

# New York City Writing Project NEWSLETTER

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## Note from the Editors

We are always changing. Often we change in subtle ways, until one day we notice that we have revised our thinking. Consciously through revision and practice, we strive for perfection. Writers rewrite, revise, throw everything out and start over. Musicians arrange and rearrange—improvise. Teachers? Well, teachers are sometimes born revisers. That didn't work? Throw it out, put it somewhere else, add, delete, maybe just try it again with a different group, in a different way.

The articles in this issue focus on change and revision as well as our feelings about them. "Have I Got a School for You" presents four proposals for the New Visions Schools. The wonderful cadre of teachers we have here at the New York City Writing Project, along with other team members, offer their visions of possibilities for change in school structure.

In his article "It is Now July," Ed Osterman wonders how long the changes the Project has implemented in high schools will last once the teacher-consultant leaves. This article is followed by responses from Eileen Cuff and Benita Daniels, teachers with whom Ed has been working at Newtown High School.

Nick D'Alessandro's article, "Teacher's Choice," reveals how his perceptions of his students' work altered when he brought their portfolios into a Writing Project summer seminar.

We also have some interesting "Steals" which foster students' imaginations by integrating writing with art and drama.

Our student writers Lia Marie Rojas and Lisa Lim were winners in the Newtown High School Writing Contest. Ms. Rojas observes the change in the Mets with the passing of the season in "A Summer Lost" while Ms. Lim advocates change as she argues against conservatism within her culture. Our teachers-as-writers section includes poetry by Hasna Muhammad and a personal essay on change by Christine Jones.

Since it is summer and many of us use this time to take courses, catch up on reading and otherwise prepare ourselves for the coming school year, we're hoping you will consider writing for us.

Have a great summer, and if you read any books you think our audience would be interested in, let us know here at the Newsletter.

Our Apologies. In the last Newsletter the book of poetry *Class Dismissed* was erroneously attributed to Mel Gusso. The book was written by Mel Glenn.

## Have I Got a School for You

*In the spring of 1992 the New York City Public Schools and The Fund for New York City Public Education invited educators "to create an innovative and imaginative school for New York City adolescents and children of other ages." In September 1993, the first of these New Visions schools will open. Marion Halberg introduces four proposals developed by committees including Writing Project members. She subtitles this article, "If You Know of Anyone with Space and Some Money to Spare. . . ."*

I'm frustrated. I've worked on programs within the school for change and I've worked in the classroom to change the traditional, doomed-to-failure system that exists in my school. Still, I'm frustrated. Forty minute periods are marked by bells telling students to pack up and put their attentions on subjects which often bear no resemblance to the real world; X-ray machines and body scanners held by uniformed guards greet students at the door; de facto segregation, prejudice and discrimination within the school emanate from all groups—administration, teachers and students—and on and on.

My school, an overcrowded, zoned high school, and others like it just can't work. It doesn't meet the needs of the students and it certainly doesn't meet my needs as a teacher. With all this talk of school-based management and shared decision making in my school, what have we gotten? More of the same old bureaucratic nightmares. I'm throwing up my arms in frustration, ready to toss my bookbag out the window. I can't continue like this. It's only getting worse.

Last spring two colleagues and I thought we hit upon a golden opportunity to work with students in a setting which made much more sense to us. We answered the call for proposals for New Visions Schools, funded by the Aaron Diamond Foundation and The Fund for New York City Public Education. We got really excited. We wrote, we talked, we fantasized about what it would be like to create a school of our own, to work with people who value the lives of the city's students in the same way we do, people who really want to make school a sane and sensible place to be. We were finalists

ready to gulp in the fresh air outside the doors of our current school located in a "sick" building that is currently undergoing a massive construction project while school is in session.

The New Visions Schools which are scheduled to open are very promising. They include schools backed by unions, community-based organizations, and

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universities. They are the beginning of what will hopefully be a trend in public education—small and sane.

While we didn't receive the grant, we have remained in contact with the New Visions planners and are intending to apply for teaching positions in the new schools. In the meantime we continue to maintain contact and search for other alternatives to the big high school setting.

What is more, my small team of teachers was not the only group of Writing Project people involved in the "creation" of new schools. What follows are the synopses of several proposals developed by teams comprised of many Project members. These proposals are from the grassroots—written and nurtured by teachers and students. Members of our Project are in the vanguard of change in many ways.

All of these proposals were finalists in the search. None of them were funded. But the people who developed these proposals are committed to making these visions realities. All of these people continue to work toward the ideals described below and toward a common goal: making education a welcomed, equal experience for all.

Please note: The following are only brief descriptions. Each proposal consisted of approximately 10 to 15 pages of description and explanation.

Marion Halberg  
Louis D. Brandeis HS

### The Two-Way Language Immersion School

The Two-Way Language Immersion School will develop both the native and second language abilities of speakers of English and Spanish. Spanish-speaking limited English proficient and English speaking students who are African-American, Latino and White will be heterogeneously mixed to create an equal ratio of English and Spanish speakers in all school classes and activities. The school will provide natural and academic settings for both English and Spanish through cultural and racial exchange and awareness, will increase students' knowledge and understanding in a multicultural, multiracial, and multilingual society. In addition, learning a second language will make students of the school very employable.

The Two-Way Language Immersion School will ultimately service 300-600 students in grades 7-12 although it is expected to open with fewer than that number. Using an alternative model for teaching and learning, the school will accept students of all ability levels. A school-as-family theme will be developed in addition to the linguistic goals, and all members of the school's community (i.e.

students, parents, teachers) will share in decision-making processes. Students and teachers will work from within to ready students for the world outside school. Community service and outreach will be essential to this aspect of the school.

Proposed by Marion Halberg,\* Maria Giacone,\* Emma Abreu.\*

### An Intergenerational School

We are living at a time in history when urban communities are rarely cohesive. Economic and housing problems have torn many neighborhoods apart. People have become more and more disconnected from each other. We relate to our televisions more than we do to our neighbors. Due in part to the ways schools are structured, generations have become particularly isolated and compartmentalized.

In fact, separating people from each other according to age for the purpose of learning is a relatively new phenomenon. Historically, opportunities for learning were present in extended families across generations. Children learned in one-room school houses where adolescents taught younger children, and were included in the work lives and social spheres of adults. As a result of working and learning alongside their elders in daily interactions, teenagers entered the world of adults more naturally.

In our society, the worlds of adults and adolescents are more than separate—they are estranged. However, adults are concerned about the well-being of young people in their neighborhoods and teenagers want adults to hear them. But there are few arenas where these groups can discover what they have to offer each other.

In an intergenerational program, the roles of "students" and "teachers" can be more fluid. Everyone can work on reading and writing—teachers as well as students. Students can be teachers and peer tutors. The presence of adults in the same program gives a living historical reference for adolescents who are often cut off from their history. Adults can have a calming influence on teenagers' often raw emotions, while young people's energy can encourage passionate debate and exploration.

During the past three years, a group of teachers has met on a regular basis to discuss both theoretical and practical aspects of our work. We are high school teachers and teachers of community education. As a result of common experiences and shared explorations of critical themes in our teaching, we've developed what we believe to be an unusual concept in contemporary public secondary education—intergenerational study towards English literacy, a high school diploma, or a GED. We believe that learning is a lifelong process which should not be limited to youth. We envision a program that will bring adults and young people together. Such a program could be a vital educational community within itself, as well as make real connections with the world outside.

Proposed by Joel Biazzo, Azi Ellowitch,\* Steve Shreefter,\* Sheila Slater,\* Maryann Pita,\* Candy Systra,\* Cynthia Carrasquillo,\* Sarah Bloss.\*

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## Lehman Learning Community

The Lehman Learning Community will be a place uniquely designed to stimulate and nurture learning through the involvement and mutual support of all members of the "community." It will be a place of connections, supporting working relationships among its members: staff, students, parents, associates, and beyond them to Lehman College and the community. Guiding principles for this community include collaboration and respect. Our school will be a safe, constructive, respectful environment where all voices can be heard. It will be actively anti-racist, anti-sexist, and nonviolent, and demonstrate the belief that conflict can be resolved through discussion and consensus-building. We respect the critical role that adults play in the education of children outside school and will seek the participation of such adults in planning and delivering education in school. By emphasizing the ways in which diverse people can work together productively for common goals, we hope that the LLC can become a model of how people can live together in the larger society.

