabout Literature*. One of their two new

novellas, *The Cosmic Color*, includes anime motifs, such as mecha, which is a large robot operated by a human.

**WORD!:** Your stories offer scares, which I won't spoil for readers. Why do you think people like to read frightening things?

**A:** It's a safe way to examine something that scares you. In writing these stories, too, I realized the other day that both have pretty heavy themes of repression and the bad things that can happen if you repress parts of yourself. Being able to look at those and figure out why they're scary, without the actual stakes for you—the writer and the reader—being life

and death, is very helpful mentally.

**WORD!:** I'm curious about your writing process for John's character in *The Familialists*. What is the specific imagery or certain qualities that inspired his character? You write, "John smiles at her, but it's like a chimpanzee's smile; not a greeting, a warning. The kind of smile that doesn't reach his eyes. Eyes that a moment ago Sorrel found deep and dreamy, but now she inexplicably sees as reptilian, unblinking."

**A:** He was really hard to write. A lot of us have, unfortunately, met someone like John. One of them might have even lived in a big white house on Pennsylvania Avenue, if you catch my drift.

(continued on p. 7)

## PRWR Alumni Q&As (cont.)

### T Madden, *The Cosmic Color*; *The Familialists*

Making a villain that was a believable person with these attitudes was difficult without making him mustache-twirlingly evil. A lot of the earlier drafts of him were really big and really



outlandish and getting the character right was trimming all of that down to its barest minimum. The reader is smart, and they are going to get what and who this character is. Making an antagonist have these microaggressions is much scarier than someone who is going to kick down the door and destroy everything in that Saturday-morning cartoon-villain kind of way.

**WORD!:** How do you think sci-fi and/or horror genres allow queer writers to express their experiences, fears, and hopes?

**A:** Horror has always been an outsider genre. The genre has a ton of space for any minority writer—queer, black, disabled, neurodivergent—to explore something because existence in

that space can also be really scary and that can be a way to explore that existence and that fear safely. To bring that new outside perspective.

In sci-fi, even if it's something more contemporary like a story that takes place in 2024, it's still very forward-looking to me. You can imagine these futures—whether it's something big like a space opera, or a few minutes in the future—to see what will society look like when we have these science-based tools. Whether it's to explore gender, the way *The Cosmic Color* does with a mecha, or if we look at the way that society itself has evolved or not evolved—how do the people in the story, regardless of the sci fi aspect, treat the people in these other communities?

— interview by Daniella Bacigalupa

#### WRITERS WHO WORK

Professional Writing  
Master of Science degree

# WRITE TO LEARN, WRITE TO EARN.

- Taught by working writers
- An education that can lead to a career

**TU** TOWSON UNIVERSITY | English

A nationally-recognized poet who has worked in publication design.  
A novelist who has also published as a ghost writer.  
A specialist in disability rhetoric who has won grants for non-profits.

Our award-winning faculty include scholars and practitioners who know the value of written and visual communication and are expert across a range of media and for a variety of audiences.

Graduates have found jobs throughout the Washington, D.C./Baltimore metropolitan area. They work in copy editing, marketing, social media, information design, publishing, technical or scientific writing. They teach in colleges. They've written successful grants for non-profits throughout our region. They've published magazine articles, books of poetry, and novels.

#### WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

- 36-credit hour program
- Rolling application deadline
- Thesis optional
- Classes meet in the evening and online

#### CHOOSE FROM THESE EDUCATIONAL TRACKS:

- Writing for the Public and Private Sectors
- Teaching Writing
- Journalistic Writing
- Technical Writing and Information Design
- Scientific Writing
- Creative Writing

#### LEARN MORE AT:

<https://www.towson.edu/cia/departments/english/gradwriting/>  
or write to [prwr@towson.edu](mailto:prwr@towson.edu)

