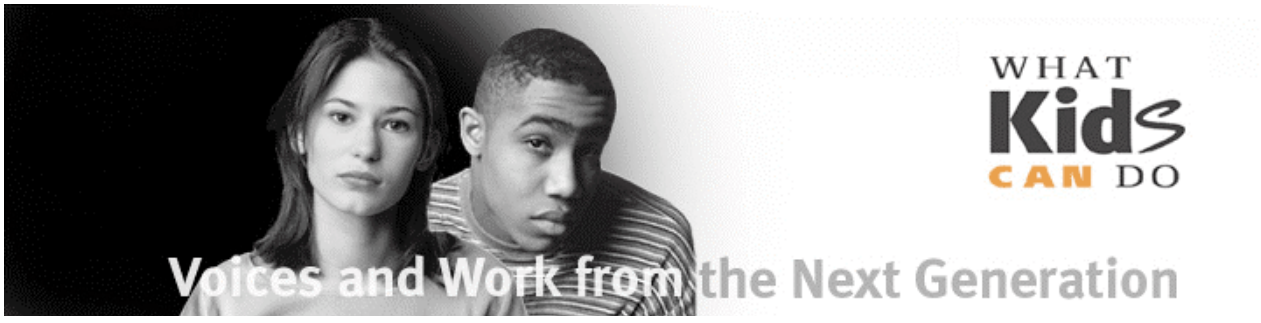
Making Writing Essential to Teen Lives



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It's hip to be deep

Making writing essential to teens' lives

PROVIDENCE, RI—We want literacy to be integral, deeply rooted, exciting, and transformative for teenagers. But how do you get young people to read and write as if their lives depend on it?

Literacy is the key factor in determining whether students fail or succeed academically, and our nation's teachers are painfully aware of the crisis point that students now occupy. When kids are alienated from academic subject matter, and poor test scores have sapped their spirit, how might we draw them in to writing as a space to grow and shine, and to communicate?

The answer begins with treating writing as a tool for connecting with issues that directly affect youth. This helps teenagers regard it not as a barrier, but as an entry into a world they can question and shape. They will hunger for reading and writing when it taps into their desire to take hold of their world, explore their identity, and be taken seriously by peers and adults alike.

Add to this the chance to make their writing and voices public—in print, online, on the radio, on stage—and literacy can exert an irresistible pull on young people. Publication is the surest route to inspire young writers, creating a powerful sense of ownership.

What you will find here

In this edition of the WKCD website, we offer profiles of seven programs and teachers that exemplify the dedication, spark, structure, and vision that motivate students—even those with no prior interest in writing—to take up writing for a public audience.

We highlight the work of one of the country's longest-running teen writing programs, New York City's Youth Communication. We introduce the Young Naturalist Awards, which recognize innovative environmental research essays by youth. We show students assuming the role of youth evaluators in metropolitan Detroit, weaving their interviews and other data about racial stereotyping into a lively 57-page report. We speak with a teacher who has spent a decade teaching writing to ESL students.

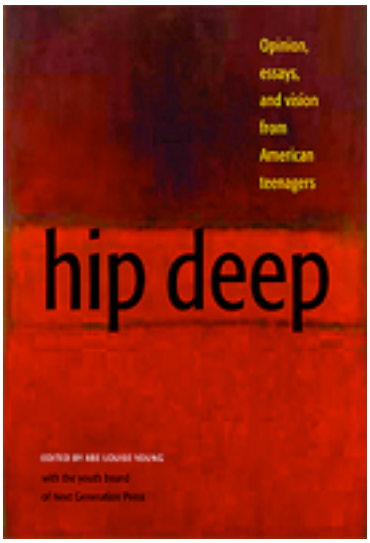
We begin, however, with WKCD's Abe Louise Young, who as a poet and teacher helps young people bring their voices to bear on issues of identity, community, and justice.

We visit the anthology of youth essays and commentary Abe Louise Young edited for Next Generation Press, released this month under the title **Hip Deep**. We travel to a high school next to our nation's largest army base, where Abe recently conducted a writing workshop for students with parents deployed in Iraq. And we learn about the Neighborhood Story Project, which supports students from a failing school in New Orleans as they create books about their neighborhoods—neighborhoods Abe knows well from growing up, herself, in New Orleans.

We include, too, an annotated list of organizations, books, and websites devoted to the teaching of writing.

*"Writing is a tool where you are not being judged at all. You're just using your own thoughts. You'd never assume it had so much power or so much of an impact on you and others."***—Antwaun Garcia, student journalist, Youth Communication**

Hip Deep:
Opinion, Essays, and Vision from American Teenagers



"You can approach the act of writing with nervousness, excitement, hopefulness, or even despair—the sense that you can never completely put on the page what's in your mind and heart. You can come to the act with your fists clenched and your eyes narrowed, ready to kick ass and take down names. You can come to it because you want a girl to marry you or because you want to change the world. Come to it any way but lightly. Let me say it again: ***you must not come lightly to the blank page****."—Stephen King*

Teenage commentators straddle an interesting line. On the one hand—whether they use print or the Internet, podium or airwaves as their medium—they have little to gain or lose. They don't have to protect an agenda or public position. Their opinions are not motivated by financial rewards. They can write and speak with integrity about what they see, and not limit their idealism about what is possible. They can tell new stories.

On the other hand, as teenagers they are gaining or losing every day. Their lives are significantly influenced by changes in education funding, health care, national policy, and international events. Youth are at the epicenter of our society; the struggles of a heterogeneous nation converge in their lives.

When WKCD and Next Generation Press set out a year ago to gather and create an anthology of compelling social commentary by adolescents across the country, we were unprepared for the diversity and depth of the voices we found. The more than fifty young writers featured in **Hip Deep: Opinion, Essays, and Vision from American Teenagers** come from villages in Alaska and slums in Alabama, suburbs in Baltimore and high-rises in Los Angeles. Whether the children of elected officials and children of minimum-wage workers, their views and stories are deeply personal. They touch on larger issues of our culture and time. Sometimes that touch is feather-light; other times, it's a direct bulls-eye.

William Harvey tells of playing his violin for soldiers digging through Ground Zero. Eric Green writes a moving account of struggling to succeed in high school despite his fetal alcohol syndrome. Telvi Alitimirano, a fifteen-year-old Latina from Texas, contributes a sassy manifesto about her choice to remain a virgin, standing her ground with style against "all those little boys who try to hit me up." Matan Prilletinsky gives a scathing analysis of the juvenile death penalty. Juliana Partridge examines her biracial identity: "I am the taste of daybreak, the initiator of a new world."

Other writers take on international politics, gay marriage, divorce, religious and cultural freedom, poverty, sports, and many other subjects.

To **Hip Deep's** readers, its teenage contributors offer not just their views but also several messages.

To young people: Write, speak, take any venue available to you—the Web, the radio, poetry slams, the copy machine. Publish in the original sense of the word: Make your views public. Don't let anyone discourage you from expression.

To teachers: Invite students' raw life material in the writing process. Inspire students to write from their own experience. Show teenagers, through their own words, that writing matters.

To other adults: Seek a place at the table with youth, recognizing that youth are already at the table, bursting with urgent ideas. They have courage, not cynicism. They are ready to be valued and included in decision-making.

To all: Open your heart, expand your brain. It's hip to care about what happens in our country, our community, our planet, and our minds. It's deep to ask hard questions, to share real stories, and to listen.

To order a copy of *Hip Deep*, see www.nextgenerationpress.org.

See below for:

- An interview with editor Abe Louise Young
- Excerpts from **Hip Deep**

Teaching and writing is love and precision:
Interview with Abe Louise Young

In early April 2006, WKCD interviewed Abe Louise Young about the links between writing and teaching. Poet Alan Shefsky, a friend of Young's who conducted the interview, has been in daily correspondence with her for six years about the writing process.

WKCD: What makes a good teacher of writing?

YOUNG: I think it's important for English teachers and writing teachers in high schools to be writers themselves. When I say "be writers," I don't mean "publish their work and get recognition." I mean have a relationship with words that's loving, excited, and special. Take the time—make the time—to be engaged in a creative process. There's always struggle—the fear, the blocks, the breakthroughs. If teachers can't remember how powerful a process writing is, they're not good guardians of that door for younger people. A teacher who is defeated about writing will inspire children to torture themselves over words. A teacher who's excited about writing will be a conduit for students to grow like wildfire in self-discovery.

Also, I think a good teacher of writing invests in relationships. To work with a piece of student writing over and over again until it's right—rather than putting a comment on it and calling it a day—is investing in a relationship. To kneel down beside a sullen student and ask them what's wrong, then say: Write about that, is investing in a relationship. Students respond to relationships more than to any instruction.

Other than that...unabashed love. Precision. Being unafraid to tell people what you think about their ideas and work, but being gentle enough to do it with respect for the limits they're working within.

WKCD: What are some things that you've learned from your students? Anything completely surprising?

YOUNG: With students, I learn about my own limitations and fears, and potential. I'm learning with them. When I walk into a classroom, I see a group of strangers and register all of my stereotypes and projections about them. Just like we do walking down the street and seeing people we don't know. *This one's too depressed to reach; this gangster-type probably hates me; that's a highly obedient girl dreaming over by the window*. Then, when the writers start sharing their work out loud, those stereotypes shatter. They become people with their own stories. It sounds silly, but I'm always surprised at people's complexity. It's endless. And I'm grateful for the opportunity to cross the threshold of the classroom—a field of possibility—to encounter it.

I've also learned that people have very different audiences in mind when they pick up a pen. Being schooled in the Western literary tradition, I have a distinct audience

of ancient literary ancestors and contemporary radicals that I'm hoping to please and converse with. Other people start in totally different cultural traditions, with different imagery, different audiences, different goals. I've learned that the less I impose my own expectations (beyond the general expectation of dazzling and hard work), the more freely students explore their own audiences and inner worlds.

WKCD: How do you encourage students who are reluctant to write, who say they "aren't creative" or that just don't have anything to say?

"To kneel down beside a sullen student and ask them what's wrong, then say: Write about that, is investing in a relationship. Students respond to relationships more than any instruction."

YOUNG: Slide in the back door with something easy. Break it into bite-sized pieces. Making lists is a good way to start. I might ask that student to make a list of everything in their room, or all the red things they own, or what cooking in their house smells like. Things they hate or love. Then, *tell me everything you know about that*.

Atmosphere is important: Make it feel like something that's *theirs*. Create a special relationship. Turn down the lights in the classroom and put on soft music, or go outside.

Another strategy with students who are alienated from writing is to have them record themselves talking, or interviewing someone—then transcribe it. Sometimes the gap between talking/thinking and writing is overwhelming. The mind isn't always connected to the hand. If their words get onto paper a different way, then they'll have something to work with. They may be very surprised to see what their words look like written down. And that you start to build that pathway between the brain and the fingers, the talking self and the writing self.

If the block is emotional—*I'm not a good writer, I suck, people will laugh*—then I think that the "workshop" process helps. Set up the classroom at a certain time to celebrate and hear each other. People write, then read aloud, get applause, and some flash responses pointing out interesting things in their pieces. One session of seeing others read aloud and get positive feedback will often cure a fear barrier; even people who don't identify as writers want to be recognized and clapped for. (Writers, of course, are insatiable for it.) This workshop time doesn't replace concentrated feedback and critique. It's not meant to make everything roses, but to fertilize the soil so that new vines do grow. Then the training, pruning, day-in and day-out work of becoming better writers and thinkers is rooted in a sense of purpose and audience.

WKCD: You must also have students who share stories that are very personal, perhaps very painful. How do you handle these kinds of situations?

YOUNG: These situations are really precious. When one person shares a painful story, the class deepens and everyone feels more permission to be real, to stretch themselves. With high school students especially, who carry a huge amount of emotional turmoil, when one person sticks their neck out and gets a caring response, then everyone else feels safer. Usually, the other students will do the work that's needed there: recognizing the writer, supporting them empathetically. As a facilitator I'd ask, *Can anyone relate?* I'd also work to keep focused on the piece of writing as a *crafted* work, and not a reflection of reality. Bring it back to the page: images we

liked, or places that we need more information, or a metaphor that was moving. That takes the pressure off the writer, and returns the focus to the work.

WKCD: How do you tailor your teaching to the particular needs of the students and the particular settings?

"When one person shares a painful story, the class deepens and everyone feels more permission to be real, to stretch themselves."

YOUNG: I use poems to start off teaching writing—poems are like portholes into deeper communication. They're short, intense, and the language has energy, and there's a window to a higher message. If the students are dancers, I'll bring in poems about bodies. If they're incarcerated kids, I might bring in poems written by people in prison, or about different meanings of freedom. If they're older people, poems about the passage of time, memory, or family relationships. There is a poem or book about everything under the sun. It's improvisational. The poems are just kick-offs—I don't analyze them much at the start, but guide folks to dive through the porthole that's opened in the room. We start writing after reading a poem out loud together.

I find it's important to bring poems written by African-Americans if the students are African-American, or by Asians if the students are Asian. Being a white American myself, I try to do this humbly and vocalize my possible idiocy, while offering what I've brought in a spirit of exploration.

Since writing is communication, there's something similar about every setting. The questions: *Who are you? How do you relate to the subjects at hand? What do you want to say? How do you want to say it?* These are questions we'll never stop finding the answers for. Teaching and writing are two of the most satisfying ways to inquire.

hip deep

Opinion, Essays, and Vision from American Teenagers

EDITED BY ABE LOUISE YOUNG

with the Youth Board of Next Generation Press

NEXT GENERATION PRESS

August

DELLA JENKINS

THE SUMMER MY DAD LEFT it was hot as hell and I picked cherry tomatoes with him in our garden, seeds running down my face. The tomatoes were practically bursting already from the heat and if you touched them a little too hard they would explode before you could even get them to your mouth. My mom spent a lot of time at the pond, she could suntan for hours, but my dad just paced. He always loved the first frost and could predict it the night before from the smell. Autumn fit my dad well. His silvery hair and icy blue eyes seemed to wait all year long for the cold to come. I sometimes think he went crazy that summer from the humidity and all, but that's probably ridiculous, blaming my parent's downfall on the weather.