A number of assumptions underlie our approach to education. In addition to our commitment to the nine principles common to members of the Coalition of Essential Schools, we believe:

*Children are the center of the educational process.* Expectations of all students should be high, with support given to them to meet these expectations. All children, given appropriate support and encouragement, can learn. Instructional planning should proceed from an evolving understanding of each child's uniqueness and specialness—her strengths, talents, needs, and interests. Related to this belief is a commitment to heterogeneous grouping, which capitalizes on the different knowledge and strengths that students bring to their learning. In a school where children are at the center, students are known; teachers habitually observe the progress of each student through a variety of approaches and use this information to guide the development of effective curriculum.

*Relationships are key to a school's success.* A sense of belonging is important to us all. A learning community should offer comfort and support to students and teachers, while at the same time urging them to take risks and accept new challenges. It should foster connections between parents and staff. In a school where relationships are central, all adults act as student advisors, students may stay with the same teachers over time—both in classes and in family groups, and team-teaching is the norm. Further, where a sense of community is important, students build relationships with each other focused on learning and on school activities, and teachers build relationships with each other focused on informed pedagogy and reflective practice.

*Learning is most effective and challenging when it is active, collaborative, and inquiry-based.* We reject the "banking model" of education, where knowledge is possessed only by teachers who then "deposit" what they know in empty students. In keeping with the Coalition's notion of the "student as worker," we believe instead that teachers must help make it possible for students to take responsibility

for their own learning. When students generate and seek answers to their own questions with the guidance of knowledgeable, sensitive adults, learning becomes more effective for them and school is more relevant to their lives. Both students and teachers need to engage publicly in the process of thinking. In keeping with this principle, we also believe in the power of collaborative learning. Students often come to new understanding about a topic or problem in discussion with others. Further, when students work on projects together, they understand problems, formulate alternative approaches to solutions, and then divide up tasks and merge their results. Their collaboration mirrors collaborative models used in the working world.

*A school works best when everyone teaches and everyone learns.* Students should come to see every member of the school community—child or adult—as a potential teacher. And students themselves gain confidence and strengthen their own learning by teaching others. When parents continue their own education alongside their children, they model a lifelong commitment to both the struggles and satisfactions in learning. Teachers model authentic curiosity and "need to know" when

students see them working through a genuine problem in class, or continuing their own learning in their fields.

Proposed by: Barbara Batton,\* Jim Bruni, Christine Cziko,\* Bob Delisle, Kathe Jervis,\* Gail Kleiner,\* Linette Moorman,\* Ed Osterman,\* Richard Sterling,\* Victoria Dallas-Stephenson, Linda Vereline,\* Paul Wasserman,\* Marcie Wolfe.\*

## Family as School - School as Family

Schools and families need each other. Children and adolescents need to feel loved, supported, and empowered both at home and in their classrooms. Our New Vision is to re-focus our mission to include families more directly in the school. Our proposal is to become a school that includes all members of a family, regardless of age or of how that family chooses to define itself.

Schools cannot replace families in the lives of their students. What schools can do is promote the relationships which already exist in families, and when necessary, help people to build new, extended kinships. It is not enough to "involve" parents in schooling. Parents, children and other kin of all ages must be a part of the school, helping to set policies and standards as well as participating in common learning experiences together.

*Schools should enhance the strength of families.*

*Schools should see themselves as if they are families where vital relationships are formed.*

*Schools should be for families, serving all members.*

Our vision of schooling is that when all three of these functions are filled by schools, learning will be powerful and both the school and the family will be strong and effective.

We also see the home-community setting as a place where powerful learning takes place—from birth on, twenty-four hours a

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to a school's success.  
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day. If we really want to change the educational experience as we know it, then we have to work in multiple contexts—reinforcing and collaborating with the learning that takes place in families. Such an approach will give us a tremendously enlarged context in which to make an impact.

*Families should enhance the strength of schools.*

*Families should see themselves as if they are schools where vital learning takes place.*

*Families should be for schools, advocating for their effectiveness.*

Our New Visions school will help children and adolescents become stronger, more whole people and more able students by reinforcing the strength and support that parents, older siblings, and other kin can give these younger students. In return, these role models will learn from their guidance of the young.

We will provide students with consonant, meaningful educational experiences from kindergarten through the first two years of college. Our commitment to "Family as School - School as Family" is a commitment to making lifetime learning in a community of learners more than empty phrases. We can do this because we will build on our successes of the past half-decade, during which time we have been creating a school that has a strong, caring, intellectually centered ethos. As we restructure for families, we will keep focused on the three Rs:

*Respect—for self, for others, for diversity, for learning*

*Responsibility—or self, for family, for school, for community*

*Reflection—self-assessment, reaching for authentic standards*

Our New Visions school will feature:

*Families not just "involved," but included in the entire process.*

Parents and other family members will help us plan, set policy, determine standards for learning, attend school themselves, and model lifelong learning.

*A diverse student population* integrated to form a cohesive whole. We will reach out to students with various educational experiences and to a wide range of families. We will always insist upon valuing the contributions of all.

*Heterogeneous and multi-age grouping* across the span of the school. People of all backgrounds, abilities, and ages will work together on many projects. Students will learn in multi-age groups with several traditional "grades" together.

*Meaningful community service* projects involving everybody. By becoming active community members and by contributing to the greater good, individuals will grow in self-esteem and families will connect with important networks.

*A strong emphasis on family groups* throughout the school. This will help us to build strong relationships which will maximize learning for all. Family groups will be models for other procedures and structures in the school.

*Outcome-based learning* for students at all ages. Within the seven Domains which are now used by University Heights High School, we will determine outcomes and standards for different levels, then assess using portfolios, exhibitions, roundtables.

Proposed by Paul Allison,\* Dinah Gieske,\* Brad Stam,\* Nancy Mohr, Suzanne Valenza\* and others from University Heights High School, and Peter Stand and others from Bronx New School.

## It Is Now July

*When does the job of a staff developer in a school officially end? How can a staff developer ensure that there will be evidence two or five years after leaving a particular site that he or she was there? As Ed Osterman looks toward the end of his tenure at Newtown High School, he hopes the work begun by teachers in the Writing Teachers Consortium will continue to take root and grow.*

In 1991 the Writing Teachers Consortium at Newtown invited participating teachers to join a writing-study committee. This committee was open only to teachers who had worked with the Consortium at some time in the past four years. I had several goals for this committee: to build upon the common knowledge and experience of the teachers involved, allowing them to continue to learn together and pursue their educational interests; to evolve over time into a cohesive group which would be eager and able to share their writing experiences with other faculty members; and to promote the teaching of writing across the curriculum long after the Consortium left the school. I wrote a letter to all the teachers with whom I had worked explaining the goals of the committee offering them the opportunity to participate in this experiment. In the fall, ten teachers expressed interest, the majority of whom were English, ESL, and speech teachers, and we began to meet. This is the story of those ten weekly, after-school meetings.

We started the way we always had started—with writing. The group was asked to write about how their participation in the Consortium had changed their thinking about reading, writing, or learning over these past few years and what they felt was the next step for them.

My co-leader Barbara\* was most interested in continuing her own writing. Arona was there "for more ideas, more surprises." Michael expressed a need to "nurture myself," adding, "I don't care about developing colleagues. I'm sick of the cafeteria complaining. They don't want to change? Fine." Susan couldn't define her interests. Though it was only October, she expressed a desire for "peace of mind," adding that she was "feeling overwhelmed by what's happening in the city." Two people in the room seemed interested in staff development, which, I hoped, would become one of the committee's goals. Ellen felt "writing needs to spread to all courses in the building" and Rina said she wanted "to change the environment in which I work... to develop like-minded colleagues." It was apparent that there was no consensus in the room other than a wish to continue to learn together.

### Finding A Focus

At our second meeting during discussion on successful classroom activities, two teachers brought up disturbing incidents that had occurred during the week. It had been suggested that Rena reconsider using *Huck Finn* with her honors English students at a time when there was so much racial unrest in the city. She was clearly upset by this. Maria described a fight that had occurred in her classroom between an Asian girl and a group of African-American girls.