**TU** TOWSON UNIVERSITY | English



## PRWR director retires from teaching after 17 years with TU

by Daniella Bacigalupa &  
Erin Lynner

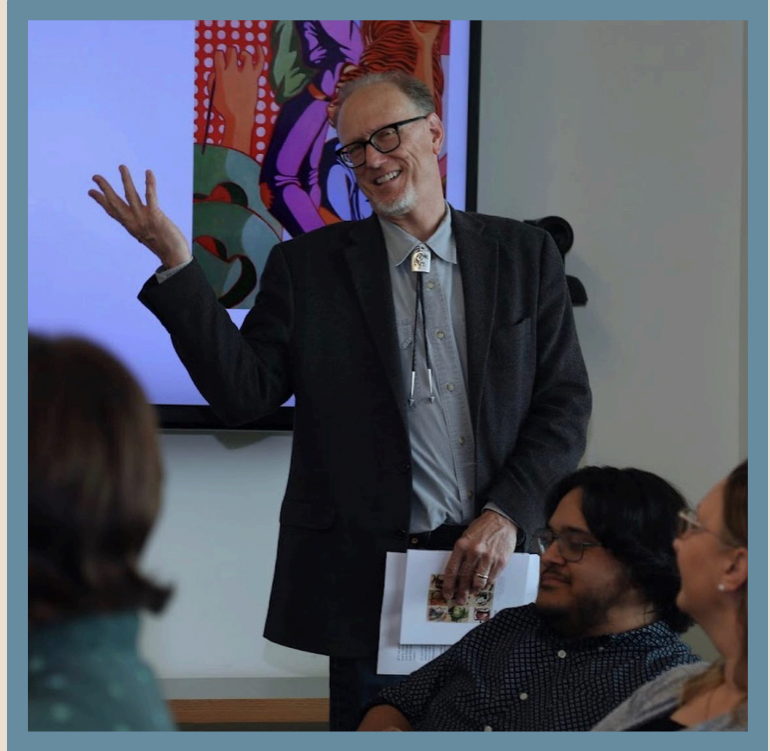
It's a Thursday evening one fall, and Michael Downs looks out his office window remarking how he gets the best view of the sunset anywhere on campus. His focus on where lighting is in any room pervades most of his days, and his writing, too.

Downs is always looking toward the light, which he sees as a key element in various art forms, including writing. "If you're creating a scene in fiction or nonfiction," he says, "pay attention to where the light is coming from."

Downs, PRWR director since 2019 and TU faculty since 2007, is retiring this semester to spend more time writing scenes and thinking about light. His last day will be May 31.

A Fulbright scholar award to Poland in 2021 helped Downs realize that he wanted to spend more time writing. In Poland, with less classroom work, "I had so much more creativity and freedom," he says, "and I was in this culture where writing really mattered, and I was doing writing that was unlike any writing I had ever done before. And that coupled with some personal changes showed me that I wanted to give more time to that part of myself."

Dr. Sarah Gunning, a professor of technical communication for PRWR and the English department, will become director as of June 1. Gunning acted as interim director



*Michael Downs speaking with students at a TU English department event, 2023.*

during Downs's Fulbright year.

"I have full confidence in Dr. Gunning," wrote PRWR professor Leslie Harrison via email. Harrison said she is interested to see how new leadership will shape the program and what new faculty will bring. Towson University will soon search to fill the vacant position for classes Downs taught.

Under his direction, PRWR faculty revised the program's curriculum. Downs hopes the new curriculum will be an advantage to students.

Also, Downs spearheaded the return of the Baltimore Writers' Conference (BWC) after a COVID hiatus of four years.

Hosted at TU, BWC gathers writers for a day of exchanging ideas and insights about the art and business of writing. Several

PRWR alumni attended the conference this past year. Downs surprised them when he promoted their books during his introduction and welcome. One of those authors was Mahdis Marzooghian, a 2014 PRWR alum.

"Like a proud parent gloating about his children's achievements," says Marzooghian. "He embodies what an educator should be, not just in the classroom, but outside as well."

