

## New evaluations assess the power of P&S

by Stephanie Hanzel

Consider, for a moment, a poem, performance or educational program that left a long-lasting impression on you. How might you document and measure the impact of that experience?

All nonprofit organizations are tasked with assessing, documenting and sharing the public benefits of their programs, yet for arts and humanities programming, it can be difficult to quantify the *type* of impact it has on its participants.

If you have participated in a People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos program, you understand the transformation that occurs when a community of diverse readers engages with complex literature. You can *feel* the change, even if you can't name it.

John La Rocca, a senior fellow from The Rensselaerville Institute, describes the importance of verifying outcomes by noting "tangibles": What did you see? What did you hear? Over the course of an eight-week P&S/GyC series, there are such tangibles—observable behavioral shifts.

One way we document these changes is through a "Rubric for Group Discussion" that coordinators complete after each session. This tool allows us to track the evolution of the group. For instance, in the first few sessions, the conversation is often initiated solely by the coordinator. The discussion content tends to be narrower, the depth of engagement more shallow.

By later sessions, though, leadership is shared, the discussion includes cross-references to other texts and life events, participants share more deeply about their connections to the story and everyone at the table shares responsibility for guiding the dialogue. As a coordinator, it is deeply

satisfying to witness and be part of this transformation.

Other means for documenting the program's impact include coordinator reports and participants' evaluations. Beginning in 2013, P&S/GyC began to use new participant surveys designed in partnership with Annie Hewitt, a professional evaluator and director of the Seton Hall Center for Community Health. With these tools, participants evaluate statements, connected to our outcome domains, using a five-point Likert scale (strongly agree to strongly disagree).

"Outcome domains" are simply the categories of change that result from program participation. These include increases in self-esteem, literacy, civic engagement, cultural context, authentic voice, critical thinking and well-being.

Participants also write candid responses to open-ended questions. These comments offer insight into the individual and collective experience of P&S/GyC. The following page includes samples of these participant responses.

What happens to all this data? We create a spreadsheet and crunch the numbers, then examine them for patterns, problems and trends. Numerical data—how many participants attended at least half the sessions; how many "strongly agreed" that the program helped them to understand others' points of view—can tell us *what* is happening, but not *why*.

Discerning the answers to the *why* helps us reflect on our annual goals, solicit feedback from our site partners and determine where our programs are most needed. There are no perfect instruments for program assessment, but our current tools are helping us articulate, with both numbers and narratives, the public benefit of reading challenging literature in group settings with trained coordinators. The story told by the data confirms what we have felt and known all along: People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos is a program with the power to change minds and lives.

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***“A story is not like a road to follow...it’s more like a house. You go inside and stay there for a while, wandering back and forth and settling where you like and discovering how the room and corridors relate to each other, how the world outside is altered by being viewed from these windows.”***

--Alice Munro

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## P&S opens minds to literature, ideas and other people

by Stephanie Hanzel

Coordinators send participant surveys to the office at the completion of their programs and I, like a 12<sup>th</sup>-century monk tasked with preserving sacred language, record the responses (into a 21st-century spread sheet). Documenting participants’ words about the program’s impact is one of the most rewarding experiences I have as program manager. The following are just a small sampling of their responses, grouped by our outcome domains.

#### **Self-Esteem:**

*“Something I didn’t expect from this program—I stopped being shy.”*

--youth participant

*“I would recommend this program to a friend because 1. To have an enjoyable moment with a group of people. 2. To travel with your imagination through the stories. 3. The opportunity to share experiences with the group.”*

--senior participant

#### **Literacy:**

*“I’ve learned that short stories have lots of loose ends that are meant to be filled in by the reader.”*

--re-entry program participant

*“In this program, literature became a part of my life and gave me interest in new authors.”*

--community group participant

#### **Critical Thinking:**

*“Some of the ways I looked at things were shallow; when others told their views, it opened my thinking.”*

