

P & S comments show that stories do change lives

At a recent People & Stories group held at a detention center, participants were discussing Sherman Alexie's "Breaking and Entering," a painful narrative about racism, fear, power and the death of a young intruder who is caught in the act of robbing the narrator's house. As readers speculated about the narrator's actions and whether the death was an "accident," one man remarked, "He didn't do it; the author made him do it."

That provocative comment pointed to questions of literary craft and authorial intent; it invited participants to critique this text, and others, at ever-deeper levels.

The man's comment was also evidence of what we seek to accomplish in People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos. The program's goal is to provide people with access to enduring literature, because we believe that experience provides a sense of well-being that translates into enhanced quality of life.

Our founder, Sarah Hirschman, is working to identify specific benefits of taking part in a People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos group; these include increases in critical thinking, self-assurance, liberation and tolerance. We seek evidence of these qualities in coordinators' reports, site staff observations and participants' comments.

Many participants report that they have gained specific skills and feel better about themselves as a result. "This was the first time I talked in a group...I'm able to explain myself better when I write...I learned how to listen," are just a few responses that indicate growing confidence.

For participants whose life circumstances have led them to feel trapped, People & Stories can point toward liberation. One incarcerated participant described the group

as a "gateway to free my mind... Physically, I'm not free in prison; I'm like a caged bird. Mentally, though, I'm free. Through the program and the stories, I am...able to use my imagination."

We see examples of the liberated imagination in the notes our coordinators submit after each series. At a program for teens in Trenton, participants envisioned alternative endings for Louise Erdrich's haunting story, "The Shawl," which explores the power of inherited stories to shape our lives. While the story poses two possibilities—the young girl whose shawl is so central to the piece was either thrown to the wolves by her mother, or she sacrificed herself so that others would not be hurt—our group came up with other vivid scenarios: Perhaps the girl was still alive and had been raised by the wolves; perhaps she died of exposure on the wagon, and it was the corpse, not her live body, that her mother threw into the snow.

People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos groups also build tolerance. A recent Crossing Borders program, where suburban professionals met with inmates, fostered a deepened understanding of difference for members of both groups. "I've learned that in spite of my previous encounters with mainstream society, people can... empathize with struggles that [others] endure," one incarcerated participant said. A Crossing Borders volunteer also found that her stereotypes melted in the face of actual "others." She said, "People are much more perceptive and involved than I expected. People in incarceration are far less angry and bitter than I expected."

We know that the literature examined in People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos is complex and enduring. We believe that our method, which honors diverse life experiences and promotes open, non-judgmental exploration of the story, can have a powerful effect on participants. And we are learning, from participants themselves, just how much the experience matters: words do indeed change lives.

Teenagers' healing helped through "Story Talk" session

by Amanda Jackson

When I decided to use People & Stories with the long-term teen residents at Mountain View Hospital, a mental and drug rehabilitation program in Gadsden, Alabama, I thought the experience would be exciting and fulfilling. I imagined myself as the Michelle Pfeiffer character in the movie *Dangerous Minds*, the story of a Marine Corps veteran who uses bribery and intimidation to win the souls of troubled kids in a California school.

But two weeks before I started the program, one of my would-be students went to the hospital because of a violent episode. I wondered if channeling Michelle was really the right idea.

Nevertheless, I packed my story binders and my nerves for this journey into short story land. My kids, aged 12 to 17, were from a variety of educational, social and emotional backgrounds. The stories in our first series fit them well. These were teens who knew what it was to be abandoned, to be abused and to feel loss; they were eager to get in the trenches with me while we discussed it all.

"Spilled Salt," Barbara Neely's wrenching tale of a mother whose adult son has returned home after four years in prison for a rape conviction, provoked sharply different reactions from girls and boys: the girls empathized with the mother, who fears her son and ultimately decides she cannot "be his mother" right now, while the boys were upset at the idea of a mother abandoning her child.

They loved and hated sharing their feelings. Some could not wait to tell me their opinions; others found themselves angry at how much feeling they experienced through these stories. I often used the optional writing exercises—offering students the chance to share their writing with me or keep it to themselves—which gave many of the quieter kids the chance to share just how

deeply they could relate to the characters.