Geoff Becker, a PRWR creative writing professor, says he will miss the candy bowl on Downs' desk. More than that, Becker says he will miss their conversations in the halls and in each other's offices. Having worked together for nearly two decades, Becker and Downs

*(continued on p. 9)*

## PRWR director retires from teaching (cont.)

have become friends outside of work. Becker understands how the demands of teaching make it difficult for writers to pursue their writing and says he hopes Downs gets to write more books.

For PRWR, Downs has taught courses in editing, writing short fiction, freelance writing, creative nonfiction, and Theory of Creativity. Before PRWR, he taught journalism at the University of Montana and at the American Indian Journalism Institute.

"Teaching journalism at the University of Montana was just a thrill," says Downs. "Teaching it at AIJI was an honor, and teaching it at Towson has been a real growth experience and incredibly rich."

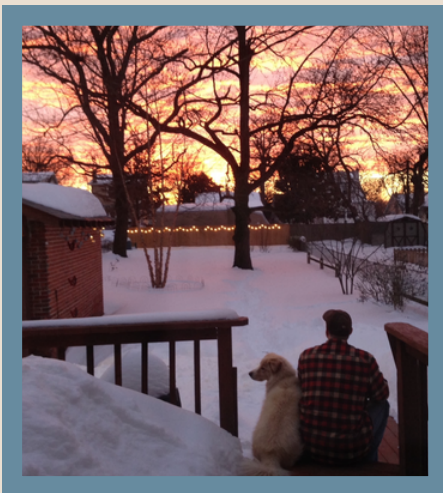
Downs already had a varied writing career when he began teaching. He holds a master of fine arts degree in creative writing, has been a newspaper reporter and features writer, a sportswriter, and had worked as a restaurant reviewer.

"He showed me that there was more than one path to becoming a writer," said Brendan Leonard, Downs's former student from Montana, via email. "And I didn't necessarily have to become a newspaper reporter—and that path could be winding and full of different experiences."

Downs challenges and inspires students, opening their minds, and helping them find self-confidence

in writing.

T Madden, (PRWR 2019) worked with Downs as Madden's thesis advisor while Madden was in the technical writing track. Downs, Madden says, taught many things about creative writing, including how to put characters at the center of the story and show the reader their motivations, approaches Madden has used to great effect in forthcoming books, *The Cosmic Color* and *The Familialists*.



Sunrise and snow at home on the back porch, Downs and Mimsy. Photo by Sheri Venema

"He was super patient with everything I wanted to do, but he would also push me further into territory that made me uncomfortable in a good way," says Madden.

Downs encourages students to publish work when they may not see its potential and to apply for opportunities they otherwise wouldn't. He supported Joe Martinak (PRWR 2023), when

Martinak had difficulty getting an internship.

"He encouraged me to apply to places that I didn't think I would get in," says Martinak, "including *Baltimore Magazine*, which I eventually did intern at."

While Downs focused many years on teaching students, he knows that students have equally influenced him.

"A thing I've loved most about teaching PRWR students is when I am wrong about something, and they challenge me," he says. "It's just thrilling. They're confident enough to say something, and then they're brilliant enough that I learn something, and that's always been a great part of it. Being in workshop and having a student reveal something about a piece that we're working on that I hadn't noticed or considered—love it."

Harrison hopes Downs will now find more time for his own projects.

"Downs is a great writer, and I'm so excited to see what he'll write as he transitions away from TU," wrote Harrison. "This is a great decision for him, as it will afford him time for research and writing that he hasn't had in years."

Downs' exit from PRWR will likely be a quiet one, a humble pass of the torch.

"Sometimes you just turn out the lights and go," says Downs. "You don't have to give a big hoo-hoo, as my mother would say."

## PRWR's newest professor prioritizes flexibility, accessibility in her classroom

by Erin Lynner

On a Wednesday night in Computer Lab 3101, Dr. Jianfen Chen's students watched as she built HTML and CSS code and troubleshooted a colored table border that wouldn't sit quite right. After a few minutes of her students offering solutions and Chen trying them out, she paused.

