



# THEY 'DARE TO CARE'

HOFSTRA UNIVERSITY PUBLIC RELATIONS

By ERIKA DUNCAN

In an alumni center board room at Adelphi University, high school students sit at one end of an over-sized table advising college students on the best way to write an “unpopular view” that questions whether suicide is cowardly or brave.

At the other end, two English language learners from Latin America encourage a community activist from Romania to let her native language emanate in her writing so descriptions about her father can come to life.

In a cinder block-lined classroom at Hofstra University, a college student, her therapy dog at her feet, gets coaching from other students on how to write about the need for acceptance and access to public and private places. A young man from Hempstead High School reads a story, two semesters in the making, about his lack of reaction when he saw his friend murdered. The group then turns to a girl who was bullied for wearing her hijab. They suggest she slow her story down so readers can experience her journey

## Students find their voice in community-based writing project

into becoming a bully herself.

Each of us has a “poetry of experience” dwelling deep inside us, a stream of memories that can bubble to the surface from our hope, our anger, our grief. When we dare to imagine someone might hear us and actually care, bit by bit, we break out of the silence and isolation.

This is what high school students in four Long Island communities are learning to explore. The students, who have seen far too much hardship for their young years, are writing side by side with college students studying criminology, social work and education as part of the Youth Writing for Justice project.

The idea is to provide students with opportunities to create literary pieces when more conventional approaches to writing had failed to achieve mastery or ignite a spark.

The project was established in

2011 by Herstory Writers Workshop, an organization dedicated to using guided memoir writing to give voice to people whose stories have been silenced and to change attitudes, policies and lives while creating a powerful body of new grassroots, community-based literature. Herstory is featured in the latest edition of *Educator's Voice*, NYSUT's journal of best practices in education (see separate story on p. 23).

The workshop partners with Community Action, Learning and Leadership at SUNY College at Old Westbury, and the Sharing and Caring Diploma Program for Pregnant and Parenting Girls of

Long Beach Reach and is spreading to other colleges, universities and public school districts.

The high school students who participate in the after-school project are chosen by their teachers and social workers. They represent a wide variety of backgrounds, yet their mission is the same: Learn techniques to tell their stories so the larger community will care. The college students, too, are learning the “dare to care” technique.

The students quickly become each other's teachers, helping one another bring out what needs to be enhanced in their writings so true empathy can be reached.

During the project's first year, a teen mother became deeply moved by a story by one of the facilitators about a lifelong quest to find her real father. The teen mother began writing a powerful piece about what she would say to her own child when

*Cars screeching, people whispering, and the heavens crying. I walked over to get a better view, and, there, one can see red smeared deeply into the street concrete. My friend is dead. — Edwin Solis*



AMY POLOAND

Left: Hempstead High English teacher Felicia Cooper Prince, a member of Hempstead Classroom Teachers Association, facilitates a writing discussion with Yazmyn Green and Jasmine Kitt-Hart, members of Sharing and Caring Diploma Program for Pregnant and Parenting Girls of Long Beach Reach, and Hofstra University student Vanessa Soldarro.

Above: Patchogue-Medford High School freshman Lucas Hahn is a member of the school's anti-bullying club.

Right: Kelvin Lazaro, a student at St. Joseph's College, musters the courage to read his story out loud for the first time.

asked: "Who is my father?"

A group conversation about "the right to know" — from the importance of seeing things from another person's perspective to weighing ultimately life-changing decisions — continued throughout the semester.

For the high school students, it was a heady experience to be "teaching" college students, even the facilitators, through their writing. Conversely, they discovered the experiences of the college students weren't so different from their own: Overcoming obstacles. Setting goals. Staying in school.

Some of the college students reset their priorities based on their interactions with their younger partners. One moved from pursuing a career in criminology to applying to law school, so she might help give young people a voice.

## FOR MORE

To read more of the students' stories, visit [www.nysut.org/writingforjustice](http://www.nysut.org/writingforjustice).



*I looked him in the face. It wasn't like mine. It wasn't like theirs either. A façade portraying strength and the lack of need of help, but his eyes, they didn't lie. Eyes never lie. — Osvaldo Nunez*

The project has doubled in size in just three years, with two new college hosts and school districts, involving more deliberate partnership with government and human rights groups that allows students to use their writing to become active players around the issues their stories illuminate.

At St. Joseph's College, English language learners and Patchogue-Medford High School's anti-bullying club members help a criminology major prepare a story about his experience during a Rikers Island lockdown shortly after his 17th birthday. He, in turn, helps an ESL teacher translate tricky words in the writing of an Ecuadorian girl.

At Touro Law Center, volunteers from Prison Families Anonymous and Tikkun, an organization devoted to restorative justice, help an immigration lawyer abandon legal language and tell his story from the heart. They prepare their own stories to present to their local assemblyman.

Writing students from Long Island University's C.W. Post campus are now traveling to Hofstra University to join criminology students and Hempstead High School writers, now starting their third semester.

The ramifications and possibilities of the "dare to care" technique are far reaching and profound. Understanding someone and feeling empathy create a compassion that reduces the likelihood to harass, bully or discriminate; it also



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*... these kids make me feel so lonely and out of place. Like a tomato in a fruit basket. Technically it belongs but it just doesn't feel right. They make me doubt everything I do, everything I want to become. They tease me and say I'm different. How am I different? ... Because I've decided that school is my main priority? Because I don't speak and act like them? Yeah, that makes me so different. — Joselyn Gonzalez*

moves each new writer from feeling helpless and vulnerable to feeling empowered. Herstory is in the early stages of planning a training institute for teachers and youth leaders, so the program will be able to spread beyond Long Island.

*Novelist and essayist Erika Duncan is the founder and executive and artistic director of Herstory Writers Workshop in Centereach. For more, visit [www.herstorywriters.org](http://www.herstorywriters.org).*

*Inside the supermarket he told me and my sister to pick anything we wanted. I didn't know where to start. He bought me candy, ice cream, toys, makeup. I thought he was the coolest. But that was his way of winning an innocent child's trust. — Erika Vasquez*

## Social-emotional development focus of Educator's Voice

Promoting social-emotional development and physical well-being is the topic of NYSUT's latest edition of *Educator's Voice*, NYSUT's journal of best practices in education.

Volume VII features articles on a wide range of topics, including an article on page 40 about the guided memoir process as part of the Herstory Writers Workshop.

Others include meditation; mindfulness practices in the classroom; tapping peer support to combat bullying; decreasing test anxiety; and developing social consciousness through media and literacy.

Authors, representing educators from K-12 and higher education, offer a "rich collection of applied theory that exemplifies what social-emotional learning looks like in best practice," said NYSUT Vice President Maria Neira, whose office oversees publication of the journal.

Volume VII can be downloaded by mid-April at [www.nysut.org](http://www.nysut.org).

## Call for proposals

The theme for Volume VIII: *Critical thinking and problem solving for the 21st century learner* is designed to investigate ways in which learning that is authentic, collaborative and hands-on can capture the essence of real-world tasks and prepare students for a global society defined by fast communications, ongoing change and increasing diversity.

Examples of topics include: STEM education; inquiry-based learning; Career and Technical Education; and teaching critical thinking and problem solving with special populations.

For deadlines, guidelines and other information, visit [www.nysut.org/resources/special-resources-sites/educators-voice/call-for-proposals](http://www.nysut.org/resources/special-resources-sites/educators-voice/call-for-proposals).

Email questions to [edvoice@nysutmail.org](mailto:edvoice@nysutmail.org).

