Interview with Barefoot Writers: Katie Yeakle and Rebecca Matter

By Mindy McHorse

"Neither Rebecca nor I really think of this as a job. It's our avocation. Always a part of us."
— Katie Yeakle, Executive Director, AWAI

"Our role is to help writers understand their value and market themselves accordingly, so they can accomplish the financial and personal goals they set for themselves."
— Rebecca Matter, President, AWAI



In celebration of our 50th issue, it seemed fitting that I sit down for a heart-to-heart with the two heads of American Writers & Artists Institute (AWAI), and the people who created *Barefoot Writer*, Katie Yeakle and Rebecca Matter.

Many readers may not know that Katie and Rebecca are truly the heart of *Barefoot Writer*. They live for everything this magazine represents, and it shows in their constant dedication to members and subscribers.

I had the privilege of meeting them both in person eight years ago when I attended AWAI's *FastTrack to Copywriting Success* Bootcamp and Job Fair for the first time. I remember being blown away by their energy and genuine interest in me and all the other attendees. Unlike other conferences where the presenters disappear to VIP rooms whenever possible, Katie and Rebecca were out on the floor with attendees, asking about our goals and offering helpful advice.

Now, fast-forward to 2015, 17 years after AWAI's first Bootcamp and four years after the first issue of *Barefoot Writer*, and they're just as invested today as they ever were. Katie and Rebecca live what they teach both in their professional and personal lives.

In this interview, you'll discover which of them conducted a test that proved pigtails were a powerful marketing tool as well as how the Sears catalog planted the seeds for what has become a life-changing company. On top of that, enjoy their shared connection in terrifying first bosses, the massively diverse marketing and publishing experiences they bring to the table, and what each thought of the other the day they met … along with how they feel about each other now, 12 years later.

I hope you enjoy this account of how the stars aligned in favor of the writing world as it sheds light on the experiences that made Katie and Rebecca the hard-hitting marketers and empathetic leaders they are today.

Mindy:

Starting with Katie … what was your introduction to the world of marketing and writing?

Katie:

My first job interview out of college was for a copy-editing position with a small newsletter publisher. The first person I met, and the man who interviewed me, was the company's Editorial Director, who just happened to be Mark Ford. (Keep in mind this was over 30 years ago … and about five years before his now legendary career as a copywriter and business-builder took off.)

Mark hired me that day, and I had the very good fortune to start at his company while it was still small. I think there were about 10 employees at the time. Over the next 10 years, the company grew to well over $100 million in revenue with over 100 employees, and I was able to grow with the company. During that 10-year period, I did just about every job within the company. It gave me a wonderful education in direct-response marketing.

Mindy:

Had direct-response marketing always been your career goal?



Katie:

I studied advertising in college. But I soon realized I didn't learn anything there compared to what I learned with on-the-job training. Everything I know now, I learned at that job. I credit my first boss, Phyllis, with being one of the best teachers I've ever had. She would have a cigarette hanging out of her mouth when I turned in my copy-editing assignments that I'd spent hours and hours on. Before she would even look at them she'd say, "There are three typos in there; find them before I do." And I would find them. She taught me a whole new level of discipline, attention to detail, and what good editing really is.

Mindy:

Sounds like she really set you on your current path of success.

Katie:

She did. And I grew to love her, but in those early days, I was scared to death of her.

Mindy:

The best kind of mentor! Given the different hats you've worn in the marketing world, from copy editor, to project manager, to publisher — which role is your favorite?

Katie:

I feel like they've all led me to what I'm doing now at AWAI. And what I do here … favorite isn't even the right word. This is what I was supposed to do. I call on parts of everything I've done in the past, just about every day, in virtually everything Rebecca and I do for AWAI and our members.

Mindy:

The result is that you've changed the lives of countless people, myself included. Rebecca, what about you? What brought you into this world?