"You know what?" she said. "I think that we are not going to figure this out right now. I will take this home and bring back whatever solution I come up with so I'm not wasting your class time." And with a nod, she moved onto the next step in coding.

Just as on that Wednesday night, Dr. Chen demonstrates consideration for the time that her students dedicate to her class. It's a teaching style she identified during the pandemic. It's one way that, as the newest addition to the PRWR faculty, Chen uses that pandemic past to shape how she teaches now.

Chen, a technical communication specialist, arrived on the Towson University campus for the Fall 2023 semester and created her first PRWR syllabus—Designing Content for the Web—to teach the course in Spring 2024.

Designing syllabi is a keen interest of hers, specifically how faculty redesigned syllabi during the pandemic to make courses more flexible, accessible, and accommodating. She even helped

write an award-winning research paper on the topic.

Chen was a doctoral student at Purdue University during the stay-at-home days of the pandemic, teaching courses in digital rhetoric. She joined with colleagues to create a resource for teachers to share syllabi. Their interests were in how syllabi showed the ways teachers and students adjusted to the extreme changes that came with the shutdowns.

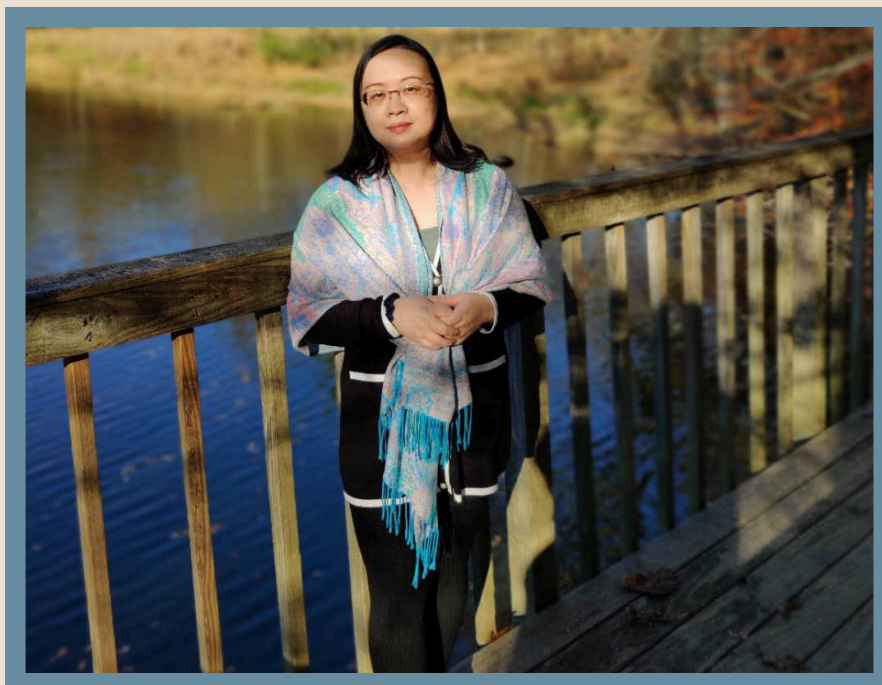
"Everyone, actually, was struggling," Chen says of that time.

Chen and her colleagues believed faculty needed new approaches to show empathy, compassion and

flexibility during a time when they and their students were homebound, dealing with isolation and news of mass casualties.

Solutions to students' struggles began with syllabi. Chen noticed, for example, that faculty might record lectures and notes to provide to students.

Chen learned from that experience and now uses the language of her own syllabi to give students space to spend more time with their assignments or not to be afraid to ask for help or grace from her.



*Technical communications professor Dr. Jianfen Chen in Brown County State Park, Indiana. Photo courtesy of Digital Rhetoric Collaborative. Photo by Jin Mi.*

(continued on p. 11)



## Chen brings flexibility and accessibility to technical communication courses (cont.)

This approach has become a hallmark of her teaching style.

"Empathetic approaches are very, very helpful to students who are already struggling with life difficulties and mental health problems or struggles during COVID-19," she says.