\*The names of the teachers have been changed.

Newtown is a large urban high school that provides a home for students from over fifty different nationalities. Usually the different groups of students co-exist peacefully within the school. Yet, we began to wonder. Was there more racial division among the students than was immediately apparent from casual observation? Were we beginning to see the problems of the city seeping into the school? More specifically, Maria and Rina wanted our help. How could Maria handle the problem in her classroom effectively and sensitively? What could she bring in for her students to read and write that might open up a dialogue on race? And what might Rina do about *Huck Finn*? We had stumbled onto a focus. We needed to explore racism. Ellen volunteered to bring in some material designed by the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) to examine the issue of prejudice with students. It was a way to start.

We devoted most of our time the following week to perusing the ADL materials which Ellen had xeroxed, but little of it seemed to excite us. The only times the conversation seemed alive were when we traded personal stories and discussed our own experiences with racism.

I recalled a workshop I'd attended the previous year where the leaders had been skilled at supporting workers in organizations and schools who wanted to develop a greater understanding of the racial and ethnic differences between them. Their method was to encourage people to talk with each other about their own backgrounds. Often the participants had found themselves identifying with the stories and experiences of someone of a different race or culture. Before Maria attempted this method with her students, our committee decided to try it out with each other. If it worked for us, it might work for students. If there were problems for us, we might need to make adaptations. We spent some time talking about our own backgrounds: our families, our neighborhoods, our religious beliefs. "Perhaps, by exploring the differences between us, we might find ways of helping students do the same with each other," I remarked.

We set some rules. Each person would only talk about what he or she felt comfortable sharing and nothing would be written. I began by talking for fifteen minutes about my background. I talked about my mother's family and my father's family and the values and attitudes I believed were passed down to me. I described the conflict between middle and working class forces which I sensed had always operated in our home. I spoke of my feelings about being Jewish. I recalled the neighborhood in which I grew up, the schools I attended, the childhood friends I had. At this moment, I can still recall how quiet it had become in the room and how vulnerable I felt. I was unprepared for how emotionally shaken I would be sharing these recollections and observations. After all, I knew these teachers well and felt at ease with them. In numerous courses, we had written and revised a whole range of personal pieces, but still it felt strange to be telling these things to colleagues. When I was finished, there was silence. A few people asked questions. Then again, there was a long

pause. Finally, another member of the group said, "I'll go next."

For three consecutive weeks, we forgot about classrooms, curriculum and students. The focus of our group became ourselves and who we are ethnically, culturally, religiously. Michael talked about growing up as the child of Holocaust survivors. Ellen and Mary discussed the powerful role Catholicism played in their Irish homes. Arona told us about her childhood in Argentina, and Susan spoke of the issues confronting a Jewish woman married to a Latino man. Sometimes, we discovered a common bond between us even though we came from completely different backgrounds. Other times we enjoyed looking at the differences in our traditions and beliefs. There were many times we had to stop because the speaker

was choked with emotion. We were treading through dangerous waters, no doubt, and yet the sharing seemed to release something within us.

Perhaps we had crossed a boundary, but I think it was useful to explore our own backgrounds and feelings about other cultures if we were going to consider ways in which we could help our students. We couldn't pretend that as adults we weren't prone to some of the same

forces of division and fear as our students. Indeed, we learned things we never knew about each other's cultures. And when we were done, we agreed that this sharing of backgrounds had brought us to a new level of intimacy. We also realized that this was an emotionally delicate activity that needed to be modified for our more vulnerable teenagers.

And so, the group looked outward again. Maryellen, who had initially expressed an interest in our devoting more time to reading, announced, "You know, I haven't read much by authors from other cultures. Maybe we could read books from the countries of our students." It seemed appropriate. Such reading could help us in two ways. On the one hand, we could select works which could educate us about the cultures and backgrounds of Newtown students. On the other hand, we might identify stories, poems, biographies, and novels to use in the classroom.

Mary, the assistant to the English department supervisor, informed us that the department had just received a number of new anthologies with a multicultural slant. So she xeroxed some stories by Latin American writers for us to read and discuss. This whet our appetite for more. We began to compile lists of possible works we might read in the future. Rina spoke to a Korean colleague in the hope of getting suggestions of Korean stories and poems we might read. Barbara attended a conference on multiculturalism. I went to a lecture on South American literature. Mary brought in book reviews from *The New York Times*. In essence, we began to prepare our agenda for the spring semester.

At our final fall meeting, we wrote about the realizations we had come to regarding race and multiculturalism, the ways in which we thought we might handle racism in the classroom, and the questions which still remained unanswered for us.

*The focus of our group became ourselves and who we are ethnically, culturally, religiously.*

Some realizations:

Coming to terms with the issues of race, ethnicity and culture has been eye-opening for me in several ways. I found (or, rather, reaffirmed) that I'm very much a work-in-progress in relation to these 3 issues.—Barbara

I've always believed that people should respect the values and cultures of others. However, as I learn more about what exactly they are, they become very difficult to comprehend because many of them seem to step on the values and beliefs I have. I feel I have to sacrifice too much of what I believe. . . . I heard a woman on TV talking about the city as a melting pot, but are we melting?—Maryellen

Handling these issues in our classrooms:

I think I have to consider how to frame such lessons on ethnic, cultural, racial, religious identity so that they are both sensitive and safe. There are so many variables. A person who is proud to share his culture may inadvertently set off another set of students who are defensive or feel the lack of positive influences. Yes, I know life is not safe, but a lot of preparation has to go into preparing listeners and writers.—Mary

Dealing with racism still scares me. In fact, dealing with multicultural stories is scary for I fear that I may misinterpret a cultural element in a piece of literature or unwittingly insult someone. I feel less in command of literary interpretation. Also, what do you do to get the kids . . . to feel safe and open about discussing such matters?—Ed

We also had some unanswered questions:

If I ask what obstacles they face, are some of the obstacles the other cultures in the room?

What is more important - to introduce a work depicting another culture for the contrasts it presents or for the commonalities of feeling and experience it shows?

What kinds of writing can break down barriers? Is personal writing the way?

Is it enough merely to use more literature from other cultures? Shouldn't the literature reveal something to us about the culture, help us to understand it better?

Are students really curious about other cultures?

Should I be called Euro-American now?

The written responses and questions revealed most of us to be in a transitional state. We had no firm answers. But everyone was open to reading and talking more. Moreover, there were also signs that individual participants were beginning to assume a more active role in contributing to the group's work. I hoped this process would continue and gather momentum in the spring.

The Spring Semester

By the time we resumed meeting for the spring term, our numbers had swelled from ten to sixteen teachers. Although there were six new participants, they quickly assimilated into the group and we picked up where we had left off. Ellen had come up with the

idea that we begin the spring meetings by writing about something in another culture or religion which we had always found disturbing or incomprehensible and by writing about something in our own culture which we believed other people didn't understand or respect. On this occasion, Karen, one of our new members, told an anecdote that reverberated for us throughout the term. Frequently the girls in her classes came to her with questions about sex and dating. Several students believed that if they had sex before marriage, they couldn't get married in white because "the white dress would tremble as we walked down the aisle." We all laughed for a minute. Then Karen sighed, "You know, when I consider what we believe and what our students have been brought up to believe, I realize how much pain we must unknowingly cause. We must create havoc in their lives." Karen's anecdote reminded us, once again, of the gap that frequently exists between the culture of the school and the world at home. Her story also reminded us of how much we didn't know about the worlds of our students. Thus, we began to talk about the need to educate ourselves through reading.

Before choosing our texts, we asked everyone to consider the following:

1. What particular cultures or ethnic groups are you interested in reading about?
2. What might you want to learn regarding this culture/group?
3. Are you interested in reading a text for your own knowledge/pleasure or for classroom and/or professional use?

As always, we shared responses and ended up dividing ourselves into smaller groups or pairs according to interests. Then, each individual group decided on a book or series of shorter works to read together.