Rebecca:

My love for writing came about back in second grade with my teacher, Mr. Sincere. He had us
write short stories and turn them in with illustrations and a cover. I still have the little books I wrote back then … my two favorites being one about a leprechaun that illustrated where I thought babies came from at the time, and another about a worm family who had lost its way.

Mindy:

How'd you go from leprechauns and worms to marketing?

Rebecca:

I fell in love with marketing way back when I was a Girl Scout. Apparently, my first marketing test was whether or not you would sell more cookies if you wore pigtails. My test proved that pigtails were more powerful and I went on to be a top salesman in my Girl Scout troop.

From there, I was a businessperson. I got the sales bug. I loved the idea of marketing. I was always coming up with a new business, whether it was a way to revolutionize the babysitting industry, or creating products and selling them. I always had a new business and new ways to market myself.

Mindy:

So you naturally moved toward marketing in college?

Rebecca:

Funny enough, I initially went to college for accounting. But after a very startling conversation with one of my professors … Professor Pierno … who told me I didn't have what it takes to be an accountant, I made the jump over to marketing. At the time, I resented him for squashing my "dream" … and right this minute, I'm thinking I need to send him a thank-you note

Mindy:

That's a big switch. How did you make the transition into marketing?

Rebecca:

It's where I belonged. During college, I interned at a publishing house, and when I graduated, there was an opportunity to become a marketing manager trainee. Like Katie, I worked in almost every single job in publishing. I worked in production, accounting, customer service — literally answering calls, placing orders for the paper, printing and binding books, everything. The CEO who ran that company was somebody I feared, like Katie's first boss. He was terrifying. But he taught me a lot, and when I finished my training and officially became a marketing man-ager, he assigned me to go to the London office of a company we'd just bought, and do the exact same training for their company that I'd just been through. I was 23 years old, living in London, with all my living expenses paid, for six months.

Mindy:

Sounds like an amazing opportunity.

Rebecca:

It was, and it really set my future in marketing and publishing … where I've been ever since.

Mindy:

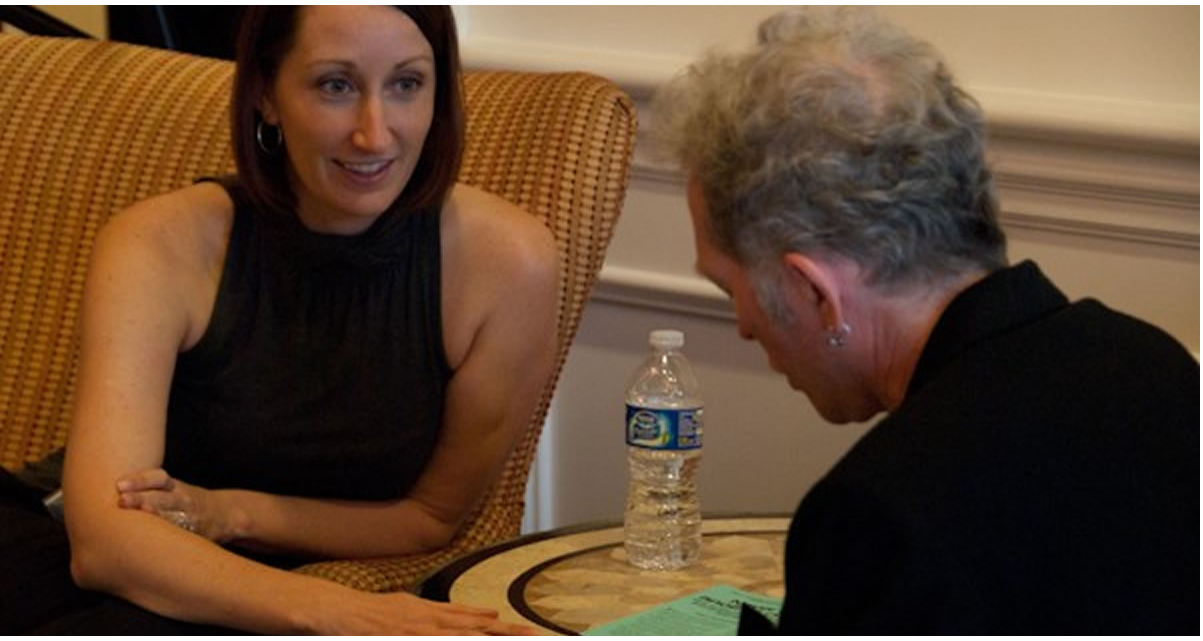
What about you, Katie? Was advertising always your first love, even as a kid?