--re-entry program participant

*“I’ve learned from this group how to unburden myself of how I feel inside. To widen my ideas and to realize that I am not the only one that undergoes difficult situations.”*

--community group participant

*“I’ve learned how to keep asking myself questions.”*

--youth participant

#### **Cultural Context:**

*“The memorable moments for me are simply the fact that different races and people from different backgrounds came together and actually enjoyed each other’s fellowship.”*

--re-entry program participant

*“I’ve learned about the commonalities and differences of experience of women in my generation.”*

--senior participant

#### **Authentic Voice:**

*“I’m more confident in expressing myself and in my communicating abilities.”*

--re-entry program participant

*“I’ve learned how to use my voice when telling stories to my children.”*

--community group participant

*“Now I can say what I think out loud and not be scared.”*

--youth participant

#### **Engagement:**

*“I would recommend this program for the reading material as much as the social interaction with people outside your race and gender.”*

--re-entry program participant

*“I have learned to share with others. I have paid more attention to the stories of other participants. My experience with this program is that it has helped me be a better human being.”*

--senior participant

#### **Well-Being:**

*“This class helped me view certain aspects in my life and realize that it really hasn’t been all that bad.”*

--re-entry program participant

*“P&S was an amazing experience. I have a new-found appreciation for my life and my mind to be able to look at things in many different ways all at once.”*

--community group participant

*“With this program, I feel that my concentration and short term memory have improved.”*

--senior participant

## Tone of voice carries meaning in short stories

by Patricia Andres

In her introduction to *The Best American Short Stories 2013*, Elizabeth Strout discusses the importance of tone in short stories by reflecting on the various “hellos” she heard on the telephone as a child. Her grandmother’s inflected “Hello?” signaled quiet dread; her mother’s perky “*Hel-lo*,” carried friendliness; an adolescent “Hullo?” sounded self-conscious. In all cases, though, “hello” was a question: *Who’s there? What is it you have to tell me?*

Readers of short stories share that question, Strout says. They wonder, at the story’s start: *What do you have to say?* The writer answers: *This. I have this to say, and I want you to listen to my voice, because that will tell you what I have to say.*

In a recent discussion of Marisella Viega’s story, “Fresh Fruit,” with women residents of a re-entry facility in Trenton, participants experienced the essential role of tone in the story’s poetics. “Fresh Fruit” features a nameless narrator—a woman who spends her time cooking for others, eating with others and sitting on the porch, watching others. The opening lines contain a matter-of-fact list of details, but the tone carries what may be the story’s core theme: the un-lived life.

The story begins, “I was up the first time about five, made coffee and heated up some milk for it. When I turned on the kitchen light, the dog came.... Right before lunch I usually boil some meat and bones for him, but it was not time for that feeding, so I gave him a little warm milk instead.” Absorbed in the minutia of her highly scheduled day, the narrator sounds like someone straining for objectivity from her own angle of vision—or, as Henry James put it, her “post of observation.”

But when the narrator describes Susanna, the young woman who lives across the street, her tone turns acid, laced with petty jealousy and criticism: “Her house is empty all day until she walks into it. She can stroll

along the shore of the sea anytime, but there, nobody gives a damn. There she goes, out to dinner alone again, taking a book along for company. I’ll start frying up plantains. Wilfredo [the narrator’s husband] will be home in an hour.” Jen, a member of the re-entry group, said, “She criticizes the neighbor so much it sounds like she actually wants her life. She seems conflicted about who she is versus who she wants to be.”

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### But when the narrator describes Susanna... her tone turns acid, laced with petty jealousy & criticism.

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The doubled-edged tone Jen noticed is present again when the narrator compares her appetite with Susanna’s: “No sweets. Give her salt, the sea, the beginning of the meal and she’s happy. I know. Now I want the sweet, the fruit that comes after the meal is done.” Nicole, whose responses often reflected deep emotional intelligence, said, “It’s almost like she has to justify her likes and dislikes, maybe even her existence.”