Her work on syllabi design helped lead to the collaborative paper, "Reimagining Student-Centered Learning: Accessible and Inclusive Syllabus Design During and After the COVID-19 Pandemic" which appeared in the March 2023 issue of the *Journal of Computers and Composition*.

Recently, that paper won an award for the best article written about pedagogy or curriculum in scientific communication. Chen and her co-authors were honored for that work at the Conference on College Composition and Communication in April 2024.

Chen believes that teaching changes that happened during the pandemic still apply.

"Probably we should also continue this practice," she says, "even post COVID-19."

Sitting in Chen's class, those practices are evident. The five students in Designing Content for the Web make a tight knit group, every student invested in what Chen calls "the magic" that can be found in html/css coding: changing colors and fonts and

line widths with a few keystrokes.

Chen has long had a love for the English language. Though she began college in her native China as an economics student, she turned to English first through a technical communication degree at North Carolina State University, and later through rhetoric and composition at Purdue University, where she completed her Ph.D.

Chen credits a lot of her academic success to her mentors in those different programs. One of her goals as a professor at Towson University is

**"Empathetic approaches are very, very helpful to students who are already struggling with life difficulties..."**

– Dr. Jianfen Chen

to be a resource for her advisees just like her own advisers were for her.

Community and advising is a reason she ended up at Towson University and the PRWR program. After she applied for the job, her adviser at Purdue connected her with Dr. Carrie Grant, a PRWR professor and

Purdue alum who Chen says was a resource throughout the application process.

However, it wasn't until Chen was on the TU campus for her second interview that she decided that she'd found the perfect fit.

While walking around campus, she met a former student from China, Shanshan Qian, now an associate professor in TU's College of Business and Economics, who provided the welcoming atmosphere that Chen had been looking to find in her next workplace.

When asked what other classes she'd like to teach, Chen says that she's excited to propose a class called Intercultural Technical Communication for undergraduates and possibly even for graduates. She also hopes to create a class around communication of disease and public health, which was a part of her dissertation.

"My personal interest would be healthcare equity among vulnerable population groups," she says, "like the minorities, like immigrants, like underrepresented groups. That could be a potential area for me to do either research or propose a course."

## WORD! congratulates PRWR's Spring 2024 graduates

Darah Schillinger

### Creative Writing

#### Why did you choose PRWR?

Towson's PRWR program was the only program offered in and around Maryland that allowed me to tailor the classes I took to my work goals. Really, I don't think I would have gone to graduate school if I hadn't found the PRWR program. Once I saw that Towson's writing program offered the option to take editing courses while on a creative writing track, I was sold. After minoring in creative writing and my time as the editor-in-chief for my college's literary magazine, I knew I wanted to pursue a career involving editing and/or writing professionally.

PRWR was exactly what I was looking for and more. (I also knew about the award-winning literary magazine, *Grub Street*, so being offered the opportunity to work on their staff for Volume 72 was just an added, wonderful bonus).

#### Who were you when you walked into PRWR, and who are you as you are walking out?

Entering my first semester at Towson, I was a poet with imposter syndrome trying to figure things out. I was stressed about the future and hoped two more years of school would give me enough time to find out exactly what I wanted to do with my career. I also wanted to build a portfolio that would branch out beyond poetry.



Now, I feel like I can confidently replace poet with writer in my bio without feeling silly or invalid. While I don't have it all mapped out the way I hoped I would, I know I have the skills and self-confidence to (finally) enter the work force full time.

#### What's a bit of knowledge or a skill or a tool that you will take from PRWR into whatever comes next?

A lot of the useful tools I learned were from workshoping with my peers. Being able to give and receive feedback in a constructive manner is a skill that all writers and editors should cultivate if they hope to have their work out in the world someday. Having another trusted reader (or even groups of trusted readers) is always helpful in showing you what the audience sees/understands/interprets and can help you figure out what may or may not be working.