Katie:

I went through the "wanting to be a vet" stage that a lot of kids go through. But also as a kid, I always loved catalogs. The day the Sears catalog would come was a huge day in my life every year. My mom would save all the catalogs that came and I would read them for hours on end from cover-to-cover. I'd look at the layouts … read all the descriptions … turn down all the pages with something on them I dreamed of buy-ing. I was just always fascinated by catalogs.

Mindy:

What do you read now — besides catalogs?



Katie:

I usually have a couple of books going at a time … some mix of fiction, biographies, short stories, self-help, and business-related. Plus, I'm in a monthly book club, which I really enjoy. It's with nine of my friends and every year we pick a different theme for our "reads" for the year. This year, it's going to be southern writers. We read books from different genres within that theme. I'm picking a play for us to read when it's my turn.

We've been doing it for 12 years now and it's ex-posed me to books I never would have picked on my own. It's something I really treasure and look forward to every month.

Mindy:

Makes me want to start a book club. What about you, Rebecca? What kind of books do you love to read?



Rebecca:

With two little ones at home, I don't read as much as I'd like. But as you can imagine, most of my reading is parenting books, lots of children's books, and a lot of business books. I'm one of those people who is always looking to learn something new or get better at what I'm doing now. Although if I do have time and I truly want to escape, I like really easy, beach-blanket fiction. My day-to-day life is pretty intense, so I like stories that don't make me work all that much. That being said, I do like to throw in the occasional thriller, every now and again.

Mindy:

Your book club basically includes your kids.

Rebecca:

I absolutely love to read to my kids. I'd say my favorite book right now for them is this book called, *I Don't Want to Be a Frog*. I love that there isn't a narrator. All the characters speak for themselves, so you get to do three different voices. It totally keeps you on your toes. My kids love it. I'm realizing it's because I do the voices, just like I loved when my mom was reading to me. It was all about the characters, and she made them come to life. I feel like that's why I love this book today, because I get to do that for my kids now.

Mindy:

We had the pleasure of interviewing your mom, Becky Masterman, for our June issue of *Barefoot Writer*. How has having a mom who is an author given you insight into the writing world?

Rebecca:

It's actually brought us together. There's a lot of crossover, even though I work with AWAI and freelance writers and my mom works on the fiction side of things. It's given us each an inside look at the other side.

Mindy:

I remember she started her career as a copywriter. She's really gone full-circle, from writ-ing copy to becoming a very successful published author. What have you learned from her journey?

Rebecca:

She's taught me that you have to work really, really hard to make it as a fiction writer. My mom may be a big success now, but she worked hard for many years. Like getting up at 5 a.m. to write for three hours before she went to work, then coming home, putting me to bed, and writ-ing more. I had always assumed that once you landed the big contract, the rest got easier, but she still works all the time. She writes every day. She actually quit her day job because she needed — and wanted — more time to spend on her fic-tion writing. From where I sit, it seems like a really hard job.

Mindy:

Wasn't that one of the reasons AWAI started the The Barefoot Writer Club? To give writ-ers more time and the means to follow their other writing dreams?

Katie:

There are just so many opportunities for writers to make a really good living and create their version of what *the writer's life* is. From copy-writing to web writing to direct-response writing, even grant writing and blogs, there are simply so many opportunities.