Anyway, by the time it did start to get cold at night he was gone. The peepers were going insane that night when I woke up to hear the car starting. I remember I sat up halfway in bed and watched the lights disappear down our driveway. I couldn't have been sure it was the end but I could feel it pulling at me and when the car turned out of sight further down the road something seemed to snap in me. I was up and I was running and I didn't stop until the gravel hurt my feet too much to keep going. My mom was standing at the door when I came back but she didn't talk to me and I was glad because I don't think I could have stood it if she had tried to tell me it was okay. She didn't look okay and I hate it when she lies.

The rest of the night I just lay in bed and I listened hard to the darkness. I was waiting to hear an engine and the door closing behind him but I guess I must have eventually fallen asleep. After a month or so he called

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Della Jenkins lives in rural Massachusetts and is a junior in high school. She wrote "August" in response to an assignment in English class.

the house when he knew Mom would be at work and he asked me if he could come see me and I didn't know what to say, so I said yes. Then he began coming to the house every two weeks but he was gone to me. He was gone to me for more than three years. I was blinded by anger that he did not care enough to see me every day, or maybe more that eating tomatoes with me was not enough to hold him here.

I have to say I pushed him away, the whole time complaining that he had no time for me. I was lost like this for so long that when I finally looked up into his eyes again he looked horribly old and I thought I must have missed something. I got this terrified feeling that I had killed him with all my blame. His vision was going very fast they said, possibly blind in the next year. None of the doctors could quite figure out what was wrong with the retina but I knew. I knew I had thrown his blame in his face, put frost in his eyes. I knew every time that I refused to look at him when he told me he loved me that I had frozen him a bit more and taken a moment of sight away from him. And suddenly all I wanted was to show him the violent red and green of a garden in August, tell him that I had felt the heat too and that it couldn't have been his fault.

Immigration Kids

DANIEL CACHO

1981

A baby boy was born in tiny Caribbean town in Belize called Dangriga.

He spent the first three years of his life playing hide and seek
in the neighborhood cemetery.
Like many other immigration kids,
he had no idea what was about to happen.

1984

In what seemed like the blink of an eye, his mother disappeared.
The kid was left to make sense of the same poverty-ridden life
his mom left to escape.
Abandonment and abuse was a daily routine.

1995

Just when the kid entered teen-hood

he received a one-way plane ticket to the U.S. of A.

It was a bittersweet mother-son reunion.
For the first year he called his mom "miss" and "ma'am."
He didn't ask any questions.
She didn't give any answers.
Between the pressures of adolescence,
finding new friends and the strain of chasing a lost childhood,

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Daniel Cacho composed his poem "Immigration Kids" during an internship with Youth Radio, and it was aired to a national audience.

immigration status was the least of his worries.
But time slowly cracked the screaming silence in the house like an eggshell.
Tears fell.

1998

A masochistic fear turned pain turned anger.
Lifestyle inevitably catches up.
He was stuck in a stank holding tank.
Thinking. Blinking.
Back to the day he decided that a gun provided
the safety and security he sought.

"ID # & Social Security card please."

Confused, the immigration kid finds himself
in the Inglewood courthouse, confronted by the public defender,
face to face with deportation or jail time.

By the time he got out of jail, he was 18,
and in the country too long to be eligible for a visa.
Why didn't you do it the right way? was what he really wanted to say to his
mom. But feeling so grateful for having escaped Dangriga,
the kid couldn't confront her,
and what good would it have done any way?
Couple years passed, and he was stepping into adulthood.
Could he go to college, and get a job?
Suddenly, he stood facing a wall he never knew was there,
and it was way too tall to climb.
The boy eventually found an under-the-table-job.
Little pay, lotta taxes.

2002

The kid had a kid. Premature, born before due.
More bills to pay and by the way, rent is due.
This is a bad situation, but worse for who?

The Case for Race

CANDACE COLEMAN

As a black american, I have disliked affirmative action for years. I mean, how could colleges admit blacks, Latinos and American Indians with lower grades and scores, but turn away better-qualified whites and Asians? To me, it seemed like blatant racial discrimination.

Why should colleges and universities lower their standards for minority applicants? It seemed to me that affirmative action allowed exactly the kind of unequal treatment people have been fighting against in the Civil Rights Movement for thirty years.

I thought that affirmative action went against the Constitution, specifically the Fourteenth Amendment and its provisions that persons shall not be discriminated against based on race, sex, creed, or ethnicity. I used to agree with those who think the Constitution is a "color-blind" document and those who think Americans should consider race as an irrelevant issue to ensure equality for all. But is the Constitution really color-blind? Is race really irrelevant in America? I don't think so.

Most of all, I opposed affirmative action because to a certain extent I believed it diminished my accomplishments as a minority. Being a black American, I didn't want to face charges of being unqualified, unworthy and unwelcomed. I'm really conscious of people saying behind my back, "She only got into this school because she's black."

But for the past few months, I have been doing a lot of reading on affirmative action, and it has changed my opinion. With so much racial inequality still in America, policies like affirmative action level the playing field and actually make our society more just. Remember, it wasn't too long

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Candace Coleman wrote "The Case for Race" at age seventeen, as a student at Marymount High School in Los Angeles. Her essay was first published online in WireTap.

ago when people of color were barred from even applying to colleges, universities and certain jobs because they were minorities.

I read a speech by former President Lyndon Johnson that really influenced my change of opinion. In a speech at Howard University in 1965, President Johnson stated, "You do not take a person who, for years, has been hobbled by chains and liberate him, bring him up to the starting line of a race and say, 'You are free to compete with all the others,' and still justly believe that you have been completely fair."

Johnson's assertion had a significant impact on affirmative action policies, and ultimately has changed the minds of many Americans—including mine—on the subject. Now I look at affirmative action as a kind of compensation for past discrimination, including slavery and legal segregation.

Racism today is not as obvious as it was in the past; there aren't people of color drinking from different water fountains. But when I open my eyes and honestly look around at the world around me, I see that racial inequality still exists. We live in a world with linguistic profiling, where people turn you down for jobs on the phone because they think you're black or Latino from the way you talk. Things like racial profiling happen daily when the police pull over black men in nice cars because they look "suspicious." Notice that the mostly white suburban schools have better resources than the mostly black and Latino inner-city schools that lack teachers and safe facilities.

A common misconception that many people have about affirmative action is that it lowers the standards for black, Latino and American Indian students in the college application process.

Take, for example, the case of the University of Michigan Law School being brought to the Supreme Court to determine whether the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment forbids giving one ethnic group or minority special advantages over another. The petitioners/plaintiffs in the case against the University of Michigan claim that affirmative action lowers admissions standards for minority applicants, which creates hostilities between white and minority students. According to University

of Michigan's own data, white students who were admitted to the University of Michigan had an average GPA lower than that of black students.

Also, over the past ten years, the acceptance rate for white students—meaning the percentage of applicants from a particular ethnic group that are accepted—at the University of Michigan Law School was still higher than the acceptance rate for black or Latino students, and was second only to the rate of acceptance for American Indian students (who still only make up 2 percent of the student population). It's important to step back from the argument to recognize that even with affirmative action policies in place, the University of Michigan is still more than 70 percent white.

In 1996, California voters approved Proposition 209, a ballot initiative that said race cannot be considered as a factor for hiring or admissions in any state institution. After the University of California system enacted the ban against affirmative action, schools like UC Berkeley found that the admittance rates of underrepresented minority students dropped by 14 percent in 1997. The freshman class at UCLA this year has only 281 blacks out of 10,507 incoming students. The decreasing number of minority students detracts from the learning process for all students because it limits the range of perspectives present in class discussions.

When white, black, Asian, Latino, Arab and other students are brought together in a classroom, they can better understand their differences and destroy racist stereotypes that have been so ingrained in our nation's mentality. I met a professor at UCLA who told me affirmative action programs have actually decreased racial hostilities between different groups because of this classroom learning process; when students learn in a more tolerant and diverse environment, everyone benefits from the experience.

I can't imagine being in a class where the discussion is on a particular ethnic group or culture, and there is no one with in-depth knowledge on the subject present. How can a group of all-white students have a serious discussion about slavery, bilingual education, immigration, racism or even affirmative action without recognizing that they are missing some key perspectives in the argument?

Without diversified student bodies, many minority students (including

those at the University of Michigan) are forced to be the "official speakers" for their race. As a black student at a mostly white high school, I've helped my classmates understand more about the black experience, but I do get tired of being the "official representative" of my race. Diversity alleviates this pressure on students like me.

Minority students might receive a slight preference when they are admitted into a particular institution, but they have to continue to work hard to earn their school grades just like every other student. Furthermore, race is just one of the many preferences that people can have when applying to college. Many students at my school abhor affirmative action on the one hand, but when it comes to asking one of daddy's friends on Columbia's Board of Trustees for a favor—you can bet they start believing in preferences. Schools may give affirmative action to minority students, but regardless of test scores, rich people have always gotten seats in the nation's most selective colleges and universities by relying on insider preferences.

The *Wall Street Journal* took a look at the practice of "legacy preferences"—a.k.a. white people's affirmative action—in which the children of alumni are admitted to colleges over better-qualified applicants. Some schools like to admit applicants with alumni ties because they get money for doing so. For example, Al Gore and President George W. Bush have fathers who attended Harvard and Yale, respectively. When applying for college, both Al and George had SAT scores lower than 1300 and bad grades from the prep schools they attended. But the fact that their fathers, who were U.S. Senators, generously gave Harvard and Yale buckets of cash for alumni funds was given a higher priority during the selection process than their academic qualifications as students.

It's clear to me that everyone gets a share of preferences. So if wealthy people, athletes, legacy applicants and poor people are all given preferences, why can't underrepresented minorities also get a little consideration?

Getting into college is never solely based on one's academic merit. Grades and test scores are important, but what a student can bring to a university community can sometimes be even more significant.

Untouchable

TELVI ALTAMIRANO

Nowadays it's hard to find many teen virgins—so why am I still a virgin? Why am I still part of the V-squad? Lots of people have asked me that. (Well, mostly boys.)

It seems to me that every little girl has given it up "just because." I plan to lose my virginity to someone that deserves it, not the first little boy that tells me I should.

I don't choose to be a virgin because I have to; I choose to be one because I want to. I was brought up in a home where sex before marriage is wrong, but that doesn't mean I'm not going to make my own choices. In the end it's really up to me to decide. People can tell me what's right, what's wrong, and what other people might think, but hey! I know what I think, and nobody's advice and no boy's persuasion is going to change my mind.

I've heard it all, from "When you gonna let me hit it?" to, "If you really liked me you would do it." I really think I've heard every reason that could possibly cross a boy's mind on why I should give it up. I've been in that position, when you think you know the person and you're really starting to like this person and you wish you could give him your everything. Then you realize you can't, and this person starts giving you all these reasons . . .

"Baby, I love you, and I wanna show you how much I love you."

Ha! Please, you've known me for two weeks and you love me? And you expect me to give you something I've been saving for 15 years? I like you, but heck, I don't like you that much.

I've been through a lot of tough decisions that only I can make, a lot of

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Telvi Altimirano wrote "Untouchable" at age fifteen, as a sophomore at Del Valle High School in Austin, Texas. She wrote the piece as part of a summer writing camp with the Breakthrough Collaborative.

persuasion, but guess what? It didn't work, because here I am, still a virgin, still standing on my own two feet, like always.

My mom thinks I can't make my own choices. She sees me as a little innocent child that couldn't possibly go through any pressure, especially to take such a decision. I mean, what teens got to worry about? We ain't got no bills to pay; we ain't got no kids to take care of. Fo' sho we don't, but we do have decisions to make—decisions parents aren't around to make for us. Our choice to have sex, our choice to use drugs, our choice to choose our friends, is our choice.

So, back to the point: Why am I still a virgin?

My virginity is the thing I'm most proud of, the thing I value the most, the thing that only I can control. Because it's mine, and because ain't nobody just gonna take it from me.

My virginity says a lot about me: about my self-respect, my image, and my decision-making. My virginity is part of me and if I decide to share it with someone, heaven trust, it's not going to be just anybody, it's going to be the one.

I'm not saying girls that aren't virgins are worth less; I'm saying I feel like I'm worth more because I am. I'm proud to answer, "Of course I'm a virgin," when I'm asked, and repeat "I know it's good," after somebody tells me it's good. I'm proud I have such a gift to offer to the right person, I'm proud of myself for making it this far, 'cause I don't know many teen girls that can say they have not had sex and they are happy. I know I can, and that whatever happens I'm going to make the right choice. I know whoever I give it to better be glad I decided to share something so pure and valuable as my virginity.

Forget the Corsage

ADAM GAUZZA

If I'm sure of one thing, it's the fact that I make a great prom date. When a girl asks me to be her date, it makes me feel I have something unique to offer. And I do—my great dancing ability, sense of style, charming personality and a talent with arranging flowers.

Since freshman year, I have been to eight proms, and my own senior ball hasn't even happened yet. But, believe it or not, I would quickly give up my track record and my tux if it meant I could go to the prom with the person of my choice. Although I have a great time at every dance I attend, I always feel a faint yet distinct awkwardness grip my stomach when I hear the words: "This is my *friend*, Adam."

I think it is much easier for a person to bring a significant other to a prom even if she would have more fun with a "friend–date." Being dubbed a "friend–date" at a prom is like being strapped with the uncomfortable title of "uncle." But if a guy is your boyfriend, he is your boyfriend—nothing awkward or uncomfortable about it.

All this is not to say I am ungrateful to the beautiful girls who have graciously asked my company in the past. The awkwardness and discomfort I speak of are about my own about personal feelings.