A few lines earlier, a flat tone works to undermine a bit of information that, in the voice of a different narrator, might have carried a jolt: “When Wilfredo returns in the evening, he greets me with a kiss on the cheek, though he is coming from his mistress’s house. We have lived in this house for twenty years now, and she has lived in another one, which he also owns, all along.” Starshemah remarked on the narrator’s apparent lack of emotion: “It sounds like she doesn’t feel any type of way about it.”

The story’s concluding lines circle back to the opening: “After the meal and some conversation... We will go through the rest of the rooms, turning off the lights in the entire house, before going our separate ways.” Here, tone and content are aligned in the rendering of a life resolutely spent rather than deeply lived. “The last line feels sad,” Angelica said, “She seems so alone, but doesn’t know what to do—maybe she doesn’t even feel it.”

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***“The unread story is not a story; it is little black marks on wood pulp. The reader, reading it, makes it live: a live thing, a story.”***

--Ursula K. LeGuin

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##### ***Pennsylvania***

Scott Feifer  
Anndee Hochman  
Lawrence McCarty

## Opening hearts, sharing stories in prison walls

### Talking with John Lekaj

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***“Stories make us more  
alive, more human,  
more courageous, more  
loving.”***

--Madeleine L'Engle

John Lekaj expected to see a circle of men in orange or navy jumpsuits. He expected to read and discuss some kind of literature. But when he signed up for People & Stories at the Bo Robinson Education and Treatment Center, he didn't bargain for a rare experience of open-heartedness.

“I signed up because it was something different,” recalled Lekaj. “A guy in my room said it was some kind of literature class.” Lekaj had been an honors English student, an excellent reader and a good writer; he just hadn't done any of those things in years.

“My first group, I just remember meeting everybody. It was different from what I expected. People were actually opening up, which is rare in that type of environment. You got to see a different side of people. I participated as much as I could.”

In People & Stories, Lekaj said, men were able to break the emotional lockdown that usually prevails in prisons. “In an environment like this, you are definitely more quiet. You don't let people in on your personal life. But Stephanie [Hanzel, the coordinator of the group] and her crew [a number of Crossing Borders volunteers] made everybody comfortable. It was a very relaxed environment, an open feel.”

Over the eight weeks, “quiet people started to speak up more. The group became closer. People you would never associate with—all of a sudden, you're having conversations and talking. It brought people together.”

One story that touched Lekaj was “How to Date a Brown Girl, Black Girl, White Girl or Halfie,” by Junot Diaz. Lekaj, the son of immigrants, raised in New York and North Jersey, connected to this first-person tale of a young man trying to navigate the path between assimilation and cultural honesty. But Lekaj was also struck by the

facts of the writer's own life. “His writing style was different, off the cuff. The guy wore his heart on his sleeve. I was surprised to learn that he'd won a lot of prestigious awards. He was less formal, he grew up poor and he was different from other writers. I related to that story 100 percent.”

Another time, when the group was discussing loss, Lekaj decided to share his own story: how his father died while he was incarcerated. “I couldn't bury him. It felt good to tell that. It always feels good to get those emotions off your chest.”

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**“People were actually opening up, which is rare in that type of environment. You got to see a different side of people...it brought people together.”**

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Sometimes, he said, group members disagreed, voicing different perceptions of a character or event in the story. Even now, several months after his release, he reads differently because of his experiences with People & Stories. “I take the time to break down stories now. I read and write perfectly fine, but I never really took the time to get into literature like that. It opened my eyes to a different way of reading and interpreting things.”

Lekaj was released in the spring and said he is determined to “start my life over.” He hopes that will mean a return to his former profession of real estate, but until he regains his license, he said, he is focused simply on “trying to get on my feet, looking for steady work” and recovering from a recent divorce.