Rebecca:

We know there are a lot of people like my mom who love to write and want to devote themselves to it, which was hard before she land-ed her first contract. It's hard to find the time to write when you're working on someone else's watch.

Mindy:

Sure, because the better part of your day is eclipsed and most people are too tired by the time they come home.

Katie:

We know a lot of writers who do their paid writing work later in the day so they can use their prime writing hours for projects that are close to their heart. Though not all Barefoot Writers are looking for time to write fiction. I'd say the quest for freedom is equally important.

Mindy:

I'd still be stuck behind some company's desk if you guys hadn't introduced me to all the different ways writers can make real money. It's mind-blowing to have more earning power than ever, but to also be home all the time. My dogs and my children thank you!

Katie:

This is a career that's tailor-made. Nobody has to follow the path of any other writer.

Rebecca:

And it can change. My mom writes fic-tion, and that's her thing. Every day she sits down, she's working on some element of her book and she works on the same book for a whole year. Whereas, say you're a web writer, there's so much variety. One day you're working on a landing page, the next day you're working on emails, one day you might write for two hours, the next day you might write for eight.

Katie:

Exactly. If you get tired of one project type, you can pick up a different kind of project. Your income level can go up and down as you need it to, based on whatever *the writer's life* means to you. You have that freedom and flexibility. It ac-tually makes me even more excited about all the opportunities we offer writers through AWAI.

Mindy:

Do you have a favorite writing opportunity?

Katie:

I consider myself a marketer who does some writing when necessary. To give you what's going to sound like a cheesy, corny answer, but it's very sincere: My favorite things to write are responses to AWAI members who write to share good news with me. That's my favorite thing to write.



Mindy:

And you, Rebecca?

Rebecca:

My answer is very similar. If I'm going to write articles, it's typically motivational, how-to stuff, but I agree, I love getting those emails and celebrating. Katie and I share all that stuff. When-ever one of us replies to a member about good stories or good news, we copy each other and we share it with the team.

Mindy:

I'd say that's what sets you two and AWAI apart. You're genuinely invested in the success of your members. It comes through in everything you do. Now, I'm excited about this next question … Rebecca, tell me about the first time you met Katie.

Rebecca:

She interviewed me for the job of Mar-keting Director. Ironically, I only took that inter-view to practice my interviewing skills. Going in, I wasn't thinking I wanted the job. Like I mentioned earlier, I had been working for an exciting Inter-net start-up in the publishing industry. They'd se-cure all these rounds of venture capital to carry us through from month-to-month and we grew from eight employees when I signed on to 85 in a matter of months. It was wild, and I wanted more of that. Then I went in to interview with AWAI and thought, "Okay, here's this nice but small compa-ny. This is not going to fulfill this drive that I have."

Mindy:

What changed your mind?



Rebecca:

Katie was so passionate about AWAI, its members, and what they had built. You could tell she knew so much about direct-response market-ing and publishing. I remember thinking, "Okay, this company has a lot of heart but wow, Katie is just incredible. I could learn a lot from her. I think this is a good opportunity for me." It was such a bizarre interview, looking back, but I knew we had this connection. By the time we were done, it was like four hours later, but I had totally fallen in love with AWAI. I wanted that job. I remember at the end of the interview I said to Katie, "I want this job. Just so you know." That was it. That was the first encounter.

Mindy:

Katie, what was your first impression of Rebecca?

Katie:

I felt the same way the day we met. My first thought was, "We have got to hire her." If there hadn't been that immediate connection, the in-terview wouldn't have lasted that long. I just didn't want her to leave.