Just once, I would like to go to my prom with someone I can call my significant other, someone I could call my boyfriend—without having to take ten minutes to explain our relationship or listen to others say what's weird about it. Some might say, why not just do what makes me happy and not worry about what others think. But it's not that easy. My high school

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Adam Gauzza wrote "Forget the Corsage" while in high school in Pennsylvania, and it was originally published in Teaching Tolerance *magazine. A revised and expanded version later appeared in the* New York Times.

career will end soon. Unfortunately, I know the "someday" when this is no longer taboo will not suddenly happen in June, in time for my senior ball. I can accept this, and I would never want to cross a line that could make the majority of my class, or the faculty, feel uneasy. I could even be kicked out for crossing that line. Or if not kicked out, I could be monitored the whole night and gossiped about for years to come.

As unthinkable as this may seem, it is the truth. While it would be a milestone in some people's eyes, to others, it would invoke a wrath never seen before. Facing that wrath on my special night is not a risk I am willing to take at this point. No matter whom I take as my date, I always have an enjoyable time at a prom. Just once, though, I'd like to be able to attend with my ideal date, matching boutonnieres and all.

Culture

MIKAYLAH BOWMAN

When I was nine years old I used to ride my purple bike down to the projects, I'd find Nick's house and bang on his screen door, he'd poke his head around the corner, I could see the television set, the fan in the living room blowing with little strings of tinsel hanging helplessly in the wind. He'd smile, really big white teeth, and throw on his shoes.

I always let him ride my bike since his had gotten stolen, he let me sit on the handlebars and we rode to the recreation center. The Rec Center was falling apart, it always smelled bad but everyone tried to stay optimistic. The vending machines were always empty and the volunteers were scarce.

Nick and I would raid the activities closet and find the old battered up mitts, the bat and search for the one baseball they had there. When we had everything we'd run around the different rooms in the Rec Center yelling, "Baseball! Baseball! Let's go!" Kids dropped their low air basketballs and toy cars, they tied their laces and ran out to the shabby field outside.

We played for hours, I sucked and so did Nick but he told the best jokes when someone struck out, we were always making fun of each other in really nice ways.

I was always "the white girl" if I wasn't Mikaylah, they asked me what a white girl was doing at the Rec Center, I told them, "playing baseball." They'd laugh, saying, "Well, trying to at least."

A few girls got to know me and invited me to play double dutch with them, they sang really complicated songs I couldn't understand, I was scared at first. One girl named Courtney squinted in the sun and stared at me for a little while. I smiled and she shook her head, a pity headshake. With

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Mikaylah Bowman lives in Austin, Texas and attends the Griffin School. She wrote "Culture" at age fifteen, and published it on her blog, Clashluver.

time and the help of the Rec girls I learned to jump-rope really well and even got good enough to learn some of their songs. Double dutch was like dancing and at the same time it was common ground for the neighborhood kids, when it wasn't your turn you braided hair and told gossip or talked about Dad hitting Mom or how hard it was to go for so long without eating.

Courtney and I tied in the double dutch tournament that year. One day when we went out for another game of baseball someone had taken all of the bases from the field, none of us knew why anyone would want to steal a bunch of banged-up bases but Nick whispered, "People know why they need stuff out here, better not to ask."

I nodded but had no idea what he meant.

To make up for it we found big sticks and laid them around the field. The games resumed.

You don't understand the beauty in concrete, in self-expression, in fire hydrants unhinged and mangled faces until you meet these kids. And it isn't a bad thing, no not even close.

I was unaware of the cultural impact this was having on me. I learned about graffiti, about the power plant they refused to shut down in the East side that was making residents sick, about music, about poetry, about the political outlaws that mattered, about real hardship, what it was like to live in government housing and at the same time, how incredibly similar I was to these kids. They offered comfort in places that no one else could. We were a family every day after school, sometimes people didn't understand me or us or them. But it didn't matter.

I stopped going back when I turned eleven. Maybe it had something to do with the fact that I was in junior high, maybe getting sick made me too tired to play baseball or double dutch, maybe it was because Nick and I had lost touch—as friends in very different situations tend to do.

Sometimes I ride my bike down by the Rec Center and see the girls singing, braiding hair, and jump roping, I see other kids playing baseball and teasing in their timeless communal way.

Things have changed so much.

But some things haven't.

My River

RAFAEL ESPINOZA

My river has a bridge
where I like to sit,
dangling my legs,
and listen.

Lots of things change quickly,
but the river takes its time.
And for some reason that's comforting.

The summer-green grass
whispers excitedly
as if passing on secrets.
The trees murmur wisely,
nodding with the wind.

The birds gossip,
and there are rustles and an occasional splash
as various animals
go about living.

And then there is the river,
which passes on heedless of all,
intent always to push forward.

Rafael Espinoza wrote "My River" at age fourteen, as a student at Broadmoor Middle Magnet School in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. His poem won a prize from River of Words, an annual environmental poetry and art contest.

As it flows beneath me it seems to say
hello and goodbye at once—
"Must be moving,
there is so much to see!"
It reminds me that life is an adventure.

And whatever bad feelings I brought with me,
the river carries them away.

Rivers make good friends.
They help you remember
what the world makes you forget.

Worrying About Family in Palestine

LAILIE IBRAHIM

Unlike my mother, who has been glued to the television watching news updates, I refuse to sit and soak in all the killing and carnage going on in the world. I'm a full-blooded Palestinian Muslim born in America, and in my house our biggest concern right now is what's going on in the Middle East. As news from the West Bank slowly trickles in to the States and I get glimpses of the situation there, I dread the call that will inform us that one of the nine family members remaining has been blown up, beaten, or shot to death. We had a close call recently when my uncle Ziad had his fingers blown off by a motion-detecting mine that was left in a plastic bag on the side of the road. Another reason I don't like to watch the news is because I like to keep an open mind and watching may only incite hatred towards Israelis, which is something that has proved itself to be far from a solution.

I think that during the September 11, 2001 attacks, many of us in America got a glimpse of what the occupied territories of Palestine are like every day. Except, what happened in New York is over and our country is getting back on its feet. What's happening in Palestine is continuous and has been going on for fifty-two years. My fourteen-year-old cousin Donya just finished one of the most difficult school years she has faced in her seven years living in the West Bank, and her troubles had little to do with the school curriculum. In a recent phone conversation Donya told me about a grueling hour-and-a-half commute to school that would take ten minutes, if it weren't for the checkpoints in between. In the morning she

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Lailie Ibrahim's "Worrying About Family in Palestine" was first published in Teaching Tolerance *magazine.*

leaves the village hours before her first class and walks nearly a mile to reach one of many taxis it takes to get there.

On June 8, several days into her remaining week of school, during finals week, Donya said she climbed a mountain to avoid a checkpoint from fear of being killed. "That day they wouldn't let anyone pass," she said. "They start shooting at anybody if they passed." She wasn't so lucky on her trip home. Israeli soldiers opened fire on their taxis after refusing passage for her and many other students trying to find an alternative way home to their neighboring villages. She spent the night in Ramallah with a relative before returning home safely on the same road the next day. "And they call us terrorists," she said. "That day I felt that they were the terrorists."

In 1995, after my freshman year of high school, I left to visit Palestine as a change of pace. Although I had visited during the summers of 1983, 1987 and 1992, for three months each time, the last trip turned into a four-year stay. It was only living there that I found the truth, and of what it was really like to travel from point A to point B. It felt like I was holding my life in a loose pocket where it could easily be lost. I recall being stopped at checkpoints and treated with hostility as Israeli soldiers in military fatigues checked for "anything suspicious."

I recall being seven years old, walking in the narrow marketplace in Arab Jerusalem that surrounded Al-Aqsa mosque, covering my eyes and mouth with my shirt so I wouldn't inhale tear gas. With the prominent displays of American flags in the wake of September 11, 2001, I have often been reminded of how, during a 1987 visit, Israeli soldiers entered our village and took down all the Palestinian flags on display. Later that summer, as I was buying a falafel sandwich in the Ramallah marketplace, I saw a child being dragged by his collared shirt and put into the back of an Israeli jeep. In 1992, I remember walking in the same marketplace and seeing snipers looking down at us from our own buildings.

People continue to call Palestinians terrorists, and the media focuses on the "suicide bombings" that continue to taint the reputation of those

Palestinians who support a nonviolent solution, but they fail to cover little Arab villages like mine which are flanked by Israeli settlements and denied basic necessities. In January an Israeli tank burst the main water pipe in my village and the residents spent seven days without running water. While hoping that the occupation and oppression ends and Palestine is finally recognized an independent state, my family remains confined to their homes as the cycle of violence continues.

Half my heart is in Iraq:
Students with deployed parents write their lives

By Abe Louise Young

KILLEEN, TX—Lamiah and Anthony wake up and get ready for high school with one thing on their minds. Are Mom and Dad safe? They go to sleep praying for the same. This brother and sister team gets through the school day in the shadow of absence: both of their parents are soldiers deployed (in Iraq and Korea) with the U.S. military.

The war is everywhere in Killeen: mattress billboards say, "Give your veteran a good night's sleep!" But its presence is felt in with particular poignancy in public schools like Killeen High. KHS stands in the shadow of Fort Hood, the nation's largest military base, and roughly half of the 1800 students have parents who are active military employees. When the bell rings at 4:00, khaki fatigues and combat boots flood the hallways and parking lot as parents in uniform come to pick up their kids. But parents who are not there for the daily events or big moments like prom or graduation have an equally powerful biggest impact on student success.

As one might expect, the student body is enormously disciplined. The waxed hallways shine, and white walls are unmarked by graffiti. Yet a burden of unexpressed emotion is carried throughout the school day. The subject of the war is curiously off-limits in conversation—it may be agreed that it is too volatile, and too heartbreaking a topic to handle on school grounds. Yet this February, students with deployed parents met to do creative writing, find an outlet to explore their emotions, and gain support from one another by expressing them publicly.

Assistant Principal Helen Miller dreamed up a Writing Week as a way to give all students a creative space before the grueling stress of standardized TAKS tests (Texas Aptitude and Skills Survey)—and to help them feel good about their writing. Coming from a military family herself, Miller recognized the strain that students with deployed parents are under. She arranged a private group meeting for creative writing sessions for these teens.

The week was met with enthusiasm, and the classes were overfull with kids who'd signed up to do creative writing and learn about the routes to publication. So many young dreamers smoldering with things to say....it was inspiring, to put it mildly. Yet none touched me like the workshop with students whose parents are deployed. A few expressed that they'd never talked about their sadness before. The feeling of connection was so powerful that we decided to squeeze another two hours in to the week, and meet to write for a second time. The students asked if they could meet every week to do this.

They wrote about using email and cell phones to talk to parents every few weeks; about holding framed photos to their chests as they fall asleep; about missing the smell of a parent's cologne, or of barbeque and taco dishes cooking.

Girdy writes,

> Sometimes I hear her talking to me, saying
> *Don't worry, be strong.*
> And know that she's smiling down on me
> And making sure we're safe.
> We are a big family, though it seems like we're
> A little puppy who's lost its mom.

At the end of the week, the auditorium stage was outfitted with microphones, and students stepped up one by one to read their poems and personal writing aloud. Even when Lamiah broke into tears while reading, she—like others—was greeted with cheers and applause. Their bravery was monumental: they brought their whole lives to school, and their peers showed respect and appreciation.

See below for:

- A collection of student writing from Killeen, TX

I want to tell you:
A collection of student writing from Killeen, Texas

These poems and short prose pieces emerged from the Writing Week held at Killeen High School. The first writing prompt was to begin with the phrases "In the beginning" and "I want to tell you." The second was to write an autobiography in seven numbered stages. Lastly, students wrote a collaborative poem about their town.

Girdy

"My Grandmother"

My grandmother is the Earth which my family lives off of.
Ever since she 's been gone our lives haven't been the same.
Her passing seemed to turn our lives around
It seems only yesterday we were together at the dinner table, happy and hungry,
About to say grace,
Smiles on our faces, knowing that everything would be okay.
Now it feels that we a piece of this broken heart
That we can't put back together.
Sometimes I wonder what it would be like
If she was still here,
If everything was back to normal.
Sometimes I hear her talking to me, saying
Don't worry, be strong.
And know that she's smiling down on me
And making sure we're safe.
We are a big family, though it seems like we're
A little puppy who's lost its mom.

Janay

In the beginning when I saw it
I didn't think much of it-but I felt a connection
That told me I have to be a part of it,
the way I can express myself
through this powerful instrument.
I knew I could do something that would
get my feelings in.
I spit friction causing verbal static.
I'm a lyricist, a poetic,
And the mic's where I started.
On the stage speaking lyrics,
You see but you don't hear it.
Ignorant and blind—it's okay,
Cause you don't understand my rhymes.
In the beginning I was timid,
But I'm as blunt as a Swisher Sweet.
Rhyme isn't about physique

Or what I'm wearing next week.

I want to tell you about so much
But one poem can't hold the fold
Of my thoughts, so this day
I'm an artist with stories untold.
I speak, some say I preach,
but I say that I teach.
Either way I hope you learn—
That's my philosophy.
You can't topple me
Because I stand high above.
That's not conceited, but
I don't consider myself of
The bottom few. I want to tell you
So much but it won't fit
In my rhymes. Getting stuff
Off my chest
Will take more than a lifetime.

Daniel

My young life was hard, that is,
until I got a green card.
I was caught up with elation,
but then came immigration.

Yesinia

1) I am part of two worlds, each with its own force as contrasting as day and night.

2) Loss never too distant. Always at the corner of a turn.

3) Pressure always there, to be better and better. To ascend the next challenge.

4) Peace is darkness. Sleep is peace, somehow always holding too many secrets, too many lines.

5) Lines of lies, lines of truth, lines of nothing. Lines of everything.

John Polkowski

1) Born on a Military base in Oklahoma.

2) I remember Maryland, vaguely, through tall grasses, mounds of dirt, and fields that would stretch for miles.

3) Then, a Military base on a small Pacific island; going to the beach every Saturday.

4) Jellyfish and pickle juice cancel each other out.

4 1/2) Sitting in a tree, high away from the rest of the problems. Thirty feet and four seconds of gravity away. Nothing could bother me up there.