We ended up with the following:

1. Latino: (*The House on Mango Street; Hunger of Memory; poetry*)
2. Asian: (*The Joy Luck Club; Iron and Silk*)
3. African-American: (*The Promised Land*)
4. Middle Eastern: (*From Beirut to Jerusalem*)
5. Native-American: (*Love Medicine; The Beet Queen; poetry*)

We agreed to keep response journals as we read which we would share each week in our small group discussions.

After we met in our groups to discuss the weekly reading, each team would read aloud a section from their text which raised issues the entire group might discuss. George, a young English teacher, and I read a chapter from *Mango Street* in which the main character talks about her first name and other people's reactions to it. The chapter released a flood of responses. Some teachers sadly mentioned how often their Asian students let teachers mispronounce their names whereas other teachers talked about how many students quickly discarded their real first names for traditional American ones. Ellen confessed finding it painfully hard to pronounce some of the Chinese or Indian names and how often she became angry with herself for not being able to do it correctly. Susan suggested that the

issue of correct pronunciation of names might be a pertinent topic to discuss with students. I attempted to take us a step further, "If we have such strong feelings about this, maybe this is a topic we should bring up at a faculty conference next year."

During the time in which we were reading and discussing these books, an interesting pattern of behavior began to develop. In the past, I had always played the role of provider for the group, by designing and structuring the activities and by bringing in professional articles for us to read and discuss. Yet, as time went on, other members of the group began to assume these roles. Ellen, who had always arrived at our planning sessions with ideas for activities, volunteered to take responsibility for setting up the room, xeroxing materials, and providing coffee and tea. Other teachers, including the new participants, began to xerox and distribute material related to our discussions. Robert, one of the guidance counselors, brought in *The New York Times'* articles on racism encountered by African-Americans; Rhoda, another counselor, distributed magazine reviews on some new books about India.

After several weeks of the small group discussions, Jane commented, "I miss the large group. Let's go back to doing something together, something different." George suggested watching some films on the VCR since they too might provide us, and, by extension, our students' glimpses into other ways of life. We brainstormed possible films and then George volunteered to preview and select scenes that would generate lively talk. As a result of George's initiative, for two weeks we watched entire films (*Master Harold and the boys*), as well as excerpts of films (*The Ballad of Narayama, Eat a Bowl of Tea, A Soldier's Story*). These films focused on a variety of cultures and examined such basic themes as death, old age, marriage, and prejudice.

In the ensuing weeks, each group gave a formal presentation of the book they had read, including the key themes/issues raised and various ways in which the work, or sections of it, might be used in classrooms. Concurrently, we began to brainstorm other films and videos that might be of value to teachers or students interested in exploring other cultures.

Toward the end of the semester, I was unable to attend one of the sessions. Ellen, apprehensive about coordinating the session alone, met with me to plan an agenda, but it proved unnecessary. At the meeting, Robert declared that he wanted to try out an activity designed to define one's stance on the issue of multiculturalism in the school curriculum. The group was excited by Robert's presentation, and the following week the conversation began to shift into a consideration of staff development. Would the rest of our faculty find Robert's presentation as stimulating as we did? Would they be interested in hearing about the books we'd read, the conversations we'd had?

A few days later, Ellen told me she had heard that Chancellor Fernandez had set a meeting for all high school principals the following week to consider ways to incorporate multiculturalism into the curriculum. Ellen's suggestion was simple: Why not let the principal know there are teachers on the faculty capable of doing staff development work in this area before securing outside "experts" to work with our colleagues?

We agreed on certain principles:

1) Any workshop we proposed had to be merely one of several options offered the faculty. Teachers need choices; we didn't want to present our work to a captive audience.

2) Any workshop we designed had to include a writing component. Our belief in the power of writing was what brought us and continued to hold us together.

3) We would not present ourselves as experts. We simply were teachers in the process of learning something new together and we wanted to share some of our preliminary thinking with our colleagues.

With these principles agreed upon, four of the committee members arranged to meet privately with the principal.

### Some Final Thoughts

It is now July, 1993 and I still look back on that year with pleasure and satisfaction. Our discussions, which had shuttled between the pedagogical and the personal, intermingled with stories about ourselves and our students in which we considered the school in which we work, the city in which we live, and the literature we read. Committee members were proud of the work we had done and excited by the response they had received when they presented their work with their colleagues.

I believe there are two factors that allowed this to happen. First, we were a group of teachers who had been writing and reading together in Project courses for three years, sharing classroom experiences and experimenting with new techniques. We had developed a way of working together; we trusted and respected each other. Second, we shared a common philosophy. We all believed that a student-centered classroom has the potential to transform students into more committed and active learners. By deepening our understanding of our students' backgrounds and cultures, we were moving closer to that goal.

I am no longer working on a regular basis at Newtown High School. However, the Newtown Writing-Study Committee continues to thrive. The focus of its work shifts from year to year, depending on the group's interests. The leaders and members of the group have changed over time, too. But with each new term, the commitment to professional growth is reaffirmed and the work of the Writing Teachers Consortium continues.

Ed Osterman  
Writing Teachers Consortium

*Our discussions shuttled between the pedagogical and the personal, intermingled with stories about ourselves and our students.*

## Defining Ourselves

*Eileen Cuff and Benita Daniels both original members of the Writing Committee at Newtown share thoughts about the evolution of the Committee since 1991. They're particularly interested in the issue of leadership.*

The Writing Teachers Consortium is very much a work in progress, but as we struggle to define ourselves and foster the ideals of the Writing Teachers Consortium, we have been able to accomplish many things. Two years ago, several committee members planned and implemented a full staff development workshop based on our multi-cultural reading and writings. This year individual committee members have presented at faculty conferences and department meetings, and we also began work on a faculty newsletter.

The focus of our sessions has varied. One term was devoted to African-American literature, another to exploring school problems with students in our sessions. This past spring we looked at the issue of evaluation. This included examining samples of student writing and exploring alternative approaches to assessment, especially portfolios. While the topics and format for our meetings continue to evolve, some real concerns about the roles, responsibilities, and expectations of committee members and the role of the committee itself in the school program have been raised.

The role of the coordinators is a perplexing issue. What are their responsibilities with regard to planning sessions, consulting with the committee, and adhering to the guidelines for funding? How are the coordinators chosen? Can anyone on the committee serve as facilitator? We attempted to address some of these concerns by setting some ground rules with regard to individual responsibilities for attendance, punctuality, and leadership. This seemed to work because members enjoy leading sessions.

The only difficulty arises when there is no central focus for the term and the sessions tend toward demonstration lessons rather than real staff development. We feel that a thematic approach sustains the group and fosters greater critical thinking on a professional topic.

Yet, how can colleagues with full-time teaching and school responsibilities devote the energy needed to find professional articles pertinent to the group's work? If and when the committee decides to publish or disseminate material among the staff, who should implement these plans? The committee can never really replace the benefits of having a full-time or even part-time staff developer who lends expertise, encouragement and emphasis to the importance of writing in the total school program.

In the absence of Ed, or any truly effective staff developer, the committee serves as one means, albeit less extensive, of support to staff who know the value and the need to continue to study the writing and learning process.

Eileen Cuff  
Newtown HS

The Writing Committee which was formed before Ed Osterman left to assume other duties after his tenure as on-site consultant continues without his intense, dependable and consistent leadership. The ten to fifteen members (the number varies term to term) are as dedicated to the life of writing and collaboration at Newtown as Ed. However, without an on-site consultant at the helm, the issue of leadership can be a sticky one.

Committee members are colleagues while the staff developer is perceived as a teacher of teachers suggesting a hierarchical, rather than lateral, relationship. When the staff developer leaves and the committee remains, how should leadership be maintained? Is it necessary that it is maintained? What management styles work best?

What is clear is that a leader's role among peers is a tricky one. Tact and diplomacy are necessary strategies. The colleague leader must straddle a fine line while trying to find an individual style without stepping on toes.

In my several terms as a committee member, I found the term in which we were essentially leaderless, except for things like payroll and memoranda, to be the most satisfying. Each of us decided to be responsible for the agenda of one session. Each session was fraught with anticipation on the part of the membership. Each presenter, faced with the role of leader *pro tem*, wanted very much to please, and, if you will, show off a little.