After reading Rosario Morales's "The Day It Happened," about a woman freeing herself from domestic abuse, I asked them to write about their own "day it happened." I explained that this could be a great day or a bad day. Many students chose to write about truly terrifying events: rape, suicide, death and violence.

They loved and hated sharing their feelings. Some could not wait to tell me their opinions. Others found themselves angry at how much feeling they experienced through these stories.

That was probably the most difficult part of the experience. The shared writings afforded me an intimate view into the lives of children who had been through unimaginable pain. I carried the heaviness of their stories with me daily and prayed that even though this program would not be the magic elixir to wipe their histories away, it could somehow help the healing process.

After speaking to their regular teachers, I learned that many of the students changed their behavior patterns so they would not have to miss People & Stories. For some, this was the first time they had ever spoken aloud in class.

Although it would be impossible for me to gauge the long-term effects of People & Stories, I do know that it meant a great deal to kids who have had so few opportunities to feel good about themselves. I thought People & Stories would be exciting and fulfilling. I had no idea that it would have the potential to change many lives. It already has.

"Books let us into their souls and lay open to us the secrets of our own."

--William Hazlitt, essayist and literary critic

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P&S volunteer finds commonalities across borders

Talking with Sally Maruca

Before her first visit to the Bo Robinson Education and Training Center, Sally Maruca put her trepidation into words: “What will the men be like?” she wrote. “Angry? Depressed? Bitter? Silent?”

But after just one Crossing Borders session, in which male inmates of this minimum-security facility and female suburbanites joined to read and discuss a short story, Maruca’s worries had dissolved. She wrote in her journal: “Suddenly, I’m swallowed up by all that is common among us: joy, love, fear, sorrow, pain.”

Maruca, who has raised five children, taught for thirteen years in Trenton public schools, tutored undocumented immigrants, worked in a family health center in East Harlem and volunteered in hunger-relief organizations, says People & Stories is “the most interesting thing I’ve ever been involved in.”

She first encountered the program in the 1970s, when People & Stories came to Martin House, a longtime neighborhood center in Trenton where Maruca volunteered in the after-school program. She was trained as a coordinator, but, with a full-time job and four kids still at home, couldn’t find the spare hours to lead an ongoing group.

After stints in New York and Martha’s Vineyard, Maruca’s family returned to Lawrenceville in 2005; by then, there was room in her life to become an active Crossing Borders volunteer.

“In the prison, I think we can really make a difference in the outlook of people. And it is so exciting to discuss the stories.” The People & Stories method works to elicit courage and candor, she said. “I think that because there is no pressure to read, no pressure to have ‘right’ answers, they learn to listen to each other and disagree by saying, ‘Well, Joe has a point, but...’”

Maruca remembers one younger inmate,

a striking man with brilliant green eyes who boasted about his good looks and the three children he’d fathered, with three different women, by the age of 21. “The older men really got on his case, asking how he could be a good father when he was in jail... It amazes me how quickly the men trust us, how willing they are to talk about their lives and the mistakes they have made. It’s very satisfying and moving.”

Maruca has taken her People & Stories training on the road, twice conducting sessions at the Anna Julia Cooper Episcopal School, a tuition-free middle school for poor students from Richmond’s East End neighborhood, where her son is the head of school. “Last year, I did ‘Raymond’s Run’ by Toni Cade Bambara. They loved being read to; they seemed to listen to one another.”

A longtime reader, Maruca is part of a book group that meets at a large, round table in a Chinese restaurant; the group’s latest selection is the hefty memoir, *My Paper Chase: True Stories of Vanished Times* by journalist Harold Evans. She had to set aside her other book, *The Children*, an account of the birth of the Civil Rights movement by David Halberstam, to read it.

Maruca’s visits to Bo Robinson have shattered stereotypes and brought sobering realizations. “What I didn’t expect was how poorly educated the men were in school.” Perhaps one reason for the program’s success is “because they have never had an opportunity to be heard. In school, it was facts, facts, facts—not how it related to people or how it affected them.”

Maruca recalls the group’s intense responses to “The Shawl,” by Louise Erdrich; deep discussions of complicated stories by Gabriel García Márquez and Guy de Maupassant; and the unanimous discomfort triggered by a story in which a young man swears at his mother. “That seemed to upset everybody.”

And she will never forget the participant who approached her after one story discussion in which the men had talked openly about times they were “stuck” in their lives. He praised the group as a “positive thing going on at Bo Robinson. When the men leave this room, they have to be macho and negative. Here, they can speak from the heart.”