But honestly, the biggest lesson I've internalized from workshops is that the writer knows their writing best. Take note of what your peers see or feel, but always prioritize what you want to get out of whatever it is you're writing. Ultimately, try to find that balance between making your audience happy and creating something you're proud of.

## *WORD!* congratulates PRWR's Spring 2024 graduates

### Chandler Vicchio Journalistic Writing

#### **Why did you choose PRWR?**

Ever since I started working at Towson University in 2018, the PRWR program was the one that kept calling to me. I was writing and editing a lot for my day job, but I was also writing creative nonfiction on my own time for fun. The PRWR program seemed like it would be a perfect fit—reinforcing skills I use in my career, honing my craft outside of work, and boosting my creativity overall.

#### **What proved to be your most rewarding PRWR knock-down drag-out moment and why?**

I don't know if it was a moment as much as it was a semester. Freelance Writing was an incredible challenge. I panicked the first few weeks because it was jam packed with so many assignments and writing scenarios I didn't have much experience with. But I think the demanding nature of the course made me grapple with my own perceived limitations and showed me that not only do I have talents in writing areas I hadn't considered but also I can handle a lot more than I thought I could. I am grateful to Professor Michael Downs for that push and for the reminder that sometimes your best work begins with struggle.



#### **What's a bit of knowledge or a skill or a tool that you will take from PRWR into whatever comes next?**

A big takeaway is that even when you are a great writer (and sometimes especially when you are a great writer), writing can still be hard. And that's okay. My PRWR professors and classmates really validated that.

The creative process can be daunting and messy and, at times, make you feel like you're doing it wrong. We often believe that if we are good at something it should come easily, but that's rarely the case with writing. Simply knowing this, reminding myself of it, gives me patience with myself and helps me not freak out if a project isn't turning out the way I want it to right away.



## *WORD!* congratulates PRWR's Spring 2024 graduates

### Samantha Park Writing for the Nonprofit Sector

#### **Why did you choose PRWR?**

I loved that Towson's PRWR program focused on writing as a holistic skill, not just for creative endeavors. Coming from the nonprofit sector, I was interested in both honing writing as a craft creatively and sharpening my skills as a writer in the workforce.

#### **What proved to be your most rewarding PRWR knock-down drag-out moment and why?**

In Fall 2023, I got the idea to transcribe and analyze my late grandfather's life story. Though I was very passionate about the project, I wasn't sure I had the capacity to handle the workload or manage my grief on top of an already difficult semester. However, with encouragement from the professor and my peers, I decided to take on the project anyway. I put more of myself into it than any other project I've worked on, not to mention the time, effort, and care that went into making this very personal thing something worth sharing with others.

What I have now is a piece of my family's history in writing that had never been formally documented before. I also



understand my grandfather in a way that I could not have otherwise. For many reasons, this project is very precious to me and undoubtedly the most valuable thing I have ever produced.

#### **What's a bit of knowledge or a skill or a tool that you will take from PRWR into whatever comes next?**

That audience is everything. My experiences in PRWR, as well as in the G.I.V.E. program, have emphasized to me how important it is to understand your readers and to write for their needs. I knew this on some level before, but not nearly at the depth that I do now. The focus on audience has drastically changed how I view writing as well as how I write.

## *WORD!* congratulates PRWR's Spring 2024 graduates

### Hunter Wynne Technical Writing and Scientific Communication

#### **Who were you when you walked into PRWR and who are you as you are walking out?**

Coming into PRWR, I was someone who liked writing but never had a chance to spread my wings with it beyond a school setting. Because of PRWR, I had a chance to experience writing in a classroom setting, working in the nonprofit sector, and marketing/design, among others, giving me a chance to combine learning with professional experience and development.

#### **What proved to be your most rewarding PRWR knock-down drag-out moment and why?**

I enrolled in PRWR 633 Teaching College Composition in Fall 2023, with no actual teaching experience and no idea of what it would entail. (A fellow PRWR student) took the course the last time it was offered, and he used that as a springboard into becoming a college professor. I was overwhelmed in the beginning, trying to comprehend everything on my own and playing catch-up to catch others with more professional experience. Once I started getting a better grip and began my projects and hands-on learning, I dove further into the work, and now have a teaching portfolio.