Lekaj said he would encourage others, especially people who are incarcerated, to experience People & Stories. “It will break up the monotony. It will take you out of this reality for an hour or two. It will definitely take you out of the woods.”

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***Coordinators:***

***New York***

Alma Concepción

Deborah Salmon

***France***

Katia Salomon

## A word unlocks memories in Fort Dix group

by Marcy Schwartz

“All of us here have been through lots of adventures,” one participant declared in the discussion following the story “Fear,” by French writer Guy de Maupassant. Chuckles of recognition bounced through the group.

“We’re all afraid of something,” another ventured, greeted by nods of consensus.

Last winter, I coordinated People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos’ first program at Fort Dix, a low-security federal prison for men situated on a former military base in Burlington County, New Jersey. Some twenty-five participants between 40 and 70 years old signed up; with every session, more begged to join. Their dedication was noteworthy. One week in February, the program was cancelled due to snow. When I walked in the next week, one of the participants handed me a photocopied essay and said that group members had held their own reading and discussion session the week before.

This group distinguished itself with vivid personalities and depth of life experience. I never had to ask invasive questions about participants’ lives, because the program’s method invites self-discovery and self-revelation through the stories. Some of the men referred to their artistic talent and business skills; others demonstrated emotional wisdom and personal conviction in relation to the stories.

They talked of the need for a place where one feels at home; Juan, from Cuba, revealed that he takes refuge in the prison library. Several shared pivotal events in their children’s growing up; Manuel, usually loquacious, said he was rendered silent when his teenage daughter told him of her first crush.

Sometimes a single word unleashed an anecdote or a memory. “Cretonne,” a curtain fabric mentioned in James Joyce’s “Eveline,” evoked for one participant the stiff swishing of his grandmother’s skirt. A

Puerto Rican story about a disabled youth led to the topic of bullying and self-esteem. “Every person ought to know his own value,” one inmate said. “You can become someone.”

Our group meetings coincided with the day that inmates receive visitors. As I signed in weekly at the security desk and passed through the metal detector, I saw lines of family members, often with small children in tow, waiting to be admitted. One day we stopped by the visiting lounge. It had the look of a small gymnasium, with a raised platform where security guards watched over the room. Neat rows of chairs rested on either side of an open aisle, and small groups of visitors clustered around the inmates. Vending machines to one side sold drinks and snacks; children tried their best to behave under the watchful eyes of their parents. The whole scene had the look of a courtroom in recess.

I felt like an intruder into this public yet intimate time when inmates could visit with family and friends. Then I spotted one of the older inmates from our group, who was lucky to have his daughter visiting. He never missed a session, and his soft-spoken and thoughtful comments were as self-revealing as they were philosophical. I hesitated to interrupt, but as I was leaving he bounded up to me and insisted on introducing me to his daughter, a college student in Vermont. She, in turn, expressed her thanks for the program and told me how much her father savored every meeting. I wished her the best with her studies, humbled by her openness and enthusiasm and by her father’s willingness to invite me into their visit.

At the end of the program, I glanced through the men’s written evaluations: they commented on favorite stories and praised the program for boosting their self-confidence and supporting their efforts at conflict resolution. Even in dire circumstances, reading collectively offers a chance for self-reflection and connection. Juan had already found sanctuary in the library; thanks to Gente y Cuentos, the sidewalks winding among the dreary buildings of Fort Dix became pathways to a collective refuge in stories. But one comment, by a quieter participant, took me by surprise. “Life is beautiful,” he wrote. “Everything is important.”

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***“...Everyone who tells a story tells it differently, just to remind us that everybody sees it differently... The only thing for certain is how complicated it all is, like a string full of knots.”***

--Jeanette Winterson

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# Stories push us to the existential questions of life

by Anndee Hochman

I love the “light bulb moments” of *People & Stories*: sudden illuminations that bring an aspect of the text into crystalline focus. Other times, insight comes gradually—not a lemony zigzag of light but a slow dawning as participants dig through layers of the story, each comment helping the whole group inch ahead.