Rebecca:

I remember standing in front of the whole team. They'd all gathered in one room, and Katie said, "Okay, Rebecca, tell the team about yourself." And I was terrified of public speaking back then, so I started giving out my background like a resume, "I have my degree from Florida State in marketing, and I have my masters from Florida …" And then I said "Do you have any questions?" Denise Ford, at the time was work-ing on direct mail, and she said, "Yeah, would you mind coming in my office to look at this direct-mail package we're working on? Like, right now." And I said, "Okay … sure?" It was just so funny and genuine: "Yeah, I do have a question if you don't mind! Come on in here. Figure this out."

Mindy:

You really hit the ground running. One thing I love about AWAI is that you practice what you preach, and that a lot of employees work from home even though they are AWAI staff members. Rebecca, you worked in-house at the office in Florida for a couple of years. How'd you transition to working from home?

Rebecca:

I worked with the company in-house for two years. But you can't read about *the writer's life* every day without thinking, "Yeah, I want to live *the writer's life.* I want that freedom and flex-ibility to be able to go anywhere." I had this bug that I had to move somewhere. I had been in South Florida most of my life. I chose this random place called Austin, Texas. Never been there, and I kept saying, "I'm going to move to Austin. I'm go-ing to move to Austin," Then I got this email. It was from Joe Vitale and it was for an event in Aus-tin. I had never seen anyone personalize a subject line before, and it said, "Rebecca, here's why you should come to Austin."

Mindy:

A sign from the Universe.

Rebecca:

That's exactly what I thought! So I cre-ated a plan. This is a big piece of advice I give to aspiring writers who want to transition from a day job, and need their life to be more flexible. Tie yourself to the bottom line if possible. It gives you leverage to ask for what you want. I give the same advice to writers who want to make a lot of money. As a copywriter, you're often automati-cally tied to a company's bottom line. You are the reason companies make money. Without you and your words, they wouldn't sell as much. I had al-ready had a little bit of success in helping AWAI grow, so I was able to say, "I want to move some-where else and have the flexibility to work from home. Here's what I've done so far. I feel I can do this from somewhere else and be just as effective. Give me a shot. If it doesn't work, I'll come back." Two months in, Katie and I both agreed I was way more effective away from the office.

Mindy:

How did you become so much more effec-tive when you switched to working from home?

Rebecca:

When I'm working, I'm working. You have to treat it like a job, even when you're work-ing from home. But my biggest piece of advice for anyone transitioning into the work-at-home life is to never close up without a plan for the next day. Whenever I shut down my computer and before I leave my desk for the day, I always look at my long to-do list and I create a Post-It® note list of the top three things I'm going to accomplish the next day. That way, when I sit at my desk the next morning, I never have the opportunity to get dis-tracted into non-work stuff. The first thing I do is look at the sticky note and I know what I have to do when

I sit down. I think that is what ensures I'm effective day-after-day.

Mindy:

Diving in like that is such a smart way to make use of that beginning-of-the-day energy. What about you, Katie? You work primarily out of the AWAI offices, right?

Katie:

Yes, though I also work at home quite a bit. My big challenge, like a lot of our members, is creating a balance between home and work. The thing is, neither Rebecca nor I really think of this as a "job." It's more like our avocation, or our call-ing. Always a part of us, on our minds.

Rebecca:

People ask us what hours we work and Katie and I both say, "All of them." We're al-ways working. In the shower, while we're sleep-ing, doesn't matter. We feel like we just live and breathe everything related to this company, this industry, and our members. We're always work-ing on new ideas, from how to make our writers more effective, how to improve our own busi-ness, and so forth. It just never stops.



Mindy:

That's probably the distinction between having a job versus having, like you said, an avoca-tion, where you can throw yourself into it and not feel like you're working. Katie, can you talk about who has been the biggest influence on your life and what lessons that person taught you?

Katie:

First of all, my parents. My father: I never saw him be rude or unkind to anyone. He always had a big smile and a bigger hug. And, he was just a huge supporter of my brothers and me. My mother, at 92, is my daily inspiration. She was AWAI's bookkeeper for 15 years … our first em-ployee … and she still comes in to the office for an hour or so every week to "check in." She's tena-cious and protective and proud and encouraging of the people she loves. She has the most dignity and grace of anyone I've ever known. She's had a big influence on AWAI's culture.