On one occasion Bob, a member who was dean of boys at our school's annex, brought with him several boys who had been in trouble. They had volunteered to serve as a panel for our committee discussing problems as they saw them at the annex. Bob served as facilitator as the boys fielded questions from us. Similarly, we heard from a panel of student leaders, led by our school's Coordinator of Student Activities (COSA), and a panel of high-achieving foreign-born students led by two members involved in second-language teaching.

These sessions were wonderful because they put us in a direct dialogue with students in an informal way—we all wore name tags with our first names on them. Not only were we able to get perspectives on the school which we wouldn't have been privy to any other way, but we were also able to form school improvement groups composed of students and teachers, and we came up with ideas which were submitted to the principal, several of which were implemented including the redesigning of the hall pass.

In the future, perhaps, the committee will decide to rotate the position of leader. Or maybe we will vote for our leader or co-leader. Or, we could agree to go leaderless again. In any case, the committee's viability and worth is obvious, and is therefore deserving of our discussions of if and how it should be led.

Benita Daniels  
Newtown HS



## Teacher's Choice

*Nick D'Alessandro teaches 7th and 8th grades at the Hudson River Middle School and is an adjunct professor at New York University in the teaching and learning department. During the summer seminar of 1992, Nick brought his students' portfolios into his summer seminar and discovered how his perspective on his students' work had changed.*

During the school year, it can be difficult to get enough distance from our teaching to reflect on it in a meaningful and constructive way, especially if we work without the support of a professional learning community. Sometimes we need for the year to end before we can gain the perspective to evaluate our successes and failures, to figure out what we did right and where we might have gone wrong.

One of the most valuable opportunities that the summer seminars provide is the chance for us as coordinators and participants to get out of our classrooms and look at what happens in them.

In the course of the month-long summer seminar, we do many kinds of writing: reflection on our own teaching, learning and writing, personal narrative, point of view, response to texts, double-entry notes, sometimes fiction and poetry. We ask teachers at the end of the month to put together portfolios as a way of evaluating their own learning and also as a model of authentic assessment for their own classes.

I had worked on writing and reading portfolios with my seventh and eighth grade classes last year and thought the work was a success although not an unqualified one. Not every student submitted a portfolio; some that did come in were not as good as they could or should have been. But many of the portfolios were wonderful. I decided to use my seventh and eighth graders' work in the summer seminar to answer the question: What do portfolios look like in the classroom?

I realized that before I shared my students' portfolios with the summer seminar, I would have to describe my classroom and my students. My students' work needed to be put in context not only in educational terms, but also in personal, sociocultural and political terms as well. So I talked about where my students come from, the emotional and physical landscape of their lives.

Our school is small and intimate, a kind of refuge in the community. Real estate developers now call it Clinton, but it is commonly known as "Hell's Kitchen." We have a history of taking in students from all over the city who are unable to function in regular school, and every child, no matter how difficult, can find at least one teacher who will defend him/her passionately when the rest of us start to grumble.

I also told the participants in the summer seminar how my students come to class often as reluctant readers and traumatized writers, and how I need to spend time getting them to trust me, each other and themselves. I also talked about how the students in my class are free to read and write almost anything they want, and about the social structures they set up in and out of school to support their own reading and writing.

Our summer seminar was made up of young, new teachers from urban and suburban districts, and older more experienced teachers from private, parochial and public schools. Our teaching jobs ranged

from early childhood to college and our cultures included every color of the rainbow. I had to keep in mind that these readers were seeing the student portfolios from different points of view and that they would offer insights different from mine.

### Sharing the Portfolios

We have heard 'portfolio' become the latest educational buzzword, and frequently, any collection of student work in a folder is called a portfolio, yet true portfolios come out of classrooms where students make choices about what they write, and self-assessment about reading and writing has become habit. One of the points I think is important to make in any talk about portfolios is that they are most effective in classrooms where student choice is prized and valued.

My students value choice. They tell me and their parents tell me. Choosing their own novels is important because they can read what is interesting to them and also—they are very articulate about this—

*True portfolios come out of classrooms where students make choices about what they write.*

they can choose what they are capable of reading. My classes must cover a wide range of reading abilities, and in a day filled with mandated and often inappropriate texts and assignments, they almost sigh with relief when they can decide to read and can pick up a book of their own choosing.

They write just as freely. They trust me because they know I have refused to let other students and even parents read their folders without permission. They know they will be heard by me and by the classmates and friends they choose. Even if we can't solve the problems of poverty, dislocation, racism, drugs, abuse, AIDS, homophobia, dysfunctional families, sexism, raging hormones and ordinary adolescent angst, at least they can write, think and talk, and make their own lives the texts they study.

After negotiating and agreeing on a set of guidelines, students make decisions about what will go into their portfolios. After all our discussions, I think the most important point students understand is that they should choose work that is significant to them and shows their progress as readers and writers. They don't always select what I would have liked, but the frequent reflections and periodic self-assessments that students write during the year gives them the ability to evaluate their own work and the confidence to present it.

After I talked to the summer seminar about my classes, I gave each pair of participants a portfolio to read. Sometimes the best way

*Continued ...*

to open discussion was to read pieces aloud from the student portfolios. We discussed the kinds of learning, often unquantifiable, we observed in the portfolios. The group was surprised and excited by what they read and listened to. They recognized honesty, skill and reflectiveness in the students' writing, qualities I had come to accept as a matter of course. I hear these voices every day. This is where I live.

Henrietta asked if we could do a read around from the portfolios. She thought it important to share with the whole group, and everyone readily agreed. The next day each pair chose a piece from the student portfolios and read to the class.

We heard Telithia, a beautiful, sensitive seventh grader with too many responsibilities:

The pieces I write in my portfolio express how I write and how I am. I don't hold anything back. That's how I think a writer should be when it comes to expressing themselves. My portfolio also expresses my inner and outer feelings and my background. My portfolio has depressing stories and some happy stories. My portfolio is expressing how a teenager is growing up in a tough world. You will also find some spicy stories as well. My portfolio also shows the progress I've done over the past months. You will see the difference before and after.

We heard Diana, shy and overprotected, large for her age, who cried quietly in a corner in the seventh grade when I announced that everyone would be reading.

"I'm not a reader," she said, and I could see the panic in her eyes.

"Can you read?"

"Yes, but...I read slow. It takes me a long time. I never finish anything."

Assured that we were in no hurry, Diana ended up reading the entire Sweet Valley High series of young adult novels, which she bought herself and passed on to her friends.

A year later Diana rushed at me across the cafeteria on the first day of school to tell me that her father was yelling at her for spending so much time reading her books. Diana devoted a good part of that year to reading Harlequin and Silhouette romances, often under her desk so she could share the good parts with her girlfriends, and she wrote about them breathlessly, if not critically, in her reading log. She alluded to a novel she was writing, but she wouldn't let me see it until she put it in her portfolio.

We heard Neftali, a small, quietly observant Puerto Rican boy who was able to reveal in his writing the curiosity and intelligence he could not act out in the rough, macho culture of junior high school. His fiction is a response to what we knew was a stressful

home situation, and perhaps, an attempt to control it. The title, "Homeless, Poor, Rich and Normal" describes the hero's progress.

My name is Al. My mother and father had kicked me out of their house in New Jersey when I was 15 years old because I was smoking and buying drugs. I collect cans for a living and save money. I am now 35 years old. I haven't seen my mother or father for 20 years. I don't even know if they live in the same place. I can't face them anymore. I have lost my faith in them just like they have done to me.

We heard Johanna, bright and outspoken, whose reading ranged from Judy Blume to Hawthorne. She often complained that we didn't do anything in class, yet she wrote in her portfolio:

All my life I've always had strong feelings for the future and what it would bring. Sometimes when I'm home, I think about how it used to be, not years ago but maybe even last summer. With every growing day and all the setting suns things get worse.

Imyself have always lived in what is now the "Hell's Kitchen" area.

You might say I've always thought that people said this area was bad, not because it was a bad area, but because they were outsiders. Because they didn't know how to "Handle it." Now it seems that for the first time in what seems like 4 years, I'm scared. The weird thing is, that everything has changed for the worst. People I used to know when I was small have become crack heads, some thieves, some in jail, but all worse off. It's almost like everyone's enemy and you are your only friend.