Lisa

I want to tell you what I know about family, what I've been through in my life. Families don't stick together—well, not all parents get a divorce, leave their wife, take the kids, move in with a new girlfriend, but that's what happened in my family. Dad left, so did I. We went to live at his new girlfriend's house. I left my mom. Didn't have any regrets until everything in my life went wrong. My mom almost died. I wouldn't have found out until after. Dad was never home. To top it all off, my step-mother was treating me like crap. So I was fed up: I left with my mom.

I think it was the best thing I've chosen. Left my dad—yeah, I know it made him sad. But my mom needed me. Then for one year, I never spoke to or seen my dad. It hurt me, I'm a daddy's girl. Two years, I saw him—then he left me again. Now I'm still with my mom and my two new little sisters, happy, and my dad was back in my life; and now he met another girl, he's not in my life again. Yeah, it hurts a lot. But through them years I've learned I can't keep holding on to my dad. I've grown up in the three years since my parents split. I've learned when to show my feelings. I can express it only in writing.

David

I want to tell you what I know about our wars and the war in Iraq. They now have something called IC in games for the PC. IC stands for International Conflict, meaning overseas wars. Like now, if they're sending our troops in to die for a Republic that's not ours. The people protect this country, the people do everything, so why aren't all people in the Army? Rolling around in Iraq would be awesome if I would get So Cal's, M16s, M203s, AK47s, AK74s, M4s, M4M203s, mortars, smoke grenades, flags and flash grenades, pistols and everything.

But I would be a Seal, and someday flying in a Blackhawk, putting black and green paint on me, loading my gun, checking my equipment, and making sure I have enough rounds to take out a block. The other guys do the same, only two of them are snipers—their suits make them camo, a lot better picking off people 600 meters away while we are swimming or jogging to our objective. Perfect position is a tool of starting at the right time with perfect aim. We get to our objective—Bravo—and wait for our signal to run in, which is "Whiskey" here. "Whiskey" is a go, and seeing the hand signals from my fellow Seals, I will fight for my country! Will YOU?

Evonne

On the other side of the world
Is where all the poor, pain-stricken, dying ppl are—
Or so they claim.
In our own backyard is a weeping, unclean, dying child.
Begging for attention and saving.

A collaborative portrait of Killeen by students at Killeen High School

Killeen is diverse, with many faces, colors, and joys. It is a place of hope.
Killeen is my silent punishment, tearing me down and about, giving birth to my second half and my insanity.
Killeen is the home of my family and where I grew up most of my life.
Killeen is where I learned new things.
Killeen is colorful, beautiful and bright. It's a place where outsiders come to see a different sight.
It's unforgettable even though boring: Killeen is where I get up in the morning.
Killeen is where you come from, not go to. It's like the places in the stories where the hero comes from some small little town that no one has heard of.
Killeen is boring, non-stimulating, entirely useless, quiet, annoying, in Central Texas, home to all my friends.
Killeen is a dead place. Almost like an unknown place. The most boringest place you could ever live @. I don't understand why people move here. I don't know why I moved here. There's no concerts, there's no art. I hate it.
Killeen is not my home, but a place for friends—a place for dreams. It's not my refuge, but it's all I know.
Killeen is fun. Killeen is my hometown. Killeen is next to Fort Hood.
Killeen is weak.
Killeen is home to me.
Killeen is the place where I grew up and matured to be the young lady I am now. It is the place that showed me life's lessons.
Killeen is something special, not like all—Killeen is a place for many stores or malls.
Killeen is interesting, strange, and small.

Photo credit: Jana Dennis

Our stories, told by us:

New Orleans teens write books about lively neighborhoods now lost

by Abe Louise Young

Just weeks before levee breaches flooded New Orleans in 2005, six African-American teenagers organized three block parties. The music, speeches, and dancing in the streets celebrated a victory few in their neighborhoods had claimed before: book publication. These weren't just any old books. Their young authors documented the people and places that had raised them, through thick and thin, in New Orleans' poorest neighborhoods. The Neighborhood Story Project books became best sellers in the city overnight.

The jubilation ended quickly, as Hurricane Katrina's aftermath dispersed those communities across the nation. The unique social fabric documented in the texts was lost in a day. Yet the stories hold memory, provide continuity, and a possibly offer a map to return with. They provide an example of the power of literacy, and of teaching that honors young people's knowledge. When the skills of reading, writing, and analysis are brought to bear on students' actual lives, transformation can happen for whole communities.

Sociological imagination

The Neighborhood Story Project began in 2004. Rachel Breunlin and Abram Himelstein were disillusioned Writing teachers at John McDonogh High School. Like many New Orleans public schools, it demonstrated less than 20 percent proficiency in English and Math skills—and 75 percent of the student body lived below the poverty line. Certain there was a better way to teach, the pair decided to create their own writing program—outside of school. They invited teenagers to spend a year writing autobiography, taking pictures, and interviewing their neighbors.

The young writers were paid $1,000 each for their participation. They met each afternoon in an apartment near the school. Visiting poets and photographers came in as guest instructors. The group read classic texts like Sandra Cisneros's *The House*

On Mango Street. As part of their job, the students taught poetry workshops for third- and fourth- grade students at a nearby elementary school.

As their books emerged on paper, participants learned editing, revision, and the many shapes a manuscript takes on the way to publication. They got feedback from the family members and neighbors they profiled. They determined their ideal audiences. "If I could pick anyone to read my book, I think it would be my mom and my neighborhood, because they are my book. Every page and every story I wrote was for them," Ashley Nelson writes in *The Combination*.

Over the yearlong process, the young writers developed what C. Wright Mills calls "sociological imagination," the ability to connect their personal autobiographies to larger issues of history. In addition, they wrote some amazing books.

Literacy in the urban southern landscape

New Orleans is a city famously rich in certain literacies, like celebration, cooking, and conversation. The literacy of knowing every person on every porch in a two-mile radius, or how to brown oil and flour into a just-right roux, is commonplace genius. But learning to read and write has never been easy.

That's one of the reasons behind the Neighborhood Story Project's success. Plenty has been written about the city's struggling communities, but little has been written from within, for an audience of peers. By portraying both the beauty and the struggles of life around them, the six young authors of the Project put into print realities that have simply never been printed before.

Their stories are as gritty as they come, yet leavened by humor and free from sentimentality. Waukesha Jackson interviews her mother about when she started smoking crack, and how it felt to leave her children alone for days while she did. Together, they test a beginning forgiveness in Jackson's book, *What Would the World Be Without Women: Stories from the Ninth Ward.*

In *Before and After North Dorgenois*, Ebony Bolding examines the changing demographics of her block. She interviews new people moving into her community, talks to old-timers on their porches, and articulates her own anxiety about moving into a different neighborhood. She writes of her mother's hard work to raise her, and the family's sadness when her brother is badly beaten by police.

Brother and sister team Arlet and Sam Wylie talk about life above a bustling neighborhood store in *Between Piety and Desire*. In *Palmyra Street*, Jana Dennis looks at her family's religious life, and their participation in the Golden Arrows Mardi Gras Indian Tribe.

In the Lafitte housing project, Ashley Nelson interviews gang members, family members, men collecting aluminum cans, and vendors of pigs' feet and sour pickles. She describes what it's like to wake up without food, and to go to her mother's funeral at age fourteen. She recounts fun times spent free-styling to cellphone ring tones, and lists the names of loved ones who have died. She writes out her gratitude for all many community members who helped her get through childhood.

When Hurricane Katrina broke these neighborhoods apart, an extraordinary thing happened. Isolated in many corners of the country, neighbors got into contact with each other—through the axis of the Neighborhood Story Project.

Unlocking the world

The Neighborhood Story Project guides students to "see literacy as a means for reading the world, building their own creative projects, and becoming agents of change." It is clear that the young writers take this aim to heart. Ashley Nelson ends her book by passing the message on: "When you read my book, don't feel sorry for me because I don't need it....Ya know what? If you feel me, figure out your own combination and unlock the world."

Today, Nelson is back in New Orleans. She works as a teacher for the Neighborhood Story Project. Each of the other student writers survived the Hurricane; they are living with their families in different cities around the country. And as schools in New Orleans slowly reopen, Breunlin and Himelstein prepare to go into classrooms, and find the next authors of history.

For more information about the Neighborhood Stories Project, go to: http://www.neighborhoodstoryproject.org/

See below for:

- Excerpts from two student books
- An interview with Abram Himelstein, co-founder of the Neighborhood Story Project

Excerpt from *The Combination* by Ashley Nelson

In most housing projects and other neighborhoods around the city, churches or community centers supply poor or low-income families with food, clothing, and other resources they can't afford. In the Lafitte, we also have another source: Southern Scrap. You would never in a million years think that this place helps homeless people, but it does. See, Southern Scrap is a recycling company. They buy cans, copper, and other material you can find on the streets.

Many homeless people as well as some residents of Lafitte look for cans, old parts, or anything else they can sell to Southern Scrap for some money to make it through the night. And the next day they're back at it again. It's sad to witness. People dig in dumpsters to get a few cans or scraps of metal, but like this homeless woman Teedy used to say, "Y'all don't understand, I gotta eat, too." But you know what? I do understand. These people depend on Southern Scrap to live and survive. Other people in my neighborhood understand as well because they leave cans and other things that they're eventually going to throw away on the ground so that can collectors can pick them up.

Grandma Pearl was a very big help to a bunch of the can collectors. I remember many a night having to go drop cans on the side of the porch for a woman she knew. Every night she would stop by to get her cans, say thanks, and then keep moving. She used to tell us kids, "You can't make money in one spot, baby. You gotta keep pushing. You gotta keep moving."

HANO (Housing Authority of New Orleans) started a policy, which stated that no trash can be left outside or you will be evicted. My grandmother and other residents of Lafitte stopped leaving cans outside. My grandmother wanted to help, but she didn't want to lose her house either. Some people still leave cans in their house and when they see their "regulars," they'll give them a bag they've saved.

Excerpt from *What Would the World Be Without Women: Stories from the Ninth Ward* by Waukesha Jackson

I live in the biggest neighborhood in New Orleans, the Ninth Ward, which is way down from the city, like at the bottom. It used to be a cypress swamp until the early part of the 1900's when the railroad tracks started to cut through the area. In the 1920's, the Industrial Canal was built through the neighborhood and the lower part is now called the Lower Ninth, or the CTC, which can stand for Cross the Canal or Cut Throat City. Driving around, you can see a lot of development and businesses related to that Canal.

In the 1940's, streets were created and public utilities expanded. The area was home to both white and black families. It was one part of the city where black people could buy houses. They felt safer from the world because most of the people were similar to them and living the same kind of lifestyle. For many years the Ninth Ward was a picture of stability, with strong black families in homes that many of them owned. In the 1950's, the Desire and Florida Public Housing Projects opened too, which provided low-income housing. People from all over the city started moving down to the Ninth Ward to live in the complexes.

In the 1960's, New Orleans chose to begin public school desegregation in my part of the Ninth Ward at William Frantz Elementary. Many people have probably heard of the story of Ruby Bridges. She was the first black girl to attend that school. The white parents started taking their children out of school because they didn't want them around her. They said that if the black girl had to stay, then they wouldn't anymore. They spit on Ruby, threw stuff at her, and she had to go to school with bodyguards. After a while, some of the white parents started sending their children back to the school. But it didn't last long because they started moving away.

When I went to Frantz Elementary I was in the second grade. Ruby Bridges came back to pay a visit to the school. We all thanked her and said, "2, 4, 6, 8. Who do we appreciate? Ruby! Ruby! We love you!" All of the children were saying that, but I don't think there were any white kids.

Today, the Ninth Ward is predominantly black. Families grow and learn about each other. The men join the military or do carpentry work. They work offshore and some of them are foremen on the riverfront. The women may sit with the elderly, do house cleaning and work at hotels. A lot of children try to move away from the Ninth Ward if they can, so there are a lot of older people here.

Women play a big part in the neighborhood. They communicate with each other by watching over everyone. They run barrooms that act as home bases, and go to church together, worshipping the same God. They organize Nights Out Against Crime, have participated in political organizations like the Black Panthers, and joined social clubs like the Nine Times Social and Pleasure Club. They take care of the community and each other while juggling their losses and responsibilities. These are some of their stories.

The real texts of student's lives:

Interview with Abram Himelstein of the Neighborhood Story Project

Abram Himelstein co-founded the Neighborhood Story Project with urban anthropologist Rachel Breunlin. In 2003, when both were teaching writing at New Orleans' John McDonogh High, an impoverished, almost-all black school, a shooting took place at the school. It resulted in the death of student and injury of three others. Breunlin and Himelstein created the Project as a place for students to explore the stories of their lives: to write about where they come from, and to portray how they live. The community documentary project has created five books by students: a mixture of memoir, interviews, photographs, and local history. Abe Louise Young met with Himelstein at the Bouldin Creek Coffeehouse in Austin, Texas in March 2006 to discuss the philosophies and methods behind the Project.

WKCD: What in your life brought you to the Neighborhood Story Project?

HIMELSTEIN: Everything in my life brought me to the Neighborhood Story Project. I was teaching at John McDonogh Senior High, which is on Esplanade and Broad in New Orleans. I was the worst teacher I've ever been—not because I wasn't trying, but because of the climate of chaos in the school prevented me from getting any real teaching done. I was teaching writing and I was unable to get anybody interested in what I thought writing meant. Occasionally, I'd have some good days or I'd do a lesson just right and things would work, but mostly it was like...New Orleans Public Schools are a crime against kids and I was participating in that crime. I wasn't comfortable with it; I was really depressed and coming home every day sour and feeling kind of bleak about my city, and about my neighborhood.

I was teaching across the hall from this woman, Rachel Breunlin...she was teaching in a closet and I was teaching in someone else's classroom. But she was doing better than I was because I am a very strict teacher and she was a very loving teacher. Her love undermined their ability to create chaos, and so they just fell into line. She and I started talking about what a real writing program would look like. We started thinking about the things that were important to the students and what that really looked like for them: they were *really* into their neighborhoods.