That’s how it was when I visited to share my own story, “Underneath,” at Architects Housing in Trenton. A group of older adults—all women, that day—switch-backed from the text to their own life stories in a discussion that poked at images in the story, posed existential questions and taught me, once again, that words on the page have a life of their own.

We spent ten minutes talking about the title. “Underneath,” for some participants, conjured the notion of “motive—what’s under the surface.” After reading the story, they had other ideas: the main character, a non-conforming young woman named Maddie, finds fulfillment and love beneath the hood of a car, a literal “underneath” described in the story as “greasy and quiet, black and warm.”

Others talked about Maddie’s zest for life, the “spark” lodged under her skin. Pat Smith, the group’s facilitator, mentioned some children she teaches who still possess that spark despite living amidst crushing poverty. Others, we agreed, lose that light—you can see it in their hollow eyes.

For one reader, the story was a mirror. At the end, Maddie’s lover—they scandalize their small-minded town by refusing to marry—goes to the store and is killed in a car accident on his way home. “This is my life,” the participant said, explaining that she was widowed when her husband went out for an errand and never came back.

Another reader related to Maddie’s refusal to accept the strictures of her upbringing. “I wanted to be friends with all kinds of people when I was growing up,” she said. “I didn’t want to be limited.”

Someone suggested that Maddie embodies the life-force itself. “When I was trying to learn to garden,” she said, “a neighbor told me, ‘Those seeds really *want* to grow. You don’t have to do much.’”

And from there, we ventured into existential realms: What was it, we wondered, that made humans so moved and transformed by beauty? Why have we evolved to be capable of loving the world? We didn’t have answers, but the questions rippled like velvet in the room. We mentioned times that we, like Maddie, felt swept away by a stunning sight, sound or smell—a sunset, a symphony, flowers springing from a backyard garden.

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## What was it, we wondered, that made humans so moved by beauty? Why have we evolved to be capable of loving the world?

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More questions poured forth: Did I set up the contrast on purpose: a woman who’s abundantly alive in an emotionally gray town? Why, when Maddie realizes she is pregnant, is the embryo described as “a question mark”? What kind of mother will Maddie become? Will the townspeople ever accept her?

We dived into the text, and we reached beyond it, discussing whether shame is learned or innate, whether “boring” is a matter of mindset and what brings changes of heart in small-minded people, in anyone.

These are questions without simple answers. But discussions like these cantilever us into a realm beyond ordinary conversation, the vertiginous edges of what we know. It can be scary, these risks of thought and heart. But we are venturing together; we will not let each other fall.

“Maddie saw what was under the surface. She wanted to touch things, experience things with her senses.” I can’t recall who said this, but it doesn’t matter, because everyone was nodding. “I do that,” declared the woman. “Every day.”

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**“Stories—individual stories, family stories, national stories—are what stitch together the disparate elements of human existence into a coherent whole. We are story animals.”**

--Yann Martel

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# Teachers reach students through learning to listen

## Talking with Nicole Furlonge

In a book Nicole Furlonge read recently, one page contains the single word, “Silence,” surrounded by a wide, white margin. That page spoke to Furlonge, a scholar, teacher—and new board member of People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos—whose work has focused on how we listen: to stories, to each other and to the spaces between words.

At Princeton Day School (PDS), where Furlonge teaches 9<sup>th</sup>-grade English, Global Lit and a junior writing class called “The Listening Mind,” she guides students to hone their listening, a skill she feels has been subsumed and devalued by our culture’s constant chatter. “In the U.S., the people who are powerful are those who have the loudest voices, who are quick to speak first, or who can give a great sound-bite,” she says. “But we also need to develop our ability to listen.”

As a board member of People & Stories, Furlonge hopes to “extend the tentacles” of a program that does just that. “[In People & Stories], we come together and enjoy this moment of storytelling from a written text that is experienced so much through the ear. We’re not individually sitting and writing in our journals; we’re sharing aloud on the spot.”