I'm only 13 years old now but every year I'm glad I made it, but sad of what would be expected of me. Before now I was secure now I'm insecure, I used to look up to my peers in envy, now I look at them and try as hard as I can to be different. That is hard to do because eventually history repeats itself. I've learned to keep up with people is that you have to *grin and bear it*. At the end if you're right you will come out winning.

*Diana devoted a good part of that year to reading romances. She wrote about them breathlessly in her reading log.*

### Student Voices as Texts

These student portfolios, the voices I hear in them, are the standards for my classroom. When we hear Telithia write about her anxiety and confusion in a frightening postmodern world, the others don't see her baby-diva glamour or hear her ask me to read what she wrote that day while we also talked about her new lipstick or new boyfriend. At the same time I was trying to keep an eye on Julio casually crossing the room to take Jessica by surprise, and Mawusi was crying softly because Juana and Noelia, her best friends, were teasing her, and Elizabeth was at the door telling me that the high school applications were due at the district office at 3:00, and were they ready?

It's not always easy to explain to a supervisor, another teacher, a parent or sometimes even a student, that in this classroom, this is what we value. I don't have a list of weekly test grades to measure student achievement, only some lines written, pages read, thoughts shared. This can be confusing to the students as well. I don't have the numbers in my book to tell them how they're doing, and they are not used to answering that question for themselves. Coming to 'Nickland' as one teacher calls my class, they often equate choice with license. But they read and they write and they talk with me and with each other, and we try to make meaning out of our inner worlds and the communities around us.

The summer seminar is, of course, different things to different people, and that is part of its power to transform. An article about a theory new to the learner, an experience in writing a piece or responding to one, a structured class discussion, or even a chance comment by another teacher in an open, non-judgmental learning environment can spark a new insight into or re-evaluation of what we do that can change our classroom practice or validate and inform it.

The formal reading during the summer seminar and the perspective these portfolios provided were like a revelation to me. We laughed, we cried, we blushed, and sometimes we were struck silent. The reading was an opportunity to hear my students' voices as texts that were meaningful to other listeners outside our own small community.

For a repeater like me, each summer reveals something different about myself, my teaching and learning. Last summer's seminar was, among other things, a quiet place where, with the support of our whole group, I could assess what happens in my classroom and what I would like to happen. Like most teachers, I worry if what I'm doing is right for my students. The selections the teachers made from the students' portfolios demonstrated the value and the difficulties of choice. The teachers' choices also reinforced the idea of diversity in our group. And the reading of my students' writing helped confirm that at least I'm heading in the right direction.

Nick D'Alessandro  
Hudson River MS

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## Articles, Letters, Inquiries

We want you to write for the newsletter.  
We are always interested in responses, ideas, new voices,  
articles, reviews, poems, questions.

New York City Writing Project Newsletter  
Institute for Literacy Studies  
Lehman College  
250 Bedford Park Boulevard West  
Bronx, New York 10468-1589

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## Steal These Ideas

When Jessie Reiss, an English teacher who participated in the WTC at Brooklyn Technical High School, took a teacher's workshop at the New York Historical Society with the Touchstone Center's Richard Lewis, she started collecting things. And she asked her students to do the same. Anything found inside or outside was acceptable. She told the puzzled students that they were going to create birds from found objects and then proceeded to show them samples of objects she had collected: leftover giftwrap and ribbon, pine needles, twigs, bark and black silk. As Reiss pulled more of her marvelous materials from her shopping cart, she explained that the students would be piecing together their own "finds" to create a bird. Although Reiss chose birds as the project, she said that any animal or fantasy could be pieced together from found objects. Her class had been studying creation myths and had talked about some symbolic birds such as doves, eagles and the phoenix. The students created their birds in less than one class period and everyone enjoyed the activity.

The next day when the students arrived in class, the birds, which were between eight and twelve inches tall, were suspended in the air. Reiss had hung them from the top of the blackboard. Reiss then invited the students to write a myth or story to go with their creations. She said it could be any kind of a story. Most students wrote from the perspectives of the birds they had created. These stories were compiled in a class magazine which the students published as an end-term project. They also commented on the activity in their journals. Most students shared a sense of pride in their entries. The students also commented that they found their work unique and were surprised that they enjoyed this project as much as they did.

Here's a unique way to bring some writing into drama: MariAnne Votava, a speech and drama teacher at Newtown High School, teaches the play production class. This year's production was *Bye Bye Birdie* and Votava needed a way to get the students involved with this play set in the 1950's.

Votava employed a variety of activities all using writing to help the class "get into" the play and the period. Students wrote mini biographies on characters from or hinted at in the musical such as Ed Sullivan and Elvis Presley. They wrote fan letters to Elvis and other rock and roll figures from the points of view of '50's teenagers. They also researched and wrote about—in I-Search form—hair styles, clothes, music and movies from the period. Their writings were then attached to the walls backstage and in the dressing room so students and teachers could read each other's work, all of which had direct references to the show. The musical, a tremendous success, by the way, was enhanced by the increased understanding of the students through this writing.

Marion Halberg  
Brandeis HS

## Students and Teachers as Writers

### A Summer Lost

It was cool even for an August evening. My comfortable attire of cut-off denim shorts and flame-red baseball jersey were undeniably at odds with the biting air and darkening skies. I sat, one among a crowd of twenty thousand, hunched on a rigid, red bleacher seat. My quivering knees were drawn up to my chin. My arms encircled them protectively, one hand grasping a steaming white styrofoam cup filled to the brim with some sweet chocolate concoction. The game, laid out across the familiar greenery some hundreds of feet below the upper deck, continued to an inevitable conclusion, while the hopelessly depressing score loomed on the scoreboard and hinted at what had become an all too familiar result.

I scanned the sparse crowd populating the stadium seats, my expectant gaze finally settling on the vacant ones which made up my row. "Where did everybody go?" I wondered vaguely. My thoughts were slowly succumbing to the nippy air, and I couldn't help but feel that there was something wrong...something missing, and it irked me terribly to be kept in the dark by my own mind. Although my eyes were still directed at the field below, my mind—whirling and weary—wandered from the game. Somehow I felt silly jumping to my feet, fist pumping, and screaming "Let's Go Mets!" or "Charge!" in the middle of the fruitless rallies.

I sighed a sigh that outweighed my years. The thinning crowd and half-hearted cheers only succeeded in bringing back memories of the past. I smiled instinctively, remembering a time when finding a vacant nook or cranny in the stadium was an impossible task. I shivered at the cold whip of wind which momentarily took possession of my body. I imagined myself back to the many summer days I had spent in that same bleacher seat under a more generous sun. It seemed like ages ago. I glanced at a knot of people seated a couple of sections to my right. They were engaged in what appeared to be a thought-provoking conversation. Somehow I knew they weren't discussing the Mets' chances for post-season action. I recalled a time when the entire upper deck rocked with cheers exuberant enough to cause a small earthquake in Flushing, and for a moment, I was angered at the crowd's seeming lack of attention at the game being played. It took a few minutes for me to realize I was among those in the lifeless crowd.

Guilty, I sat up in my seat and focused at the field below. I tried to re-capture the old emotions of carefree days, and realized with a start that doing so only brought on feelings of frustration. The memories of better days—days when the sun had been shining, the team had been winning, and I had been a major component of the stadium's shameless scream machine—were distant ones. They faded farther the harder I tried to reach them, clouded over in a thick fog, lodged in the recesses of my mind.

I shut my eyes quickly, cringing at the discomfort that began to eat away at my body as well as my mind. I hesitated before opening my eyes again. I gazed down at the field. It struck me that although the grass was undoubtedly green, it was not as blindingly brilliant as I had thought it to be. Grown men in tights scrambled around below. They were playing a game.

It was only a game.

I shifted around in my seat, unable to settle down. A shiver ran through my body and I rubbed hastily up and down my pimpled arms. Quickly, I gulped down the last of my drink, savoring its heated sweetness to the final drop. I wondered if I should leave. I had never left a game before it ended. I sighed, half in resignation and half in frustration. How had things managed to change so fast? Was it me? Who could I blame? I glanced around for something, someone, anything to point a finger at. I wanted desperately to find that...magic—that something I had taken for granted. Had I lost it with age? But no...no.

