

DISCO: Making Friends on a Desert Island

BY Ethan Gissendaner

The ever-growing creative community within Birmingham is a field of opportunity for the skills unique to a professional writer. Revitalization efforts in the city are largely spearheaded by an up-and-coming generation of city residents who have taken great personal stake in the social and business success of Birmingham. This affords them many chances to utilize numerous channels to send their projects and work across the city. Loose social ties are the currency that keeps this community going and within it, connections to almost anything social or professional exist. Exposure and experience are two crucial components in the field of technical writing and like dots on a map they can lead to the x-marked career you are seeking. The easiest way to plug into this community of writers and creators is to go where they find inspiration and common ground: the creative space that is the Desert Island Supply Company in Woodlawn (DISCO).

Just outside of downtown Birmingham along First Avenue North lies DISCO—as it is lovingly called—like treasure beneath the sand. DISCO is a creative writing non-profit organization that provides a safe creative space for students in the Woodlawn neighborhood and the greater Birmingham area. Throughout the year writing and design workshops as well as after school tutoring are offered by day. By night the space hosts events such as concerts, adult spelling bees, and live storytelling.

Captain on the desert island and University of Alabama professor Chip Brantley created DISCO loosely based on similar programs across the country that provide literary and creative services to children in at-risk parts of large cities. Each has a unique theme that permeates the space and workshops held there. DISCO's angle creatively provides its visitors with all one would need to survive on a desert island: stories to keep the mind engaged and body prepared for all possible scenarios one could encounter while stranded. Workshops, which take place all over Birmingham, focus on various forms of writing and creativity.

The physical space is picturesque—maps adorn exposed brick walls, hodgepodge globes cover every flat surface. Ropes knotted and tied litter bookshelves that overlook massive oak tables worthy of the ship captain's quarters. A giant swordfish swims amid exposed rafters overhead. The store front provides all one could need to survive on a desert island like original-bound story books and unique writing utensils, of course.

Finding one's place on the island is as simple as walking through the front door and picking up a pencil. Volunteers are readily welcomed and have so many outlets to choose from. Workshops and tutoring sessions require proctors



Sea creatures swim out of the maps on the walls of DISCO

who can facilitate discussion and have a creative eye. More than that though, DISCO manufactures a lot of signage for events and maintains a very modern website. The skills of a professional writer are highly useful in the organization's marketing and branding ventures as well. Preparing write ups and publicity statements, posting online to social media, and creating digital designs are some tasks professional writing volunteers could do while at DISCO. The small staffing structure of the organization allows for volunteers to have significant roles in the execution of projects and take leadership at times. Volunteering is an excellent component of a résumé that shows dedication to a profession or field. Having the specialized experience that DISCO provides is a strong addition to a résumé as well.

The professional writer's skills will be most cultivated by the interactions DISCO facilitates and the relationships it fosters. Volunteers have a plethora of resources just by working with Chip Brantley and Lillis Taylor, the directors of the organization. Chip is a journalism professor who has his hands in most everything happening in the creative sector of Birmingham. He is a published author and feature writer for AL.com. His academic connections stem throughout the Birmingham and Tuscaloosa collegiate systems—did I mention he is also married to UAB poetry professor Elizabeth Hughey Brantley? Talk about an impressive and effective recommendation letter.

Lillis Taylor, artist extraordinaire and DISCO's hands and feet, serves as program director for the organization. She networks and plans for workshops and events held at DISCO. Lillis is the contact and the face of the organization which puts her face to face with notable professionals and people in Birmingham. Knowing Lillis is knowing many

others. Volunteering at DISCO puts one right in line to encounter so many influential people in the city as they are patrons and loyal supporters of DISCO and its mission. Leaders of non-profits throughout the city, professors, and city wide movers and shakers fill the space weekly. DISCO has been featured in Birmingham Magazine and Southern Living publications so chances are—even as a volunteer—you can be seen.

Loose social ties are one of the most influential components in attaining a job and success throughout life and even more so in professional writing as one's exposure to the job market is very important. Time and time again a job has been secured because of a casual conversation that turned into business or a positive word of approval that tipped a decision. Solid, long-standing relationships are important, but people and potential employees who have more loose social ties in their respective communities experience more success. When applying for positions, having connections within a potential employer can be the needed edge in a highly competitive job pool. Not to mention many opportunities can spawn from those casual conversations, chanced interactions at a read-a-thon or spelling bee.

As a seasoned volunteer of two years, I can vouch for the experience DISCO has generously given me. I've seen the inside operations of a non-profit organization from start up

to full scale operation. I've gained invaluable writing experience from Chip's influence and I have seen my personal writing style evolve since my discovery of the desert island. My knowledge of professional writing as a practical skill has been heightened and expanded. Relationships have been formed at DISCO—that otherwise would have never been created—that have benefitted me academically and already professionally. DISCO has been a very common and beneficial thread between me and others in the young professional scene in Birmingham. I have been exposed to current opportunities that I never knew existed in Birmingham and some that will be available later on by being a volunteer with DISCO. Volunteering at DISCO is as easy as visiting this web link (<http://www.desertislandsupplyco.com/volunteer-2/>) to sign up and stopping by the location at 5500 First Avenue North.

Connectedness is just as much a component of being a successful professional as having the ability. In a city that is so rich with opportunity, having connections in a field that will later become the source of a career is a strategic and highly beneficial move. DISCO is an epicenter of sorts for the creative community in Birmingham and the connections that exist within the organization almost outnumber the nautical decorations that cover most every space in the building. Volunteering positions one full access to those connections and social resources afforded by the directors and patrons of the organization. One conversation, one contact could very well be the difference in beginning a career or seizing a new opportunity. It really is all in who you know.