#### **What's a bit of knowledge or a skill or a tool that you will take from PRWR into whatever comes next?**

Dr. Harvey Lillywhite's higher-order concerns and lower-order concerns system has been priceless in my professional and personal work. Editing is a very valuable class, and so is Business Writing. Take them ASAP! It'll help you so much in the long run.

## *WORD!* congratulates PRWR's Spring 2024 graduates

### Will Eichler Creative Writing

#### **Why did you choose PRWR?**

After I moved to Baltimore in 2020, I began searching for a graduate program where I could really expand my skills as a writer, and I happened to live right down the road from Towson! I was able to get in touch with Professor Michael Downs, and he was kind enough to answer my questions about the PRWR program, and it was clear that PRWR offered a great balance between creative and practical writing that would really help me find a career as a writer.

#### **What's a bit of knowledge or a skill or a tool that you will take from PRWR into whatever comes next?**

The primary thing that I am taking from the program is the ability to adjust my writing for a variety of different scenarios. I was able to experience much more than the creative writing classes that were required for my track, though those were an excellent experience. The myriad courses available allowed me to expand beyond that sphere, though, and make me a much more versatile writer.



#### **Who were you when you walked into PRWR and who are you as you are walking out?**

When I first started the program I was unsure of what I was hoping to accomplish beyond becoming a better writer, but through the program I have found a much clearer career path, as I want to continue to pursue grant writing, and have found a great community of fellow writers that have helped me grow in my writing beyond my classes.



## *WORD!* congratulates PRWR's Spring 2024 graduates

### Ariel Crank Technical Writing and Scientific Communication

#### **Why did you choose PRWR?**

I chose PRWR because I wanted to develop my own writing skills. The main critique that I received as an undergraduate for my thesis was that my writing was too abstract, and that I didn't communicate topics and ideas clearly enough. I wanted to find a program in which I would be able to do so effectively.

#### **What proved to be your most rewarding PRWR knock-down drag-out moment and why?**

I would say when I took Dr. Gunning's coding for the web class during my first semester at PRWR. It was super interesting to me because it showed how the way that the information that is displayed on a website page really had an effect on how much the targeted audience was willing to read through it. It didn't matter how great or concise the content was; if it was presented in a crappy way the reader wasn't going to look at it. As a technical writer for an IT company, I see just how important this is, whether that involves short articles, RFPS, or forty-page manuals. Format and structure is huge, huge, huge—and I think I missed this concept back as an undergraduate.



#### **What's a bit of knowledge or a skill or a tool that you will take from PRWR into whatever comes next?**

I will say that it is important to know your audience. Know who you're writing for, what they're looking for, and avoid any unnecessary jargon or overly fancy words.

## *WORD!* congratulates PRWR's Spring 2024 graduates

### Daniella Bacigalupa Writing for the Nonprofit Sector

#### **Why did you choose PRWR?**

I was working two part time jobs—as a forest guide and a grant writer—and I knew I wanted to go back to school. I always liked writing but was pretty paralyzed by indecision. What type of program I should go to baffled me. So, I let the universe decide, in a way. One random spring day, I googled grant writing resources for work and came across Grantwriting in Valued Environments (G.I.V.E.)—TU's own project that connects students to local small nonprofits. I worked for small nonprofits myself. I reached out to one of their partners who said lovely things about G.I.V.E., which led to me looking into PRWR, which led to me applying. The rest, as no one ever actually says, is history.



#### **Who were you when you walked into PRWR and who are you as you are walking out?**

I was swimming in grief when I started—my dog, my dad, and my close friend had all passed away in 2020, and the pandemic didn't help with the grieving process. I've made great friends at PRWR who have taught me how writing helps with grief.