The seventh inning stretch began as "Take Me Out to the Ballgame" blasted from the stadium speakers. Around me, the handful of fans who remained got on their feet and stretched, yawning through the song. I stood up. And in stunned silence, I walked down the ramp...and out the gate.

As the number seven IRT train pulled away from its Willets Point station, I looked back at Shea Stadium until it was reduced to nothing but a speck of blue. I collapsed onto one end of the light-blue length of seats and let my head fall back. It was only a game. But once upon a time, in the not so distant past, it had been a game worth crying over, played in a place that had been my summer home. All of a sudden, summer seemed so far away. Autumn, I realized, was just around the corner. And as night sought to embrace me with its cloak of darkness, I could not help but feel alone.

I caught a mirrored reflection on the glass paneled door. She stared at me, her face a mask of stone which denied entry into private thoughts and emotions. But she could not fool me. No, not me. For I had known her. I knew that behind that expressionless facade was a heart which beat with unharnessed hope...and a soul which wept for summer lost.

Lia Marie Rojas  
Newtown HS

### Conservatism

"Conservatism" is a concept I know too well. Growing up as a young girl in a semi-traditional Chinese household has been difficult at times.

There was my grandmother who was plagued with the ancient *love the boy better* complex. In the face of my accomplishments, Nen Nen admonished, "Lisa, you'll never catch a husband if you're smarter than the man," but in the face of my brother's feats, she would become his own personal cheerleading squad, spurring up his already inflated ego. Never did she falter to remind me of the Chinese woman's most merited trait, "conservatism." "Confidence will render you cocky," she parroted daily and, "...it will blemish your repute as a virginal China sow. You'll be waiting forever to be deflowered." As the tale goes, no man would have felt true potency while standing beside an independent-minded girl. At the same time, I was expected to dare not besmirch the family name by performing poorly in my academics. The fact that I was an "ABC" (American Born Chinese) further depressed my standing among the family. Contradicting expectations foisted themselves upon me, jerking my mind and experience in two very separate directions. The question of how was I to achieve both echoed secondly in my mind.

Later in life, I soon realized that there was no binding law in America commanding my subservience to men, for there was no need to be dependent on any man's genius nor his ideas. I found that I possessed my own. Confidence and the complete near trust in my own capabilities surged within me the desire to do more.

I believe that the *what could be's* in life can be acquired if each of us resolved to put forth our best, to refuse to toy with the jewel worth of our intellect. Never should our aspirations and dreams be cut short to appease our future mates. It wouldn't be fair for them nor us. Why should we play down our intelligence and render ourselves simple-minded puppets for the sole purpose of availability? By cheapening our mind, the value of our worth as a spouse multiplies in tenfold! There is no logic in the latter!

We, as distinct individuals must be given the same chance to shine, to feel the geniuses within us. By accomplishing this goal, we will not only be successful in our own lives, but we will also be paragons for tomorrow's children. Perhaps we will stand as the strength they may need to feed on, to detach from the weakness of their ethnic tradition, the culprit, "conservatism." May we trumpet to the millions of girls who live in the shadows of their brothers and fathers, in homes which comply to the norms of the *righteous society*, where a home is still a man's castle, the true danger in playing suicide with their intellects, and may they grasp onto the forte of our new age individualism.

*Without the bravos of our grandmothers, without the repressive traditions of our culture, and without the derision of society, to be dubbed in ill-will, "ABC's" ..., we should continue to live life, with our culture and individual geniuses knowingly beside us.*

Lisa Lim  
Newtown HS

## Various Changes at Forty

Change is not something that has ever come easily to me, in the classroom or out of it, Clinton Presidency or no. For at least two years before it actually happened, I'd been using the specter of my upcoming fortieth birthday as a fool-proof darkener of good moods and sunny Friday afternoons. Forty was a change I didn't want to face.

I knew all too clearly from a childhood spent voraciously reading biographies what happens at forty. The books that I devoured and measured myself against in fourth grade—generally, life stories of celebrated women, like Liliuokalani, last queen of Hawaii—would contain pictures of their subjects as they aged. I remember staring at a photo of a forty-year-old Sarah Bernhardt. She looked faded and deluded about her age. Eleanor Roosevelt was particularly scary as she entered her fifth decade. Yikes! Was I going to look like that? At nine, I hoped I'd never make forty.

I don't know where I got the nerve to deal with the dreaded anniversary the way I finally decided to, but I guess I didn't have much of a choice. As the bumper sticker ought to say, "Birthdays happen."

Here's what I did: I told everyone I knew to make a huge fuss over the day. I was not shy about this. I wanted parties and cakes, I said, and the more the better. I told my boyfriend I wanted major jewelry. I even booked solo passage on a flight to San Francisco and

saw friends and family there the weekend before the big date. Of course, I'd warned the West Coast about what I'd be expecting upon my arrival—boatloads of sushi (my favorite food), home-made chocolate cake, and more parties.

Here's what I got: the chance to teach *The Scarlet Letter* with jet lag that was almost psychedelic in its intensity. That was, as we are fond of saying in this business, a challenge. But I also got a pearl and amethyst necklace from my favorite rich-hippie store, a bi-coastal celebration, and enough raw fish to feed three of me. Best of all, I got to look out the airplane window as I flew home, and see the approaching lights of the New York area glowing through smoky, late-night clouds like sparks from a smoldering log. I was glad to be an airborne, single, forty-year-old English teacher, then.

I used to be scared to fly. I used to be scared to be alone, and I used to dread turning forty. Apparently, the worst part of change is anticipating it. The best part is having lived through it. The sneakiest part of change is that it keeps happening.

Several months after my fearless vision in the dark skies somewhere over the Poconos, my boyfriend, an intelligent but often depressed man with whom I'd been intensely involved for two years, decided to end our relationship. In all fairness, I should admit that Ben had been in the throes of such classic mid-life crisis that I was expecting him to purchase a red Miata at any minute. The black leather jacket and the blue suede shoes he'd bought on our vacation hadn't made him feel any better, though.

We were on the phone, planning to see each other when Ben terminated me as his love interest. He needed to finish his novel, he said. He needed space. He couldn't see much of anything in the world having a satisfactory conclusion, least of all us, so he didn't imagine he'd be coming to Nyack to see me that weekend—or ever again. He simply disappeared.

"If he wants space, tell him to watch *Star Trek*," said my friend Richard, and my other friends agreed, but this year, I got to teach *The Great Gatsby* with a broken heart. This year, when we got to the passage about Gatsby's death, and the death of his dreams, I knew exactly what a grotesque thing a rose could be. I was living in the cold, grey, new world that Gatsby couldn't survive, and I didn't have anyone mad enough at me—even in error—to do me in.

Shortly after Ben vanished, my beloved twenty-year-old cat died. She'd had cancer. In a world full of folks capable of bombing a crowded New York skyscraper at lunchtime, or for that matter setting on fire a religious compound with their own children still locked inside, my losses—one great-hearted calico cat, name of Mezzrow, one fellow English teacher/writer of a boyfriend—may seem insignificant. They aren't. If you've ever been a single, forty-year-old English teacher, you know this: your aged cat and your boyfriend can sometimes be your whole family. Mine were.

The big wheel kept on turning. Last Friday, I watched a storm blow in over the Hudson. It was a tenuously warm day in mid-April, and there was an edge, a sort of winter memory, in the air. As I sat in my car, watching, the wind whipped the river into a wrinkled, mercury-colored band. Brownish-white crests of waves smashed on the wet rocks nearby, throwing spray onto my windshield. The sky was so flat and gray that it looked unnatural, like a black and white photograph of itself.

Continued...

I was thinking of a woman I had seen a few minutes before I'd decided to watch the water. She looked about seventy, and she was marching through the wind along River Road, her white hair flowing out behind her. She carried a cane, but she was using it to mark the beat of her walk more than she was leaning on it. Her billowing clothes made her look like she was posing for a statue meant to personify some epic female virtue, but the woman's obvious energy was what was really gorgeous. She was no faded Sarah Bernhardt, no unhappily married Eleanor Roosevelt. I decided I wanted to emulate this woman. The Hudson boiled in the wind, and its waves turned an even more subtle, even more amazing shade of silver gray. I felt happy for the first time in a while, but I wasn't sure why.

