

# Professor Watermelon

Story by Jami Stall | Photos by Hadley "Tad" Fruits



Like a millennial Mister Rogers, Professor Watermelon leans in, excitedly nodding as the children reel off ideas in rapid fire. Their spoken words barely keep pace with the rush of thoughts swirling in their minds. A palpable enthusiasm gives the classroom a joyful energy and the “professor” a rockstar-like presence.

The visiting creative writing instructor laughs easily and listens intently to his diminutive pupils. Bespectacled in dark-rimmed “nerdles” (as he calls them) and his trademark bow tie, the 35-year-old former librarian gasps and giggles as he comments on their work.

“Oh, what else might happen next?” he asks. Or “Exactly, I can see it now!” he says as his eyes widen. He’s as thrilled to hear their ideas as they are to share them. And they get that.





Having brought his Creative Writing Club to Park Tudor, for six years now, Professor Watermelon (or Chadwick Gillenwater to those older than the Minecraft crowd) knows how to get children excited about reading and writing—even those who hardly had the pincher grip down well enough to form letters just a year ago. His students range from junior kindergarteners up to fifth graders. Whether they wield pencils, pens, or chunky crayons, when kids get the bug to write, he shows them how to harness that creative energy to plot their tales.

“It kind of goes along with the ‘Professor Watermelon’ name,” he explains. “I’m planting seeds— cultivating readers and writers. I also think of stories in that sense, that their ideas have to be planted like a seed, and the teachers and professors are the gardeners.”

He says his job is to build confidence in young wordsmiths and to be a springboard for inspiration to them.

“Children often find that penning their thoughts to paper is intimidating, because they are fearful of the editing process,” he says. “But the writing process is very creative and can be fun. My goal is to help them find joy in writing and show them that words are like crayons or paints—that they are just as powerful, just as creative. You can do anything with them. ”







Likewise, he reminds parents to celebrate their kids' works the same as they would a sketch, by putting it on the fridge, offering praise, and building confidence in their writing.

Though a self-proclaimed and celebrated “nerd,” Professor Watermelon enlists methods that are free of gimmicks and corny classroom gags. Instead, he creates think tanks and writing rooms of laughter, praise, and positive chatter. “It is imaginative play, but you’re using words instead of Lego bricks, Lincoln Logs, or blocks,” he says. “I give them permission to let their silly out, and I show them I’m willing to let my silly out. It breaks down walls immediately.”

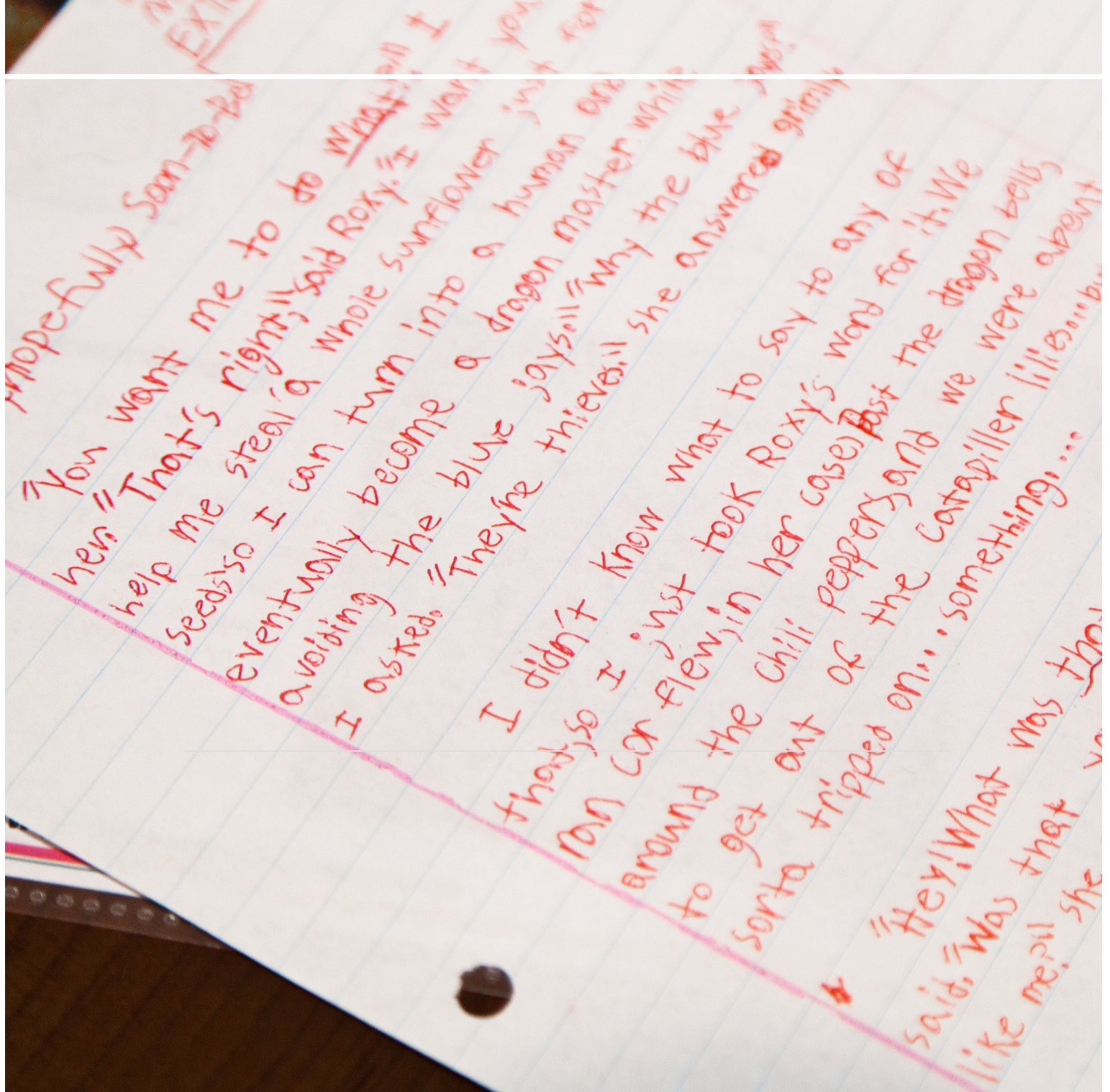
According to one Park Tudor parent whose daughter has taken his classes, this delicate balance is what keeps an otherwise chaotic scene focused and productive.

“He’s a little bit silly, which the kids just adore—seeing that in a grown-up—but it’s still a structured class,” says Nicole Ongwijitwat. “He’s so enthusiastic, and he provides enough guidance to go along with it to make it engaging and fun, instead of a chore—which is especially important when they’re learning to read and write. It’s such a critical age.”

Her 7-year-old daughter, Elise, has taken two of his classes. Ongwijitwat says it unleashed Elise’s love of writing and reading—especially her own works.

“At bedtime, she was sitting with her little 4-year-old sister, reading to her one of the short stories she had written. That was such a precious moment,” Ongwijitwat says. “Now Elise is making up her own stories and verbally telling her stories to other people.”





A children's book author as well, Professor Watermelon has visited 50 schools all over the state as a storyteller and "edu-tainer." He instructs his weekly Creative Writing Club regularly at Park Tudor (as well as The Orchard School, Sycamore School, and St. Richard's Episcopal School). This summer he will be teaching his Creative Writing Camp at the James Whitcomb Riley Museum Home from June 13 to 17 and August 1 to 5. For details, call (317) 631-5885.