I came to PRWR as a perfectionist. I'm leaving PRWR as a perfectionist...who is okay with making mistakes sometimes. I also didn't know any writing techniques or styles and walking out, I feel confident that I've got a good start to understanding a few. I've learned so much but still feel like there is so much more to learn.

#### **What proved to be your most rewarding PRWR knock-down drag-out moment and why?**

In Writing Creative Nonfiction, I opted to write a short piece about a late friend. I pushed it away and wrestled with it and screamed at it and cried some (a lot) and finally it came together, thanks to support from my classmates and my professor. It was the most rewarding experience because it pulled something from deep within me, something I didn't really care about or even understand until I felt it: I had found resolution through writing. Watching my classmates go through similar experiences was and continues to be inspiring and rewarding.

## WORD! congratulates PRWR's Spring 2024 graduates

### Christa Davis Creative Writing

#### Why did you choose PRWR?

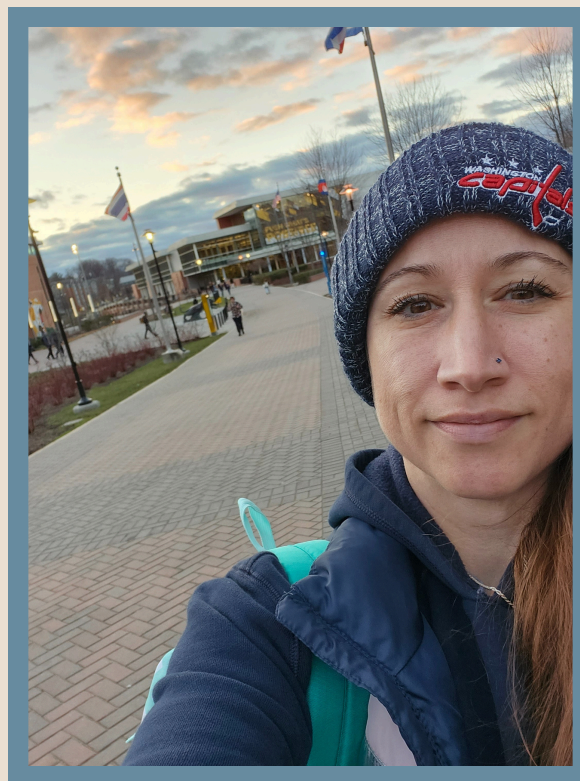
I chose PRWR to advance professionally as a technical writer. The program looked like a lot of fun, so I applied!

#### Who were you when you walked into PRWR and who are you as you are walking out?

My first few PRWR classes were eye-opening. To be honest, I second-guessed myself a few times! Today I look back and see how every class made me better in some way. I now have goals beyond graduation not only professionally but also as a creative writer.

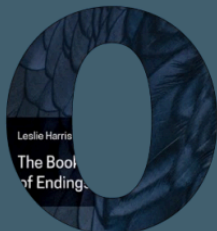
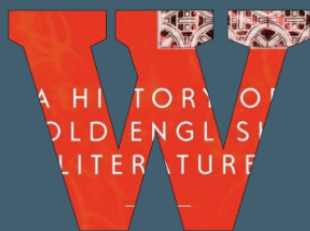
#### What proved to be your most rewarding PRWR knock-down drag-out moment and why?

Rhetorical Grammar challenged me in ways I never imagined, but I survived!



#### What's a bit of knowledge or a skill or a tool that you will take from PRWR into whatever comes next?

Revise, revise, revise. And if something interests you, write about it! 😊



#### Editor

Michael Downs,  
PRWR director emeriti

#### Writers

Erin Lynner,  
Daniella Bacigalupa

#### Design and Layout

Erin Lynner, Daniella  
Bacigalupa

#### Masthead logo

Brianna R. Rostkowski  
(2018)

WORD! is the newsletter of Towson University's Professional Writing graduate program.

For additional information about the program, write to [prwr@towson.edu](mailto:prwr@towson.edu) or contact Sarah Gunning, program director, [sgunning@towson.edu](mailto:sgunning@towson.edu)