

Writers Find Haven on an Ivy Campus

By ALAN FINDER



At the Kelly Writers House at the University of Pennsylvania, Al Filreis talks with, from left, Gabriel Oppenheim, Aichlee Bushnell, Alexandra Goldstein and other students.

PHILADELPHIA — College coaches have long scoured the country for supremely quick point guards who can transform a basketball team or fierce linebackers who can dominate a football game. Al Filreis is also perpetually on the lookout for talented high school students, although the ones he seeks do remarkable things with a pen or keyboard. He recruits writers.

Dr. Filreis, an English professor at the University of Pennsylvania, is the faculty

director of the Kelly Writers House, an unusual, largely extracurricular community of people passionate about writing: fiction, nonfiction, poetry, screenwriting, songwriting and myriad other forms. At an elite university filled with undergraduates preparing for professional and graduate schools — and on a campus in which the Wharton School can literally cast the largest shadow — the Writers House is an oasis for the arts set, for the unconventional, even the countercultural.

The house, an old, three-story Tudor cottage on Locust Walk in the center of campus here, features an array of events. There are readings, both by aspiring undergraduates and by some of the country's most celebrated poets, nonfiction writers and novelists, including Richard Ford, John Updike and Cynthia Ozick. There are lectures, workshops, songwriters' performances, writing sessions with local high school students, and lunches, dinners and two-day

seminars with writers. Some classes are also held on the comfortable couches and chairs in the Writers House.

“For me, this is Swarthmore, Reed or Bard, here in the middle of a big research university,” said Dr. Filreis, a bearded, often beaming professor of modern and contemporary poetry whose enthusiasm and avuncular demeanor seem to permeate the Writers House. “This is a little bit of Bard. You can come in and people know who you are.”

“This is not just about writing,” he said. “That’s almost incidental.”

So what is the point? “Apprenticeship, mentorship, internship,” Dr. Filreis said. The goal, he added, “is to enrich the undergraduates’ lives outside the classroom.”

When he took the keys 12 years ago to the badly run-down cottage, for decades the home of a university chaplain, the professor’s intention was to create a loose-knit community of people who cared about the craft of writing and were willing to promote it. Today, people from across Penn’s vast assortment of schools and disciplines — nurses, engineers, business students, even a veterinarian — take part in the center’s programs.

But for what Dr. Filreis calls “this free space, this sandbox, this incubator” to survive and prosper, the Writers House requires an ever renewable corps of undergraduates. And so, after he quickly obtained a \$1 million gift to renovate the house, Dr. Filreis set out to populate it. He began

recruiting talent, and with no less effort or fervor than his colleagues in the athletic department.

“My line is, if you were a swimmer and you felt your backstroke was the best, the coach would be recruiting you,” he said. “Why can’t I behave like the swim coach?”

Dr. Filreis said he hears from at least 150 high school students a year. They typically learn about the Writers House through word of mouth, especially from alumni. Some also learn about the program through readings and fund-raisers that Dr. Filreis organizes several times a year in New York and other large cities.

Sixty to 80 of these students turn out each year to be seriously interested in writing; many of them visit the Writers House, spending time, often with their parents, chatting with Dr. Filreis in his cozy garret office. He writes letters to the admissions office for a portion of them, advocating their selection. Last year he wrote about 25 such letters, and he said his success rate at helping them get in is high.

“The reason why admissions likes the Writers House is that this is a kid I’m going to take under my wing,” he said. “If you take this kid, she’s going to succeed because I’m going to take care of her.”

Students, like anyone else at the university, can decide how involved they want to be. Participation can vary from the shy poet who occasionally attends a reading at the house to the

outgoing aspiring sportswriter who camps out on a green couch in an alcove off the living room nearly every afternoon and evening.

Eric Karlan, a junior who was recruited by Dr. Filreis, is the couch’s constant companion. “I do all my homework here,” he said during lunch one afternoon with a half-dozen other students in the dining room. “If I don’t show up for a couple of days, people call and say, ‘Are you sick? Are you dead?’”

“It’s more than a community,” Mr. Karlan added, “it’s a family. Al is the bearded patriarch, and these guys are my brothers and sisters.”

Not long after Mr. Karlan arrived at Penn, he told Dr. Filreis that he would like to start a literary magazine. Less than a month later, the professor persuaded a donor to endow the magazine, appropriately called The Green Couch.

“It’s a very nurturing place,” said Cecilia Corrigan, a junior who writes poetry and plays, and who was also recruited by Dr. Filreis. “It was immediately so welcoming and individualized.”

“Here I’ve found the most amazing mentors,” Ms. Corrigan said. “You can connect with professors one on one.”

Jamie-Lee Josselyn came to the university from a small town in southern New Hampshire, primarily because of the Writers House. Dr. Filreis was appointed her adviser, and before she had ever attended

a class at Penn, she had been at his house for pizza with the other students he was advising.

Once intensely shy, Ms. Josselyn said it took her two years to become deeply involved with the Writers House. She graduated in 2005 and never left, becoming Dr. Filreis's assistant. Now every morning before coming to campus, she works on a memoir of her mother, who died when she was 12.

"I wasn't able to say, 'I'm a writer,' when I first came to the Writers House," Ms. Josselyn said. "We use the phrase a lot — a place to stand. You need a place to stand."

A network of alumni supports the program and offers encouragement and professional advice to students. In addition, a number of well-known writers and poets who have spent time here have become unofficial alumni. This is all extremely gratifying, Dr. Filreis told a large gathering for a reading at the Louis K. Meisel Gallery in SoHo one evening in November that was organized by the Writers House.

But the larger point, he said in the quiet of his office the previous day, was that he and his students had created a community, and together they had enhanced the standing of the literary arts at a university better known for its economic forecasts. Dr. Filreis invoked the mentor who brought him to Penn 22 years ago, Robert Lucid, an English professor who died last December.

"If Bob were here," the professor said, "he'd say what's really important is that Penn has been enlivened by these kids."