With that, we started thinking about the things that might motivate students to actually give a damn about their writing.

WKCD: What do you think can get a high school student deeply motivated about writing?

HIMELSTEIN: Writing has to seem like an essential part of their lives. We'd had some little bit of success in the classroom having students write about their

neighborhoods, so we decided, "Let's do this thing where they make a book. Publication always inspires.

Rachel had done all these books in her classroom: small books that the other students loved to read. It just had this power to it. So, Let's tap into that power. And, if we're having them do a book, we have to pay them. Because I personally don't *ever* write unless I get paid. It's a rule of mine.

So let's have them get paid: we'll have each student write a book about their block. It'll take four months, and we'll pay them $1,000 at the end of it. It'll be like an after-school job. Rich kids can do internships, so they get to do intellectual labor which then makes them ready to do intellectual labor for a living; whereas, working-class students have to get jobs that aren't intellectual. I was very into the idea of paying them for intellectual labor.

"What I was really hoping to do with the whole project—in addition to being a good teacher—was to create literature that was meaningful to the neighborhood."

We went around to tell all the English classes, and we said, "Look, we're doing this thing. You write a book about your block. You get paid $1,000." Everyone seemed interested and seven students applied so we took all seven.

WKCD: How did you create the environment for this to work?

HIMELSTEIN: We had to get an office outside of the school. Otherwise, the culture of the school would subsume what we are trying to do. We rented an apartment across the street and put in one table, and started using it.

WKCD: What was the process of getting students so deeply invested in their stories?

HIMELSTEIN: The first part of the year was convincing them that they were writers and this could be done. We read this book called *Our America: Life and Death on the South Side of Chicago*, which was written with David Isay by junior high to high school kids in the Ida B. Wells Housing Project in Chicago. That was a turning point: everyone was like, Oh, we can do this. We made these posters of photos that they had taken. I taught them photography and when that poster came out, it was like "this is really going to happen." There were all these moments during the year when corners were turned and they got closer to believing in it....

It's a real flip to get people to self-identify as writers. We work on that for about nine weeks, the first quarter of the year. It was just about, "This is a journal, this is free writing, this is vignettes, this is editing, this is storytelling, this is narrative arc, this is dialogue, this is all these things." And all the time, you're reading books that you hope they're interested in. They're talking about it and breaking down what good literature looks like, and coming to see themselves as a part of that continuum.

There was a certain point in each student's process, where their names were on it: it was who they were; it was going to represent them. The money was always there, but it was about the books. That part was interesting and great to go through. In the end when we were copy-editing, we were pushing kids out the door, like, "You have to go home now, and it's nine at night." And they were like "No, there might be a mistake still!" Kesha is a dancer and once she brought over a couple people from her

dance team to help her copy-edit. And I was like, okay, this is what I was hoping for when this whole thing started.

WKCD: Is it possible for you to break the process down into a series of steps? How you can accomplish a book from inception to publication with this group of kids?

HIMELSTEIN: Well, first we put a team together of people to talk about the idea, to see whether or not it was stupid. That team was G. K. Darby, who is a publisher in New Orleans, and Kalamu Ya Salaam, who is a long-time New Orleans writer and publisher. And Tim Lupin, who has been on the Jazz Fest Board and who is a friend of mine, and a couple of school teachers. We did that for a while, and we started hustling money to try to get that going, and talking through the idea enough so that you get good at talking about it.

WKCD: How much money did you end up needing?

HIMELSTEIN: Around $45,000—but that's not including my salary and Rachel's salary, which were covered by two organizations that stepped forward to partner with us when we were just a dream. They were the University of New Orleans, and the Literacy Alliance of Greater New Orleans. They really understood what this could mean for the community, and they did a great job of leading us and pushing us and allowing us, all three of those things.

After the first nine weeks of getting people to self-identify as writers, then you move into the body of, the next eighteen weeks where it's getting students and us into the community, and getting the community into the book. That means getting out and doing interviews and taking photographs, and then getting those transcribed and edited and taking those back to the people.

"In the end when we were copy-editing, we were pushing kids out the door, like, 'You have to go home now, and it's nine at night.' And they were like, 'No, there might be a mistake still!'"

As we moved into the community work, Rachel Breunlin really led the way. What she had a gift for was taking interviews back to people and having them edit them. That helped them community members to believe that there was a book coming out with them in it, so they weren't surprised when that eventually happened. It also it made sure there was nothing in there that was going to set off a bad reaction....So the community ownership of the book really came in that process.

WKCD: Can you say more about those two steps, which are easy to rush or ignore: making sure that people who are being represented have a real say in the text, and building the fabric of trust and equality with the community?

HIMELSTEIN: It's really important to take interviews back to people. That speaks to what I was really hoping to do with the whole project: in addition to being a good teacher, we were going to create literature that was meaningful to the neighborhood. If you're going to do that, then people have to feel ownership of it...and they can't feel that unless they actually own it.

We don't get the signed permission forms until people clear their own interviews and they check stuff. People are not grateful, and they shouldn't be. I think that's where

a lot of arrogance of these kinds of projects comes, is their downfall—expecting people to be grateful for the opportunity to be represented.

Our motto is "Our story is told by us." I'm sick of other people getting New Orleans' stories wrong, and seeing my neighborhood misrepresented by national media. Especially more so, post-hurricane, but even pre-hurricane, you get to see the stories wrong constantly. Ebony writes in her book that she lost a year of school because a newspaper reporter misrepresented her words after a shooting at John McDonough, and she was essentially afraid to go to school for a whole year. She lost a year of her life due to people getting stories wrong, and the arrogance of outsiders telling insiders' stories.

WKCD: Is there anything else that should be done to ensure this integrity?

HIMELSTEIN: The other important thing we do is to form a book committee for each book. The students pick one person and Rachel and I pick one person, and somebody from their family comes, and they all read the book. It's like a test market. I feel really grateful that the parents and families were excited about being chronicled, and no one was surprised when the books came out. This was one of the keys to having people embrace them, because there were a lot of intimate stories told in the books that are painful and hard and brave.

WKCD: Can you talk about what literacy means in the context of the City of New Orleans, the education system, and the future?

HIMELSTEIN: Well, I want to say I live in New Orleans because I find it to be the most literate about *the quality-of-life* city that I've ever been to. People are literate there about social graces that other cities will never ever touch. We're good at checking in with each other and caring for each other. We are really, really bad about creating systems that are just and equitable. As a result, our literacy in terms of reading and writing rates are some of the worst in the country.

I was taking the subway once in New York City, which is extremely illiterate when it comes to dancing and music and community. But when you're on the subway, every single person has something in front of their face—maybe just as a screen—but it's writing and it's reading. Most of the people are reading. I was thinking how different that was from New Orleans. An incredible percentage of the city is functionally illiterate.

"Literacy is what I care about; this is the part of Western culture that I deeply believe in and am willing to go to bat for."

And I was thinking about how difficult it is to get my students to read books. I think a lot of that is because a lot of literature does not speak to us and isn't about us and tells our stories wrong. So that was the point for me: that people will struggle through the process of reading a lot more if there is something meaningful to them in there.

For me a part of what I had to come to terms with was the sometimes uncomfortable roles of the authority figure, with being the person in power in the classroom. And with my own misguided beliefs that I could save students from the circumstances of their lives. "Saving" is not an appropriate way to interface with other people. So, I had to let go of all that, and at the same time figure out if I was willing to take on

this authority position. Teaching is very hard, and you have to have something to believe in if you are going to do it. You know, why am I here? I had to work out my own discomfort and determine exactly what I was using that power and authority for, if I was going to occupy it.

I started teaching when I was twenty-two in Washington, D.C. I had this amazing student my first year named Rudolfo—he came up to me one day with a bunch of scribble on his paper. He was in first grade at this time—and his writing looked crazy. He'd spent a lot of time working on it. "What's this about, Rudolfo?" So he reads, "Well, the man was saying to the other man in jail, 'I could kill you. I could kill you so easily. I could kill you with one hand tied behind my back! I could kill you so fast you would not even know what was happening. In fact, I could kill you—'" It went on and on, it was almost poetic, with death threats and ways this guy could kill him. It was awesome, awesome spirit.

Rudolfo was the youngest of eight, and all of his older brothers were actually in jail. This was this cathartic moment to me when I realized that—I hoped not, but statistically speaking, it was highly likely that Rudolfo was going to spend some time in the joint. And I wasn't going to be able to save him. S, you know, I realize that it matters whether or not Rudolfo can read when he goes there (if he goes there.) Because these will be the tools with which he begins to unfurl the rest of his life. These will be the tools that he uses to write to his girlfriend who is not in jail.

Literacy is what I care about; this is the part of Western culture that I deeply believe in and am willing to go to bat for. I am willing to play the sometimes-uncomfortable roles of the authority figure in order to get this kind of teaching done. And the rest of it, you know, the rest of it has flown out from that, developed from that moment of I actually believe in reading and writing. I believe in it as a way of taking down the colonial structure that I think is in place.

Photos: Cover art from recent Youth Communication publications

True teen stories by teens for teens

> *"I'm Natasha Santos, I'm from New York City, Queens, and the first story I worked on was the one that took be two years to write. I remember the first edit, and the story was going to be about love-but no-o-o. Every time I sat down to write it, it would not come out that way. What would happen is that I'd write these ranting pages of like 'People suck, life sucks, I suck, bleh, bleh.*
>
> *"She [my advisor] would ask me these questions, these deep questions, and I'd go around them or use my words to mask what I was saying, and she'd say like 'you aren't telling me something.'*
>
> *And then one day I walked into her office and I'm looking at her folders and one has my name on it and it says 'Natasha Anger.' I'm like, 'what's anger?' She's like, 'that's what your story is about!' I'm like, 'my story is not about anger, my story is about love.' She's like, 'no it's about anger, did you read the drafts?' I read them over and I'm like 'maybe.' She said, 'I think we should work from there [from the anger].' And we did."*
>
> — From the film **Changing Lives, One Story at a Time** produced by Ric Burns in honor of the 25th anniversary of Youth Communication

For twenty-five years, Youth Communication (http://www.youthcomm.org/) has been teaching writing, journalism and leadership skills to diverse New York City's teens like Natasha—Latinos and African-Americans, teenagers in foster care, recent immigrants, youth from the most marginal of circumstances. MacArthur Fellowship winner Keith Hefner began Youth Communication in 1980 in response to a national study that found racial exclusion, censorship, and mediocrity the rule in high school publications.

Each year, more than a hundred youth participate in Youth Communication school year and summer journalism workshops. They become writers for two magazines. Some write for *New Youth Connections*, a general-interest youth magazine,

distributed monthly to a readership of 200,000 New York City teens. Others write for Represent, a bi-monthly magazine by and for young people in foster care.

"Writing is a tool where you are not being judged at all," says Antwaun Garcia, who grew up in the projects with drug-addicted parents and uses writing to fight back at those who labeled him a "crack baby." "You're just using your own thoughts. You'd never assume it had so much power or so much of an impact on you and others."

In addition to publishing two magazines, Youth Communication periodically gathers its young writers' essays into theme-based anthologies. The most recent, *The Courage To Be Yourself*, features 26 teens writing about cliques, conflicts, and overcoming peer pressure. The story titles speak volumes: "In Defense of Misfits," "Sticking with Your 'Own Kind,'" "Lighten Up on Heavy People," "Beating the Bullies."

In her story, "Sticks and Stones," 18-year-old Yen Yam writes: "I always thought being Chinese was a curse. When I was growing up, I lived in a mostly black neighborhood and I had friends, but I didn't fit in. At first, I didn't think too much about my race. Then, in first grade, two boys started calling me 'small eyes' and making some karate noises. At first I didn't know what it meant. I was only 6 years old."

Youth Communication magazines and books have won dozens of awards, including the Coming Up Taller award from the President's Council on the Arts and the Humanities for being one of the best youth programs in the nation and the Judges' Award for overall excellence from the Association of Educational Publishers. Its alumni include a national book award finalist, bureau chiefs for Newsday and the *New York Times*, young novelists and writers—and a corps of 2,000 young believers in the transforming power of writing.

A Leader's Guide to The Courage To Be Yourself *by Al Desetta and Sherrie Gammage provides teachers, counselors, and advisory leaders with an array of discussion tools and activities to use with students in conjunction with* ***The Courage To Be Yourself****. Both books are published by Free Spirit Publishing and are available from Educators for Social Responsibility, a partner in the project. For more information, go to* http://www.esrnational.org/home.htm.

See below for:

- More information about how Youth Communication works with its teen writers

On teaching writing and publishing at Youth Communication

"The teaching and editorial process begins with discussions between the adult editors and the teen staff, during which they seek to discover the stories that are both most important to each teen writer and potentially most appealing to the magazine's readers.

"Once topics have been chosen, students begin the process of crafting their stories. For a personal history, that means revisiting events from the past to understand their significance for the future. For a commentary, it means developing a logical and persuasive argument. For a reported story, it means gathering information through research and interviews. Students look inward and outward as they try to make sense of their experiences and the world around them, and to find the points of intersection between personal and social concerns. That process can take a few weeks or a few months. Stories frequently go through four, five, or more drafts as students work on them under the guidance of editors in the same way that any professional writer does.

"Many of the students who walk through Youth Communication's doors have uneven skills as a result of poor education, living under extremely stressful conditions, or coming from homes where English is a second language. Yet, to complete their stories, students must successfully perform a wide range of activities, including writing and rewriting, reading, discussion, reflections, research, interviewing, and typing. They must work as members of a team, and they must accept a great deal of individual responsibility. They learn to read subway maps, verify facts, and cope with rejection. They engage in explorations of truthfulness and fairness. They meet deadlines. They must develop the boldness to believe that they have something important to say, and the humility to recognize that saying it well is not a process of instant gratification, but usually requires a long, hard struggle through many discussions and much rewriting.