“The stranger who tells our stories when we cannot speak not only awakens our spirits and hearts but also shows our humanity—which others want to forget—and in doing so becomes family.”

--Mende proverb,
Sierra Leone

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Taking stock of P&S/GyC: 2010 program review

by Patricia Andres

Organizations, like people, have life cycles. People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos charts its growth along two separate life-cycle trajectories—one programmatic, the other organizational. That is, while our program and its method were founded by Sarah Hirschman in 1972, the non-profit organization, People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos, Inc., was established in 1993.

If we use the human life cycle as a gauge, our program would be well into middle age and our organization just on the cusp of adulthood. Both those moments seem ripe for taking stock, gaining perspective, assessing successes and challenges and charting new paths for growth.

So, what does 2010 look like at a glance for us? How are our programs developing? What is our organization's position and structure? And the underlying question: How are we fulfilling and remaining loyal to our mission—to bring powerful, potentially life-transforming literature to underserved people so they may begin to see themselves and others differently?

In 2010 we conducted 51 programs, each meeting weekly for eight or ten weeks: 37 in New Jersey, four in New York, eight in Pennsylvania, one in Louisiana and one in Alabama.

Together, these programs served 1,107 people who attended 426 sessions to hear, read, discuss, and sometimes write about a literary short story.

Whom did we serve? Latino audiences account for eleven of the programs, often conducted with parents and grandparents in conjunction with community-based organizations or school systems. Re-entry populations—men and women in transition from prison back into their communities—accounted for another eleven of the programs. Seniors were served in nine programs; youth in eight. Adult Basic Education centers hosted four programs, while recovery, prison, and homeless

shelters and grassroots organizations account for the remaining eight.

While these numbers do tell a story about the reach and presence of P&S/GyC in our communities, our participants provide a compelling narrative in their responses to questions about how our programs touch their lives.

While we're still collating the results of some of our 2010 programs, our most recent reports show that 92% of participants felt strongly that People & Stories helped them enjoy reading more, helped them become more aware of the ideas and views of others, and created an enjoyable experience with people from different backgrounds and life experiences.

Participants' open-ended responses to our post-program questions revealed even more about the ways we are meeting one of our core objectives: to create an enjoyable experience of enduring literature with those who have not yet had the opportunity to use it as a tool for reading their lives.

Participants wrote: *I enjoyed the stories and how she [the coordinator] read them; I loved the stories; I learned how to learn from what [I] read and implement it into [my] life; I listened to good stories and learned to look at situations differently; I learned how to listen better and not to be afraid to voice my opinion.*

For us as an organization, 2010 held some benchmarks that promise expansion and growth. We received a second National Endowment for the Humanities grant, this time to work with libraries across the nation to serve youth, especially those who are marginalized or in difficult life circumstances. While two series of these programs were conducted in 2010 in Alabama and Louisiana, 23 additional librarians completed training workshops in January. Through the end of 2012, more than 75 programs will reach youth in California, Arizona, Oklahoma, Georgia, Texas, New York and Washington.

It would be impossible for People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos to accomplish our work and to grow as an organization without your support. In this regard, we want to acknowledge all the friends and donors who help keep People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos in the position of being able to impact lives...one story at a time.

“The universe is made of stories, not of atoms.”

--Muriel Rukeyser,
poet

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“We construct a narrative for ourselves, and that’s the thread we follow from one day to the next.”

--Paul Auster,
novelist

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Fiction can pave path to tolerance of “the stranger”

by *Anndee Hochman*

Late Fragment

*And did you get what you wanted
from this life, even so?*

I did.

*And what did you want?
To call myself beloved, to feel myself
beloved on the earth.*

--Raymond Carver

In Raymond Carver’s short stories, it’s not easy to be loved. His characters reach for connection with clumsy, ill-articulated gestures. They stumble over their own prejudices and limitations. They get stuck in their routines.

And then someone new comes along. In two Carver stories, “Cathedral” and “Fat,” characters enter who are, at first, reviled and misunderstood—“strangers” whose strangeness ignites our own stereotypes. A blind man comes to visit; a morbidly fat man sits down at a waitress’s station. What happens when these strangers, so easily dismissed as “the other,” intrude on the intimate worlds of the stories’ narrators?