Furlonge first heard of the program from her husband, Nigel. He is the dean of students at Christina Seix Academy in Trenton, which has hosted People & Stories and Gente y Cuentos programs involving parents of the school’s students and faculty members from PDS. “My husband came home talking about how amazing it was for people from a variety of different backgrounds and access to be in the same room, really talking in interesting ways about the story.”

Then she attended groups at Bo Robinson Education and Treatment Center. “The men are incarcerated and have different levels of education, but I was struck by their willingness and openness. They showed that they appreciated that moment to take

time out and participate in a conversation and have people listen to them.”

Furlonge fell in love with books and stories as a child—she taught herself to read at age four—and remembers an early attempt to proselytize that passion. When one of her sisters arrived at the house for the first time as a foster child, Furlonge set up a mini-school for her. “She hadn’t learned to read yet; she was almost seven. I was eight. I sat her down, but she didn’t want to do it.”

Though Furlonge took a circuitous route from there to life as a professional educator—she was initially pre-med in college, unaware that “people read books and wrote about them or wrote their own books and that you could make a wonderful life out of that”—she never forgot the lesson of that mini-school and her sister’s initial resistance.

“I realized that a large part of teaching—most of teaching—is figuring out how to reach people where they are. That’s what I really try to focus on now: not to assume that everyone sees books and writing the way I do. It goes back to listening and putting yourself aside to figure out the other person.”

While delving into ancient philosophers’ work about speaking and listening, Furlonge has also explored 21<sup>st</sup>-century modes of storytelling with her blog, “40daysto40,” which she posted daily as she approached her 40<sup>th</sup> birthday. “I wanted to play around with blogging: how would I feel about getting feedback right away and seeing who it engages.”

In a four-part series on the blog, Furlonge, who is adopted, told of seeking and finding her birth parents—a saga she would like to turn into a book. She’s also finishing a manuscript based on her dissertation, “On the Lower Frequencies,” about listening, sound and differences in race and gender. She has a new blog now, [Inktopia.com](http://Inktopia.com), designed to engage and inspire young writers.

And as the mother of three young children, Furlonge has daily opportunities to share her love of language and storytelling. “I definitely want my kids to appreciate books. I want them...to listen to the stories that come to them but also to feel empowered to respond and to make choices about their reading. I want them to have a full imaginative life.”

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***“For all the books in his possession, he still failed to read the stories written plain as day in the faces of the people around him.”***

--Emma Donoghue

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## On the Bookshelf...

*How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character*, by Paul Tough. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012.

When Paul Tough spoke at a 2013 Catholic Partnership Schools conference in Mt. Laurel, New Jersey, 300 educators listened, then applauded. Loudly.

They responded because Tough, in *How Children Succeed*, documents an idea the educators intuitively understood: that we have been looking at the wrong measures to predict and ensure children's success.

Through interviews with economists and psychologists, pediatricians, principals and teenagers, Tough lays bare the fallacy that children's academic prowess—measured by IQ and other standardized tests—is the strongest predictor of how they will fare as adults. Instead, he argues, traits such as persistence, self-control, curiosity, grit and

self-confidence are much more critical.

Much of Tough's book is rooted in the growing body of knowledge about early childhood stress—experiences that include having a parent with a mental illness, or one who is incarcerated, along with physical, sexual or emotional abuse. Such experiences leave tracks in the developing brain, making it harder for children to focus, organize tasks, form relationships, control their impulses and learn.

Tough's book is a disheartening chronicle of the many ways we have failed children by focusing on cognitive skills instead of character. But there are glimmers of good news, including research that shows a nurturing adult—teacher, clergy member, grandparent—can strengthen children's resilience. "The kids who succeed," he told the educators, "all have deep reserves of perseverance, grit, optimism. They also had help: someone who reached out a hand to them and helped them succeed."

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