"It would be impossible to teach these skills and dispositions as separate, disconnected topics such as grammar, ethics, or assertiveness training. However, the staff has found that students make rapid progress when they are learning skills in the context of an inquiry that is personally significant to them, and that they think will benefit their peers."

From ***The Courage to Be Yourself***, edited by Al Desetta (Free Spirit Publishing and Educators for Social Responsibility, 2005), pp. 134-135.

From raw data to rich description:
Young naturalists produce award-winning science essays

"*This world, after all our science and sciences, is still a miracle; wonderful, inscrutable, magical and more, to whosoever will think of it.*"—Thomas Carlyle

On a hot highway in Ohio, a tall teenager with a passion to protect endangered species crouches with a shovel. He's picking up snakes struck by cars in the Killdeer Plains Wildlife Area. Using a pneumatic traffic counter, he works to find the reasons for the numbers of dead snakes in a given season. Along with charts of traffic frequency and graphs of road temperature, he keeps a journal about his expeditions along long, lonely roads.

Down in South Louisiana, a student keeps litter-boxes clean for his family's ten cats. Disgusted by the task, he lights on the idea of using worms to transform the kitty waste into rich, dark soil—will it work? Will it be safe? He calls the nation's expert on the subject, who isn't entirely sure—then he gets to work building worm bins. He carefully documents each stage of the process with photographs and a log, and leavens his reports with humorous turns of phrase.

And far up the United States' eastern coast, a high school senior on an exposed island in Maine counts periwinkles. These little whorled gastropods with grey and black shells fill her days. She's trying to determine the reasons behind their intertidal placements on different rocks—a subject untouched by previous scientific literature. With a pen always in her pocket, she takes note of the feel of the sun on her skin, the sound of the water in her ears, and the excitement that propels her research.

All three are winners of the Young Naturalist Award, an annual essay contest sponsored by the American Museum of Natural History. The contest celebrates student researchers who turn months of science investigation into superb prose.

Writing across the curriculum

The students who are named Young Naturalists are as different as the research subjects they invent. Drawn nationally from applicants in grades 7-12, they are

neither science wonks nor poets. Rather, they use their prose to take the reader along expeditions, and create a sensory world where research springs to life.

The theme of the Young Naturalist Awards is the same every year: "Scientific Discovery Begins with Expeditions!" Students choose a topic in biology, Earth science, or astronomy and take an expedition to an area where they can explore their topic.

"Scientists from the American Museum of Natural History go on many expeditions each year. They go to explore, collect data, and analyze and document their findings," the contest directions tell students. "You do not need to go to an exotic place to observe and collect data. Your expedition can be a class trip, a family vacation, or a visit to your local park, a nearby stream, or your own backyard. As long as you engage in the observation and collection of data, you are on a scientific expedition."

Teachers who want to use the Young Naturalist Awards with their students sometimes make it a semester project and require each student in their class to participate. Others suggest the contest to students in their science clubs or present it as an extra credit project.

In either case, the challenge for teachers and other adult mentors is the same: to bridge the science lab and natural world with writing. Teachers must help their students put the decades-long "writing across the curriculum" into practice. They must show their students that writing has a natural kinship with science-that close observation and innovative thinking fuel both. They must open the classroom to a spirit of expedition in the broadest sense.

Essays that bring the world alive

The scientists who judge the awards look for more than hard science: they seek evocation of a landscape, the electric suspense of articulate questions, and descriptions of an evolving thought process. Students who win the award explain complex information (chemical changes, taxonomy, equations) in everyday language, as if discussing ideas with a friend.

Nathan, the student who pioneered his version of "snaking," writes,

> As I was unable to drive during my first two years of "snaking," this project gave me lots of great bonding time with my parents as they drove the 100 miles to, around, and from the wildlife area, allowing me to discuss anything from school to the meaning of life and sometimes even snakes. Nothing builds togetherness like driving 35 miles an hour looking for dead snakes, staying awake by discussing the emotional range of snakes or the symbolism in Queen's Bohemian Rhapsody with your dad.

Emily, whose basement turned into a periwinkle research lab, writes,

> The tide was low, and the clam flat's odor filled the autumn air. The blue sky was crystal clear, and the rocks were still warm from the noon sun. I heaved a sigh and kicked off my sneakers. The ledge was warm and felt perfect under my toes. I ran barefoot along the rocks, jumping on stepping-stones across the mud flat to my island. I bent low and picked up one of my periwinkles. I hummed to it as I filled my lungs with the fresh air. Then the circuit was completed. The electricity ran as excitement through my veins.
>
> [....]
>
> My previous studies suggest that in order for morphologic variation among sites to be effectively compared, the periwinkles' intertidal position must be taken into account. The purpose of the recent study was to further explore the influence of intertidal position and substrate on periwinkle morphology. I formulated a research hypothesis that stated that periwinkle shell height would vary according to intertidal position and substrate. Specifically, periwinkles on ledges near the high tide would be, on average, smaller than those on ledges near the low tide, and periwinkles in tide pools would be, on average, the smallest.

And Eric, who spent two years determining if a composting cat pan was a practical idea, writes,

> The worms, of course, asked, "What's for dinner?" Since Eisenia fetida manure worms will make use of almost any carbon and nitrogen source as food, the worms were not picky about cat waste. It is a common misconception that worms "eat" waste. The worms get their nutrition from the bacterial, fungal, and protozoal activity in the vermicomposting system. Since the worms have no teeth or digestive enzymes, the microorganisms "predigest" the worm's food and then become food themselves.

The fact that the American Museum of Natural History recognizes invigorating intellectual work by young people is cause for celebration. The awards convey the important message that written communication lies at the heart of any successful venture—and that close observation, combined with writing, can be a simple bridge to brilliant discoveries.

For more information about the Museum of Natural History's Young Naturalists Awards, go to http://www.amnh.org/nationalcenter/youngnaturalistawards/

See below for:

- Excerpts from three winning essays
- Young Naturalist Awards rough draft check list and resources to inspire connection with nature and writing

Excerpts From "Got Cats? Get Worms!"

by Eric, Age 17, Louisiana

When you read my work, you may not think of it as a nature study, but the ultimate purpose of my experiment is to find an environmentally friendly solution to animal wastes. My family has a lot of animals and, specifically, 10 cats. I see the problems with animal wastes daily. The cats live happily in a very large, specially equipped pen. The only problem is that I hate to clean four smelly litter pans. There are no words that adequately express my dislike for this chore. Tired of my complaints, Mom challenged me to design a better system. For years I've observed worms in the compost piles in the woods behind our house. Why not borrow some worms from the woods and have them clean the cat pans for me? Having worms clean up cat mess is my idea of how work should be done.

I knew nothing about vermicomposting and needed to educate myself. I read 12 volumes of *Worm Digest*, a few books, and watched a video. I spoke with Dr. TK Carney, a soil and compost specialist with the Louisiana State University Cooperative Extension Service. He discouraged worm-composting cat waste because of the potential pathogens, but he referred me to an expert in vermicomposting, Dr. Rhonda Sherman, with the North Carolina State University Cooperative Extension Service. She did not discourage me, but told me to make certain my cats had no pathogens or chemicals in their systems. She told me to read references on the vermicomposting systems used for reducing pathogens in bio-solid mass from city sewage. Her Web site and its links were the most helpful; they contained information that was more scientific than on many other sites.

It was clear that my experiment would have to be designed in stages; the answers to the first questions would be used to design the next stages. To determine in a scientific manner if a composting cat litter pan was a practical cat pan would ultimately take two years.

The next part of the essay is the scientific method: the basis of my design, my questions, hypotheses, methods, variables, and controls. It's not too interesting to read because it is methodical, but method is necessary to a valid experiment.

Question: *Can a vermicomposting system be a practical alternative to the traditional cat litter pan?* **Hypothesis Year 1:** *Vermicomposting cat wastes will break down the solid waste and reduce the number of pathogens in cat wastes.*

I decided that my experiment was workable; I could overcome the problems I had read about. I would have my cats screened for intestinal parasites and fecal pathogens, and take them off flea medications and wormers for four months. I

theorized that vermicomposting the wastes of my meat-eating cats would not create the heat problem that manures from grass-eating animals generate. The final product of the vermicomposting cat litter pan would be a beneficial soil amendment for the woods and the landscape around my house.

Purpose Year 1, Part 1: *To produce a vermicomposting system for cat feces by determining the optimum ratio of carbon to nitrogen for the worms, the ideal food-to-worms ratio, and the ideal end point of the vermicomposting.* **Part 2:** *To determine if cats would adapt to the vermicomposting system.* **Part 3:** *To determine how to protect the worms from predation by the cats.*

Excerpt from "Que Vivan Las Serpientes Muertas!"

by Nathan, 17, Ohio

Snakes living in temperate climates must hibernate to survive the winters, so many migrate from where they hunt to hibernating places called hibernacula. Snakes in temperate zones eat and reproduce in the summer, migrate to hibernacula in the fall, hibernate in the winter, and migrate to feeding grounds in the spring. Often they are killed by vehicles if their spring and fall migrations cause them to cross roads.

To conduct my research, I drove 33 miles of roads in the KPWA twice a week, from August to November in 2000, 2001, 2002, and 2003, and from March to June in 2001 and 2002, each season having about 20 collection dates. I carried a permit issued by the Ohio Department of Natural Resources' Division of Wildlife at all times. Time of arrival, odometer, and weather conditions were recorded. If a snake was found, a picture was taken of it next to a ruler; the species and its latitude and longitude, determined by the global positioning system (GPS), were recorded. If a dead endangered snake was found, it would be placed in a plastic bag and the bag numbered to keep track of the snake. If the dead snake was not endangered, it would be taken off the road to prevent recounting. If a live snake was found, the snake would be helped off the road. In the beginning, all dead snakes were collected and preserved to check species and were added to a collection at Ohio State University. Dead endangered snakes were transferred to Doug Wynn. Wynn verified my identifications and checked for Passive Integrated Transponder (PIT) tags that would show whether the snakes had been collected previously. This entire process, from beginning to end, came to be known around my house as "snaking." Serious concerns exist regarding the decline in numbers of threatened and endangered snakes in the KPWA. Snakes in the KPWA include the eastern garter (*Thamnophis sirtalis sirtalis*), the eastern plains garter (*Thamnophis radix radix*), the brown snake (*Storeria dekayi*), the eastern massasauga (*Sisturus catenatus catenatus*), Kirtland's snake (*Clonophis kirtiandii*), the smooth green snake (*Liochorophis vernalis*), the eastern milk snake (*Lampropeltis triangulum triangulum*), the northern water snake (*Nerodia sipedon sipedon*), the redbelly snake (*Storeria occipitomaculata*), and the black rat snake (*Elaphe obsoleta*).

In my first year of "snaking," the fall of 2000, I collected each dead snake for identification purposes; they were put in jars with formalin, which is a chemical similar to formaldehyde. This procedure was fine until I found 60 snakes in one day, which was way too many to put in jars right away. I placed the snakes in bags, in a downstairs, out-of-the-way freezer that no one would have to know about. A few days later that freezer died, so the snakes had to be transferred to the upstairs

kitchen freezer. For about three months, I had close to 80 dead snakes in the freezer. I'm glad my parents are supportive of my science project. After that year, I only had to collect the dead endangered snakes I found, so since then the total number of snakes in my freezer has not exceeded seven. It is now safe to come to dinner at the Yaussy household.

Also in the first year, I had my first encounter with a live, wild, venomous snake. The eastern massasauga rattlesnake is one of the endangered snakes for which I was told to watch. I was not ready for it when it came. My dad and I came upon it cautiously, knowing from the car that this was a big snake. When it started rattling at us, there was no mistaking what it was, and seeing the head shaped specifically for holding venom glands aided in the identification. Only one rattlesnake lived in this area. We recorded the necessary data, but there was one problem: I also had to move any live snakes off the road to save them from cars. The ODNR had given me a snake hook, which I did not have with me. It would not have helped anyway; it was only four feet long; I needed the proverbial 10-foot pole. We stood there thinking, "Hmmma" for quite some time, until Dad had the bright idea of throwing roadside litter toward the rattlesnake to coax it off the road. A few Gatorade bottles and beer cans later, the snake decided to give us one final glare and slink off the road.

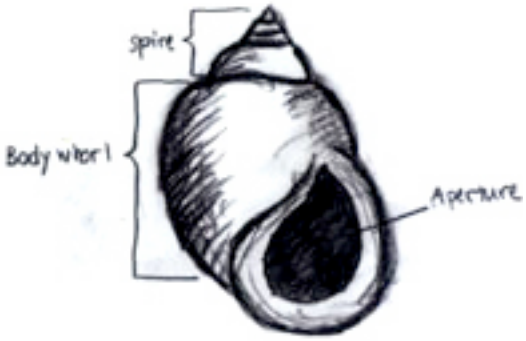
Excerpt from "Morphologic Variation in the Common Periwinkle"

by Emily, 17, Maine

For years I tramped up and down the Maine shore, paying little heed to the creatures under the seaweed. It was whales that fascinated me when I was little. I was sure I wanted to grow up to research them, and I couldn't wait to get started. I had hopes that some day orcas would swim into my clam-flat cove—yet I soon learned that that was highly unlikely to happen in Maine. With a lack of whales at my beck and call, I soon turned to seals. They were almost accessible; however, they were still too large to fit into a tank in my backyard. With seals and orcas off the list, I became needy for my research fix. I racked my brain and took a walk to my little cove. No orcas, no seals. The tide was low, and the clam flat's odor filled the autumn air. The blue sky was crystal clear, and the rocks were still warm from the noon sun. I heaved a sigh and kicked off my sneakers. The ledge was warm and felt perfect under my toes. I ran barefoot along the rocks, jumping on stepping-stones across the mud flat to my island. I bent low and picked up one of my periwinkles. I hummed to it as I filled my lungs with the fresh air. Then the circuit was completed. The electricity ran as excitement through my veins. I scrambled back to ask my mom. After some careful rounds of negotiation, the proposed periwinkle laboratory was approved for immediate construction in my basement. It wasn't whales, but my research had begun.

[...]