As for my business life, I have to go back to that very first boss of mine, Phyllis. I hear her in my head quite a bit even now. Then I have to say Mark Ford. He's given me so many opportunities over the years. He's always been an example of excellence, of doing better than you think you can do, of always delivering quality content, and really putting your customers first so it becomes a win-win for everybody.

Mindy:

What about you, Rebecca? Who has been the biggest influence on your life and what les-sons did that person teach you?

Rebecca:

It's funny, Katie and I have a lot of over-lap as far as lessons go. I would say, like her, I have had a lot of mentors. I've been really, really blessed to date. My mom — like your dad, Katie — taught me kindness. My mom's mantra, in any situation, is to always be kind. That's her advice to anyone in business, that's her advice to new couples get-ting married: "Always be kind." To this day, that saying rings through my head all the time, in the way that I treat people in business, my personal life, on the street, anywhere, to always be kind.

Also, Mark Ford has taught me a lot. But the thing that I think impacted my life the most was that he taught me the real value of money and how you use it to buy freedom. It's not about the money, it's what you do with the money. If I hadn't met him over a decade ago, I may still have student loans, credit card debt, and nothing saved for re-tirement. He impacted my life and my family's life in a way that I can never thank him enough for. And then Nick Usborne, another mentor, taught me the value of myself and how to properly eval-uate my time and effort and the opportunities that present themselves. Because of those les-sons, I'm in a much different place today in my life financially and professionally. And I'm able to teach others the same valuable lessons.

Mindy:

That's a huge lesson for writers as well, to understand their value. Any other mentors you can tell us about?

Rebecca:

I'll try not to get choked up about this, but my biggest influence has probably been Ka-tie. She taught me to shoot big, way bigger than I ever could have done on my own. She taught me to be confident. And she taught me that you can actually trust people in business. Even after al-most 12 years of working together, I'm constantly learning from her and she's constantly challeng-ing me to do better.

Katie:

Now I'm crying.

Mindy:

I'm crying, too. That was beautiful.

Rebecca:

Good luck with the transcription.

Mindy:

Right? Thank you.

Katie:

Rebecca's made business fun. She's made it a joyful experience. She's taught me what it means to have a real partner and colleague, and all the wonderful collaboration that we do is just pure joy.

Mindy:

I don't know how I can follow that. I so appreciate that you both shared that. How about we wrap up by talking about the most important thing a new writer can do to get his or her writing career off the ground?

Katie:

From day one, think of yourself as a writer. Tell everyone you know that you're a writer and realize that you're running a business. You're the CEO of your own business, so do what a CEO does and focus every decision on making your busi-ness profitable.

Rebecca:

My answer is to just get started. The biggest mistake new writers make is not getting started. They get caught up in the, "One day, one day, one day," line of thought, or get stuck re-searching all the different opportunities without ever taking action. And it's true, there are tons of ways to make a living as a writer. But you have to get started, and then focus. Take the time to go ahead and look at all the opportunities, consider which ones are the best fit for you, and then pick one. Then you, "F.O.C.U.S." or "Follow One Course Until Successful." Get the skills, get the training, do what our programs say, get out there, and connect with clients. Like Katie said, focus on be-coming profitable. Just saying you're going to do it "someday" isn't enough. You have to actually do that work. Focus on one thing and avoid the bright shiny objects.

Mindy:

Put one foot in front of the other and charge ahead toward the most promising, life-worthy opportunities. Which is exactly what AWAI stands for. Thank you both for sharing your time and incredible insights today.

This interview was previously published in the October, 2015 issue of *Barefoot Writer*. To read more interviews from fellow Barefoot Writers be sure to checkout *The Barefoot Writer's Club*.

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