The next day, I was talking about change and aging with a man I've seen a few times, lately. Michael is an enormous moose of a fellow, a scientist, and relentlessly logical. He's got a fair amount of gray hair himself, but I'm sure he knows exactly how good it looks with his lab coat. I like him, anyway. He admitted to me that he worried about "not being able to do stuff" as he got older.

Then he saw me fussing with an earring. I have a nasty scar on my right ear, and I like to keep it hidden.

"What's that?" he asked, examining me more closely. I tried to duck, but it was too late. He saw. I cringed.

"That's nothing!" said Michael. "How are you going to deal with aging if a little thing like that gets you uptight?" As I type these words, I still don't have the whole answer to his question. At the time, I told him about the walking woman, and about my hopes of having her kind of energy and spirit. I thought about the storm on the Hudson, and the view out the airplane window, and a lot of other things that have happened this year.

I don't know Michael well enough to know if he understood me. I don't even know if it would matter vastly in my life if he didn't understand. I hope he did, though. I also hope it matters, even though Michael's understanding is nothing I can order like a plate of sushi, nothing I can book like an airplane ticket. Knowing that is the only thing that has really changed inside me. Everything else was just dodging flak.

Lately, a rose is no longer such a grotesque thing. Maybe the truth is that change is a lot more complicated than candles on a birthday cake. Maybe, when our dreams blow up in our faces, leaving us with nothing less than the rest of our lives, what really happens is that we don't, like Gatsby, disappear among the yellowing leaves.

The world rolls around, planes take off and land, and storms blow in off the Hudson. We trust the world enough to love each other, to leave each other, and to continue to hope for love despite everything. We march head-on into the blustery wind. Epiphanies become yesterday's news. We think we've got it all figured out and sometimes things change.

Christine Jones  
Clarkstown HS

## Writer's Place

I need to live where seasons change  
in not just Virginia's room  
but in a house of my own  
just walking distance from the sea

I'll shovel more snow than I know I should  
in the winter  
then spend the next days  
inside the music of fires and teaspoons  
surrendering my age

In the spring I'll build a pond  
and row my boat till the summer's chill  
chases me to gazebos with windmill breezes  
where I'll stand in baggy overalls  
watching the grass wink rainbows

Autumn will wrap everything in sweaters and scarves  
I'll chop and pile wood  
rake and pile leaves, snip my plants back  
and watch the season's colors fade  
into the black and white of winter

This is the place where I feel the earth's rotation  
This is the place where my words will rise and speak;  
where after time and death they will remain  
still changing with the seasons  
bellowing the silences from which they came  
keeping my house, taking my walks, watching the sea.

## The Firebird

The red bird  
in ballet slippers  
on black toes  
wears a sequined, feathered crown  
Her neck peckswings her head  
from side to side  
Her wings sparkle us with flight and movement  
On—her—toes,  
On—  
her—  
toes—  
She is the oboe and the harp,  
the shimmering violins  
for the hunter and his bride

I am like a child in the dark  
with my mouth and eyes open wide  
my heart all over my body  
as the crowd cheers  
and stands to yell:  
Bravo! Bravo! Bravo!  
I want to see the Firebird  
I want to be the Firebird  
Do it again bird sister,  
Do it again!

Hasna Muhammad  
A.B. Davis MS

## Project Notes

As always, Project members have been involved in many new and challenging activities beyond their regular teaching duties. Let us share with you some of the exciting things our colleagues have done and congratulate them as well:

Long-time Project member Gail Reisin has had an article published in the April issue of *English Journal*. Gail describes the work she and her students at Murray Bergtraum HS have done with Shakespeare in "Experiencing Macbeth: From Text Rendering to Multicultural Performance."

Victoria Sottile, a WTC participant at John Jay HS, has won an NEH grant to study the American Short Story this summer.

Teacher-Consultant Linda Farrell, Martin Luther King, Jr. HS, has received an NEH grant as did Tanya Grote, a participant from the Hackley School.

Teacher-Consultant Helaine Hirschfeld of Clarkstown High School recently taught a journal workshop to counselors from Planned Parenthood and teacher-consultant Barbara Matzner of Bayside HS has been nominated by her principal, Andrea Kanner, as Teacher of the Year.

Rhea Kirstein, a WTC participant at Clara Barton HS, has received a grant from Ventures in Education to create and implement new curriculum.

Teacher-consultants Nick D'Alessandro and Betsy Rorschach were panelists at a conference entitled "Voices of Change." The conference was sponsored by Language Educators Applying Reflection Now (LEARN) and was held at New York University.

Exciting new endeavors are awaiting several NYCWP teacher-consultants. Gaynor McCown will be moving to our nation's capital. She has received a White House fellowship. Pat Cox, Eileen Cuff, and Gail Kleiner have been selected for The Principal's Institute at Bank Street College. Congratulations to all of them!

Kathe Jervis, Director of Publications at the Institute for Literacy Studies and Coordinator of the NYCWP branch of the Urban Sites Network will be moving on next year. Kathe has taken a position with NCREST which will enable her to continue her work documenting classroom practice. We hope Kathe will collaborate with the NYCWP in the future; we shall miss her. Good luck, Kathe!

Several teachers in WTC schools have recently taught their first mini-course to members of their own faculty: Miriam Borne and Barbara Kalsmith (George Wingate HS); Marianne Rose and Robin Migdol Freiman (Christopher Columbus HS); Anne Corey, Kathleen Nilson, and Ellen Victor (Telecommunications HS); and Marianne Votava (Newtown HS). We congratulate them!

A big thank you to the leaders of the school-based writing/study committees which have been operating so successfully in six Consortium schools: Eileen Cuff, Benita Daniels, and Mary Carter (Newtown HS); Gloria Golding, Nancy Richardson, and Gilda Tesser (James Monroe HS); Geraldine Curulli and Mary Mangiacasale (James Madison HS); Christine Cziko and Ruth Licht (Evander Childs HS); Lori Sigelakis and Phyllis Witte (Brooklyn Tech. HS); and Kathleen Jensen, Sue Steinberg, and Teresa Vega (Bayside HS). These committees have sponsored

writing contests, produced videos, coordinated workshops, and published student and teacher writing.

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From The Urban Sites Network:

Christine Cziko, Gaynor McCown, and Marcy Torres presented their research last February at the Ethnography Forum at the University of Pennsylvania. In addition, three of Marcy's students were invited to meet with New York State Commissioner Thomas Sobol and other policy makers to advise on their proposals for making education better for students.

Gaynor McCown also joined Hasna Muhammad to present their Urban Sites teacher inquiry work at the NCTE spring Conference in Richmond, Virginia.

Paula Murphy presented her Urban Sites case study at the "Inquiry into Practice" conference in Philadelphia. The conference was sponsored by the Philadelphia Schools Collaborative, The Philadelphia Writing Project, and PATHS/PRISM.

Urban Sites/ETN member Nadine Harding presented her pre-school teacher inquiry project at the National Reading Research Council in Athens, Georgia.

Kathe Jervis, coordinator of the NYCWP's branch of Urban Sites, also spoke at the National Reading Research Council Conference in Athens, Georgia. Kathe's talk was entitled "Multiple Entry Points to Teacher Inquiry."

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From the Elementary Teachers Network:

Joan Gadson (ETN participant and guidance counselor at CES 42 in the Bronx) and Barbara Batton presented Joan's work with the Primary Language Record at an NCREST conference in May.

Phyllis Liverpool, Liz Edelstein, Barbara Batton, and Elaine Avidon are part of a team from the New York Assessment Network (NYAN) leading a day long pre-convention workshop at NCTE in Pittsburg.

In addition to Barbara Batton, Isabel Beaton, and Vivian Wallace, three people will be joining ETN's summer teaching team: Yvonne Smith (who teaches pre-K at CPE I in Manhattan), Liz Edelstein (who teaches at Our Little School in Brooklyn), and Joan Gadson.

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And thanks to all of you:

We received 250 nominations from NYCWP members for this summer's invitational seminar. These nominations yielded 90 applicants; we couldn't be happier! This year's invitational seminar is made possible by a grant we received from the National Writing Project.

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