My Previous Research



I have always had a curiosity for how creatures survive the cold winters of Maine. After some preliminary observations in 2001, I designed an experiment to test periwinkle activity according to water temperature. The experiment was composed of a set of three temperature environments that were maintained at specific temperatures. After observing periwinkles in my basement laboratory for 30 days in 2001, I determined a trend in periwinkle behavior according to the temperature of the water. Periwinkles in cold water were less active than in warm water, and there was an upward turn in periwinkle activity at 4 degrees C. This helped answer a few of my early questions but led to more. By my second year in high school, I was completely enthralled, and I had moved away from the lab to work with periwinkles on the shore. My next questions focused on the physiological differences in populations from different water temperatures. My results showed periwinkles from a cold water temperature site to be smaller (on average) than those from a warmer site. Another trend that I was not expecting to see appeared in my data. It showed that common periwinkles near the low tide line were larger than those near the high tide line. This trend was consistent at all three of the sites I had sampled and led to a completely new focus in my research. I designed a study of morphologic variation in periwinkles as a function of intertidal position. For my study site I chose an exposed island (Jenny Island) in Harpswell, Maine.

[...]

Conclusions

The results of this Jenny Island study show that periwinkle morphology varies significantly according to intertidal position and substrate. These results support my research hypothesis and my previous findings. The periwinkles near the high tide line are on average smaller than those near the low tide line. Periwinkles from tide pool substrates were significantly smaller than periwinkles from any of the other substrates.

This trend is not reported in the literature, and my findings suggest that in order for periwinkle morphology to be effectively compared among sites, the periwinkles' intertidal position and substrate must be taken into account. The experimental design developed in this study seems to provide adequate sample size and control for intertidal position and substrate. It seems to allow periwinkle morphology to be investigated effectively, and I intend to further test this methodology in a follow-up investigation of periwinkle distribution trends.

Young Naturalist Awards rough draft checklist

Focus of Investigation
Is my topic original and interesting?
Is my question clearly defined?
Did I narrow my focus so that my topic is not too broad?

Procedure
Is my data gathered and recorded using a clearly described methodology?
Did I clearly identify where, what, when, how, and why I conducted my investigation?

Analysis and Interpretation
Was good data collected?
Did I interpret the data correctly?
Did I use information from outside resources to help formulate my ideas and interpret my data?
Did my observations support and relate to my question and hypothesis?
Did I present ways I might change my procedure or include questions for further study?

Personal Voice
Have I written an interesting and engaging essay?
Does the essay describe my observations or the expedition I took?

Clarity and Style
Is my writing clear?
Is there a logical progression of ideas?
Do I use proper punctuation? Are words spelled correctly?
Are sentence structure and word choice appropriate?

Resources to inspire connection with nature and writing

Keeping a Nature Journal: Discover a Whole New Way of Seeing the World Around You by Clare Walker Leslie, Charles E. Roth (Workman Publishing Company, 2003)

Perspectives of San Diego Bay: A Field Guide by the Students of High Tech High, with an introduction by Jane Goodall (Next Generation Press, 2006)

Ecological Literacy: Educating Our Children for a Sustainable World edited by Michael K. Stone and Zenobia Barlow

The Best American Nature and Science Writing 2005 edited by Jonathan Weiner (Houghton Mifflin, 2005)

River of Words: Images & Poetry in Praise of Water Edited by Pamela Michael (Heyday Books, 2003). A collection of poetry and art about water by children worldwide, aged 5-19.

Youth as evaluators:

Race and ethnicity in metropolitan Detroit through the eyes of its youth

"People in my neighborhood don't like to leave it...most parents don't want you to hang out with other races. I had a White friend, but as I grew up my parents got on me because of it. I think parents just want you to hang out with the same kinds of kids. Not that they are racist-but I assume it is because parents may think the other races are bad." —Student participant, Youth Dialogues Project, Detroit, MI

DETROIT, MI—On a summer afternoon in the nation's most segregated metropolitan area, 75 young people who usually gather in groups divided by race and ethnicity are coming together to confront the stereotypes that color their lives.

Strangers to each other, they arrive from the city's most blighted neighborhoods as well as from the nearby college town of Ann Arbor. Schools and organizations across greater Detroit have sent them, invited to join an interracial dialogue organized by the University of Michigan's Program for Youth and Community with funding from the Skillman Foundation, using an approach which was developed with support from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation.

Nervously, these teenagers exchange the messages they have heard: White arrogance, Latinos forming gangs, Arab Americans concealing terrorism, African Americans doing drugs, Asian Americans consumed by academic achievement.

Some disavow the stereotypes. Others wrestle with them.

"I mean, just this year, I found out that 'A-rab' was a racist word," one student admits.

Later, five high school and University of Michigan students huddle at a coffee shop, poring over a pile of interview transcripts to evaluate and draw lessons from these dialogues.

Deputized as analysts by the larger group, these young people seek quotes and evidence for their pressing questions: What's it like to grow up in metropolitan Detroit? How do these young people think about race and ethnicity? How effective are the dialogues in altering preconceived ideas? How do participants view the future of race and ethnicity in metropolitan Detroit?

When the seven-week dialogue program finishes at the end of the summer, the young people will produce a bound report of their findings and recommendations.

Youth as evaluators

"Youth have a strong sense of justice, which makes it especially beneficial to involve them in evaluation research," says Barry Checkoway, a professor of social work at University of Michigan and the director of the Program on Youth and Community, which sponsored the dialogue project.

"We need their eyes, perspectives, and energy," he asserts. "Involving youth in evaluation demystifies the process, shares power, and lessens the gap between the researcher and the community, between youth and adults."

For almost a decade, Checkoway and others have built a small but sturdy movement of young people engaged in evaluating community programs, especially programs designed to serve youth like them. In the process, participants learn the basics of social science research as well.

"We began this evaluation as a team of high school, college and graduate students, diverse across age, gender, race, and ethnicity," the Detroit research team writes in the introduction to its report. "Over the course of the summer, we came into our own as evaluators." Rather than working from a template, the team created its own evaluation design:

We developed a plan, created questions, and set up contacts in each of the communities. We visited each of the communities and interviewed young people. We examined photographs, discussed common themes, and analyzed results. We learned about how young people experience race and ethnicity, how they think about diversity, and what they learned during the dialogues. Many young evaluators are new to the intellectual challenge of thinking and working from scratch. "Everything else I've done has always been laid out for me in one way or another," says Ellie, one of three high school students on the Detroit team.

The young people collaborated and revised at every step, creating eight drafts of their interview questions. They divided responsibility for different sections of the report, then critiqued each other's writing and the corroborating

evidence selected. They worked together on conclusions, recommendations, and the final look of the report. While one student focused on copyediting, another tackled finishing photos.

Many answers, more questions

Race and ethnicity does matter to young people growing up in metropolitan Detroit, these youth researchers concluded. It impacts every aspect of their lives: their attitudes, their schools, their communities, their aspirations.

The youth dialogues did create important opportunities for interaction across racial, ethnic, and community lines, the team found. "There were some young people who had never had a sustained conversation with someone different from themselves," the student evaluators observe. "Even a few had never held a conversation with someone of a different race or ethnicity, and it was a big deal to talk to someone different. Some of the young people had also never been to other communities and so traveling to the city, the suburb, or across town was a new experience."

The evaluation team also had suggestions to strengthen the project. Increase the number of intergroup dialogue sessions, it advised. Create groups based on communities, not race. Begin the project by having participants first research race and ethnicity in their own school and neighborhood. Help participants start intergroup dialogues of their own. Include time during the intergroup sessions for participants to "chill." Add a tour of each community to the program.

As the youth researchers marshaled answers to their framing questions, however, they surfaced new concerns. Studying the journals young people kept of the experience, they kept coming across the ways class mixed with race in the stories of participants. The role of class in Detroit segregation had gone unexamined, they decided. They also worried that the dialogues' positive impacts might diminish once the youth returned to segregated settings, questioning what might make changed attitudes lead to changed behavior. They queried the role of schools in combating institutional racism, when the origins of segregation lay outside the schools.

As much as they learned about such larger issues, these youth evaluators said that their work taught them just as much about themselves.

"Being part of the evaluation was totally overwhelming," noted Ellie, 17. "But it was a good kind of overwhelming. Growing up white in a black community, I've always paid close attention to the way races interact, and what role race plays in every type of relationship. With this project, I was able to compare the perspectives of other young people with my own. I learned more than I can say."

To download the final evaluation report, "Creating a New Beginning: Youth Speak Out on Race and Ethnicity in Metropolitan Detroit," as well as two excellent guides by Barry Checkoway and Katie Richards-Schuster—"Youth Participation Guide for Participatory Evaluation with Young People" and "Facilitators Guide for Participatory Evaluation with Young People"—go to [http://www.whatkidscando.org/featurestories/detroit.html.](http://www.whatkidscando.org/featurestories/detroit.html)

See below for:

- An interview with youth evaluator Ellie

WKCD interview with evaluation team member Ellie

Ellie was one of three high school students on the five-person evaluation team for the metropolitan Detroit Youth Dialogues Project. The two other researchers were students at the University of Michigan. Their assignment: to evaluate the impact of a seven-week series of interracial dialogues involving youth across metropolitan Detroit. WKCD recently interviewed Ellie about her participation. She is currently a senior at Southfield Lathrup High School. She is heading to college next fall to study public policy.

WKCD: Did you have any experience with evaluation before this project? How did you and the team get started—figuring out how you would collect your data and who would do what?

I'd never done anything like this before, being an evaluator was totally new. And the coolest part was that we got to create our own strategies for how we would get the information. Everything else I've done has always been laid out for me. Here, we got to create the whole plan ourselves, from scratch.

We decided who we wanted to interview and what questions we'd ask. We decided to have the kids do journal entries, and we wrote the prompts. We decided that we wanted them to take pictures of their communities and that would be part of the final report. We basically decided all that. And then we worked hard to get it right. We had eight different versions of what the interview questions would look like. We spent hours working through the questions, getting the words just right. With each new version, I could see how my input was directly there, "I said that!" I've never worked on anything so official, a bound book like this.

And then we all had jobs. One of my jobs was transcribing the interviews, since I type fast. I liked most transcribing the interviews I hadn't done myself. I learned from them.

WKCD: How did you approach analyzing and sorting through all the data you gathered?

When it came time to start our analysis, we combined all the transcripts with a big pile of journal entries and then sorted through and sorted through and highlighted all of the comments that stood out. We had the four main questions we wanted to answer in the report, so we looked stuff over again and again, pulling out what would go well in this section, what would work in that section. We tried to balance the quotes, like "we need to find another quote from a person of Arab-descent to fit here." We went back and forth, adjusting what went here and what went there. It was good that we had such a large amount of information, though, because it showed the diversity that was so much a part of the project. There are so many quotes, so many perspectives. Honestly, it was overwhelming.

WKCD: How did you tackle the business of presenting all of the material you collected in a final report?

Early in the project we had to do a presentation at a retreat for the dialogue groups. It forced us to focus and develop our main message, to figure out what was most relevant, what was important, what we were getting out of it and what we wanted people to get out of our final report. We created a Powerpoint where we mixed it up: we had pictures of the different communities, music, we had slides with data, quotes from the journal entries and interviews. People could see what they had said and what others had said. It was so direct. It made us feel like what we were doing was really relevant, that we were teaching others.

When it came to writing the report, we divided it up into pieces. The lessons we did as group, we debriefed as a group and everyone added their thoughts. But the writing we each did separately. And then with every draft, each one of us specialized in a particular thing. I'm the meticulous one and specialized in things like punctuation. "Hey Katie, you forgot a comma here!" I was the copy editor.

WKCD: Who did you see as the audience for your report?

The first audience for the report was the youth who were in the program. We wanted to bring back to them what was learned in the dialogues, to put it into context and help them see the bigger picture. We also wanted the report to be a tool for making the program better. And we wanted to give the community outside a sense of what went on inside. We saw the audience as both peers and adults.

The fact that our peers were going to be reading it did have an impact on the methods we choose. This is why we decided to create stories of eight of the participants. People my age, you can't just read something that's the same all the way through. The way we did it, there's quotes, there's stories, there's conclusions, and photographs. And then there is so much analysis and in depth material that reaches adults. We tried to reach both audiences at the same time. And the fact that it came from us, that the evaluation team was also diverse, with different ages and nationalities, that helped us better address the diversity of our audience.

WKCD: What struck you most about the data you collected? What would you most like to see changed in the coming summer's dialogue project?

There's one thing I definitely wish they would change for the future. Reading many of the statements students made in their journals, I realized how many of their stereotypes also had to do with socioeconomic class. With the focus on racism alone, there wasn't a chance to bring in economic class, to examine and discuss it and see how it mixes with segregation. Race and class are almost inseparable, I've learned. In future dialogues, we must focus on class too. You could tell that the youth really wanted to talk about the class issue, about the stereotypes that go with class, but the way it was set up they couldn't.

WKCD: Has the experience of being an evaluator influenced your thinking about what you'd like to study or do?

I was already interested in public policy before this, but this project opened my eyes to all that's possible in the public policy field, like evaluation. Having an outside

perspective on the dialogues helped me look at the issues discussed in a whole new way, especially because I was analyzing the participants' experiences instead of directly participating. The experience also gave me a lot more respect for my teachers—how they take information and have to put it into a presentable format every day!

Honoring two worlds:
Teaching young writers as they learn English

"Sometimes I don't know how to express who I am to people."—Barbara, ESL student

Eric, whose family immigrated from China six months ago, casts his eyes down in painful shyness, filling pages of a notebook with pencil sketches of the world in his head. Sandra, fresh from Guatemala, sticks closely to a girlfriend, the two murmuring constantly in Spanish. Pedro, recently arrived from Mexico, relies on Javier and Rafael to elaborate on his two- or three-word replies. Judyta spills out her answers urgently, passionately speaking her mind despite the grammatical errors she knows she is making.

Scenes like this occur every day, in schools with large numbers of students new to this country. And, even when the students share the same language—perhaps Spanish or Chinese—the differences among their situations can be breathtaking.

Sixteen-year-old Sandra has just come from a remote Guatemalan village, with no access to schooling. Sixteen-year-old Pedro also speaks Spanish, but arrived in the U.S. from a rough-and-tumble Mexican town along the Texas border.

Giving voice to immigrant students through writing offers them a powerful entry point to advance their learning across the curriculum. But when adolescents are still acquiring English, how can high school teachers work most effectively to draw out their thoughts in written form?

For some insight, WKCD turned to Annie Gwynne-Vaughan, who has a decade of experience teaching immigrant students in the New York City public schools. At Manhattan International High School, she teaches tenth- and twelfth-grade language arts to students who arrived at the school in grade nine with very little English. She was also a mentor teacher for WKCD's **Forty-Cent Tip** book project, in which students at three of New York City's small schools for newcomers interviewed and photographed relatives, friends, and neighbors to tell their stories of struggle and pride as working immigrants in America.

See below for:

- An interview with Manhattan International High School teacher Annie Gwynne-Vaughan

Honoring two worlds:
Teaching young writers as they learn English

Below is an interview with Annie Gwynne-Vaughan, who has a decade of experience teaching immigrant students in the New York City public schools. At Manhattan International High School, she teaches tenth- and twelfth-grade language arts to students who arrived at the school in grade nine with very little English.

WKCD: You aren't specially trained in teaching English as a second language. What helps you to hook teenagers on reading and writing in their new language?

I try to find simple texts that engage their intellects and ignite their imaginations. You have to go slowly and define words, but you don't have to define everything. You're teaching them to trust themselves, too. One of my tenth graders, Sandra, couldn't speak at all when she came here. Yesterday, she was doing a presentation about whether adolescents should get the death penalty—and she was so confident, because it was something that she understood. You realize how much their skills and their ability are driven by interest.

WKCD: Some of your students are not literate in their first language. How does that affect your work with them?

We have a lot of students who never went to school in their native countries, or who missed a couple of years of school. They can be very savvy verbally, and then you get their writing and you realize, wow, the student doesn't have any sense of punctuation or sentence structure. It's much easier to get literate in English if you're already literate in your first language. Yet students come to us with so many different languages and dialects; we can't possibly try to fill that gap when we find it, so we concentrate on the English. It's a very big obstacle, but there's a lot of research that's being done about these students right now, and our school has a grant for serving Students with Interrupted Formal Education (SIFE).

*WKCD: For the **Forty-Cent Tip** project, your students interviewed neighbors and relatives about their experiences as immigrant workers. They did the interviews in their native languages, and then they translated them and shaped them into short essays. How did that process influence students' writing?*

Students could be experts in these interviews, and they took it seriously. I was really moved by how much time and care they all gave, to their subjects and to the project. For example, my student Miguel sometimes seems elsewhere in class, he's not really grounded in his commitment to himself academically. But in this project, he was interviewing his stepfather, who is a mechanic. And in the presentation, he took great care in his word choices. He wanted to put his own spin on it and he wanted to be true to his father. That's when translation really works—when it's not just a direct transcription, but when the translator captures something of the feeling, in that air that lies between the words and the page.

WKCD: It sounds as though students gained a certain pride in their own strengths, as writers who are learning to cross language barriers.

Many of my students live in families that don't speak English. They are always interpreting, always code-switching; it becomes a part of their way of being. This project allowed them to use the skills they practice all the time. It was a way of honoring their two worlds—honoring the part of them that exists, but goes unrecognized.

WKCD: I'm interested in the step-by-step process they used for this project, and how it might have built their literacy skills.

The students used inexpensive digital voice recorders, then they loaded the files into the computer. They played back the interview—the computer can slow it down—and transcribed it first in its original language, then translated it into English. Those included in the book then saw their work edited and made public. In Miguel's case, his title got changed in the process, and he was very upset, he didn't like the change at all. I talked to the students about my reporter friends who have to let go and give up editorial control. This book was produced over the summer, so the editing couldn't have been done in class, but if we did it again, I would want to include them more in the process.

Shaping an essay from the spoken word

1. Student makes a speech before the class, from notes.

2. Peers give feedback on angle, content, organization, tone.

3. Student turns the speech into a written essay.

4. Student gives the speech a second time, receiving more peer feedback.

5. Student revises written essay again.

6. Final speech presented.

7. Final editing of essay.

WKCD: Moving from the spoken word to the written word appears to be an important technique with kids who are still learning English. Do you use this strategy in other assignments as well?

Yes, we spend a lot of time on the college application essay at the beginning of senior year, because so many of our students have moved to this country, often against their own wishes, to go to college. A social worker, Susan Calhoun, comes in every week as my co-teacher on this. It takes two months in the fall; once a week at the start, and then every day for the last three weeks. I think the whole assignment succeeds because it involves speaking, writing, revision, and then eventually presenting to the community.

WKCD: Can you explain how it works?

First we have the students make extemporaneous speeches, to get them thinking about their lives and who they are. We work a lot at getting their verbal skills to help inform their written skills—for example, we have them give a speech with a beginning, middle, and end. Eventually, we build up to using one of the four questions on the Common Application as a speech prompt.

They give their speech from note cards—or some will write it all out—and then they give each other feedback about its strengths and weaknesses. That often tells them about the strengths and weaknesses of their writing—where they could go deeper, finding their angle. If some part of the piece is just to sell the admissions committee, for example, their fellow students will pick up on that in their speech, and it will be the part that falls flat in the writing, too. So starting with the speech allows them to go further with writing on the page. It's a really important process—almost like having an experience of their writing, with other people.

WKCD: It sounds like revision is a huge part of teaching writing in this way.

It is. They all give the speeches in class twice, and at the same time they are revising their papers. One student, who got into Hamilton College, probably rewrote his college essay twelve times. Susan and I sat with him for so long, looking at the writing: "This is what tells me more about you"; "show, don't tell," all those things. If we can help them to sort out the patterns in their thoughts, if they can somehow get a bigger picture, which a lot of them have never gotten from an adult, they can have the ability to move those muscles that allow you to be more specific. You kind of have to model that for people, or they don't get it.

WKCD: A college application essay has high stakes right from the start, of course, because a committee will be using it to help make admissions decisions.

Yes, but we also build in a more public audience—a Speech Day, when nine of the fifty seniors give their speech for the school. We don't choose for the strongest speeches; often, we choose students who need the experience of success, who need to hear their voice and surprise themselves.

WKCD: Perhaps more than most English teachers, do you see the effects that improved writing skills can have on your students' futures?

Definitely. I use the term "living document" when we talk about the college essay project—it not only reflects who they are, but it can teach them who they are becoming. One student, Fianny, wrote her original essay about her sister dying when she was a kid, and now the college has asked her to write more about herself. And in the last few months she has come alive, has developed an interest in photography and started taking a photography course at the Museum of Modern Art. "It was like I was asleep," she told me, when we were talking about what she would write [about her sister's death] now. "If I could just freeze the moment, like in a photograph, then I can go beyond it and see something I couldn't see before."

Valuable resources for teaching writing

So much of today's push around adolescent literacy involves reading. However, there are invaluable resources on the writing end, too, and here we offer a collection of them.

KEY PLAYERS

The National Council of Teachers of English
http://www.ncte.org/

The National Council of Teachers of English is devoted to improving the teaching and learning of English and the language arts at all levels of education. Since 1911, NCTE has provided a forum for the profession, an array of opportunities for teachers to continue their professional growth throughout their careers, and a framework for cooperation to deal with issues that affect the teaching of English.

NCTE has over 60,000 members and subscribers in the United States and other countries. Individual members are teachers and supervisors of English programs in elementary, middle, and secondary schools, faculty in college and university English departments, teacher educators, local and state agency English specialists, and professionals in related fields. Anyone interested in advancing English language arts education is welcome to join the NCTE membership community.

The NCTE website includes links to:

Awards—student award programs, professional service awards, and awards for scholarship and teaching.
ELA policy blogs—the latest in literacy education trends and breaking news.

Education issues—news of interest to literacy educators, policy studies, summaries of national, local and state education issues, Council action on policy questions, the Anti-Censorship Center, and the Educators Advocacy Network information.
Grants—funding sources available to educators, including NCTE grant opportunities and various grant programs offered by educational institutions, foundations, and corporations.

National Writing Project
http://www.writingproject.org/

The National Writing Project is the premier effort to improve writing in America. Through its professional development model, NWP builds the leadership, programs, and research needed for teachers to help their students become successful writers and learners.

Every student deserves a highly skilled teacher of writing. To that end, each of the 195 NWP sites conducts an annual summer institute, attended by the most experienced teachers in the area. Together, these teachers prepare for leadership roles by demonstrating their most effective practices, studying research, and improving their knowledge of writing by writing themselves.

After the institute, writing project teachers conduct project-sponsored programs in their own schools and in neighboring schools and districts. They attend to two purposes: developing teacher knowledge and leadership in their home communities and putting this knowledge and leadership to work to improve student achievement. Collectively, across 50 states, Puerto Rico, Washington, D.C., and the U.S. Virgin Islands, NWP sites conducted 7,288 programs in 2005.

This model of summer and school-year programs, designed and supported by the National Writing Project, is validated by NWP research. Studies of student achievement, both local and national, show positive results. Importantly, NWP sponsors research directed by local sites as well as research targeted at key educational concerns, for example, how to support new teachers or how to support teachers, grades 4-12, in their efforts to improve students' reading and writing for academic purposes.

NWP sites, all located on university campuses, serve over 141,000 educators annually. NWP continues to add new sites each year with the goal of placing the writing project within reach of every teacher in America.

Breadloaf School of English
http://www.middlebury.edu/academics/blse/

Since 1920 the Bread Loaf School of English has offered a rich array of graduate courses in literature, the teaching of writing, creative writing, and theater arts to students from across the United States. For six weeks each summer Bread Loaf students, most of them secondary-school teachers, work toward an M.A. or M.Litt. and study with a world-class faculty at one of our five sites: Alaska, New Mexico, North Carolina, Oxford (England), and the home campus located outside Middlebury at the foot of Bread Loaf Mountain in Vermont. Summer 2006 will be the opening summer for Bread Loaf's fifth campus at the University of North Carolina at Asheville.

This coming June some 550 students will again travel to the Bread Loaf of their choice for an intense, exhilarating, even transformative six weeks of class work, lectures, performances, and conversation. They can then join the virtual community of teachers and learners after classes have ended, as they stay in touch year-round using BreadNet, our computer network.

INNOVATIVE BOOKS ON THE TEACHING OF WRITING

Because Writing Matters: Improving Student Writing in Our Schools by National Writing Project with Carl Nagin (Jossey-Bass, updated edition 2006)
A fresh, comprehensive, and invaluable book which offers case studies of successful schoolwide writing programs that improve student performance, and gives examples of effective assignments, assessments, and research-proven classroom strategies for improving writing.

City of One: Young Writers Speak to the World, edited by Colette DeDonato, foreword by Isabel Allende (Aunt Lute Books, 2005)
City of One is a compelling portrait of a generation of youth who use their words to re-envision the world.

Educating the Imagination: Essays and Ideas for Teachers and Writers, edited by Christopher Edgar & Ron Padgett (Teachers & Writers Collaborative, 1994)
The 72 informal essays in Educating the Imagination were selected from the very best articles in *Teachers & Writers* Magazine over the past 17 years. Fifty-five creative writers present a multitude of ideas and techniques for writing in the classroom: poetry; fiction; writing across cultures; bookmaking; creative reading; the history of punctuation; and that great, alluring mystery known as the imagination.

Hip Deep: Opinion, Essays, and Vision from American Teenagers, edited by Abe Louise Young (Next Generation Press, 2006)
This riveting anthology presents fifty-six student writers on themes of contemporary life, and includes a guide on how and where aspiring young writers can publish their work.

Reading Your Students: Their Writing and Their Selves by Anne Martin (Teachers & Writers Collaborative, 2000)
Building on more than 20 years of teaching experience, Anne Martin shows how teachers can gain valuable insights into students by a close reading of their writing. She then demonstrates how this new knowledge contributes to a more creative classroom.

Reading, Writing, and Rising Up: Teaching About Social Justice and the Power of the Written Word by Linda Christensen (Rethinking Schools, 2000)
A practical, inspirational book offering essays, lesson plans, and a remarkable collection of student writing, all rooted in an unwavering focus on language arts teaching for justice.

The Story in History: Writing Your Way into the American Experience by Margot Fortunato Galt (Teachers & Writers Collaborative, 1992)

The Story in History gives teachers and students of all levels an entirely new way to learn about American history: by re-experiencing it from the vantage point of the imaginative writer.

HELPFUL WEBSITES FOR THE TEACHING OF WRITING

Teachers & Writers Collaborative
www.twc.org/
(T&W)—a nonprofit organization—is one of the oldest and most innovative writers-in-the-schools programs in the country. T&W places writers in schools and publishes books and a magazine on teaching writing—materials that provide sound theory and practical curriculum ideas for classrooms. T&W links our country's rich, diverse literary community with the public schools.

Poetry 180: A Poem a Day for America's High Schools
www.loc.gov/poetry/180/
Created by Billy Collins, former Poet Laureate of the United States, Poetry 180 is designed to make it easy for students to hear or read a poem on each of the 180 days of the school year.

Cultural Arts Resources for Teachers and Students
www.carts.org
The CARTS Web site explores the people, places, and traditions that turn communities into classrooms-and provides many useful resources for building cultural arts into the writing curriculum.

Online Poetry Classroom
www.poets.org/page.php/prmID/6
Here you will find a wealth of resources, including teacher forums where teachers can share ideas and seek help from colleagues; pedagogical and critical essays about poetry; extensive links to relevant websites; curriculum units and lesson plans; biographies of hundreds of poets; and nearly two thousand poems.

WriteNet
www.twc.org/forums/
WriteNet is a valuable resource for writers and teachers interested in teaching imaginative writing to students in grades K-12.