The strangers disrupt expectation. They are greeted with uncertainty, suspicion, even meanness. But in each story, the protagonist’s relationship to the stranger gradually shifts. And we mirror that in our own circles as we read these Carver stories, reveal ourselves and change our minds.

I read “Cathedral” at Interim House, a residential drug-and-alcohol recovery program for women in Philadelphia. It’s a mysterious story, told from the point of view of a working-class man who is comfortable—though not exactly happy—in his marital routine.

“This blind man, an old friend of my wife’s, he was on his way to spend the night...I wasn’t enthusiastic about his visit. He was no one I knew. And his being blind bothered me,” the husband says.

“He doesn’t want a blind man in his home because he’s prejudiced,” scoffed

Camille. Others suggested the narrator might be limited by his own lack of exposure; as he explains, “My idea of blindness came from the movies.” Perhaps he was jealous, Jackie said, reminding us that our reflexive reactions to strangers are complicated, a blend of experience, rumor, conjecture and emotion.

“I had stereotypes about Muslims until I was in jail with some of them,” she added. “Now I think it’s just another religion, like Catholics or Jews.” Simone said she’d had a similar experience with someone who was deaf; before meeting this person, she assumed all deaf people talked loudly and with impairment, as they do on television.

“I knew a blind person once,” said Tiffany, “and that is how they ‘see,’ with their hands, by touching you.” The group was quiet then, perhaps imagining what it would be like to know the world only through touch. Imagining what it would be like to be someone other than themselves.

The same thing occurs in the story; by its end, the narrator and the blind man have connected—though their bond is lubricated by generous amounts of food, alcohol and pot. We talked about why people use those substances to ease social awkwardness; Camille confided that she is an “emotional eater,” and others nodded in recognition.

But it was the story’s end that drew the most discussion: the blind man is helping the narrator, who claims he is “no artist,” to draw a cathedral, guiding his hand as he draws on paper torn from a grocery bag. “I put in windows with arches. I drew flying buttresses...The blind man felt around over the paper. He moved the tips of his fingers over the paper, all over what I had drawn, and he nodded.”

Finally, the blind man invites the narrator to close his eyes. When he tells the narrator to open them again, something has shifted: “My eyes were still closed. I was in my house. I knew that. But I didn’t feel like I was inside anything.”

“The blind man taught him something,” Camille said. “How to look inside yourself and see without ‘seeing.’” We turned that over and over: what the blind man “sees” in the wife, what the husband, with his functional vision, may be blindly missing.

“[The blind man] is not judging her by how she looks, because he can’t see her,” Tiffany said, and several women responded

“A good book should leave you...slightly exhausted at the end. You live several lives while reading it.”

--William Styron,
novelist

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that they'd enjoy a relationship with someone "who would love you for your personality, for what's inside."

The blind man's power, in this story, is to awaken empathy and imagination. The narrator keeps his eyes closed "because he's trying to feel what the blind man feels. And he realizes maybe being blind isn't so bad," Jackie said.

The women thought he had learned something else, too: the ability to "see" in a deeper way. That kind of sight—we might call it *insight*—may be at the root of empathy. It can come from encountering a stranger. It can come from reading about one. Insight allows us to "see" past differences of culture, age, or race, to imagine ourselves in another's skin.

"I think the husband will be changed," said Simone finally. "I think he'll be more compassionate, more sensitive."

Compassion and sensitivity are initially in short supply in another Carver story, the short, enigmatic tale, "Fat," in which an extremely overweight customer catches the attention of a waitress in a greasy spoon. The fat man, seated alone at her station, is unfailingly gracious, thanking the waitress for each dish and forgiving her when, in her nervousness, she spills his water.

Yet at first, even she sees him as little more than a freak. "This fat man is the fattest person I have ever seen," the waitress tells her friend Rita. "I first notice the fingers. They look three times the size of a normal person's fingers—long, thick, creamy fingers."

"She's only looking at his size, at the outside of him," said Barbara T., a new participant in my group at Elks House, a housing facility for seniors in Deptford, New Jersey. At the same time, that description made us wonder about the fat man, imagining the full dimension of his life. A man with "creamy" fingers probably doesn't do heavy labor, John said, pointing out the man's politeness and suit coat as evidence of a more refined occupation.

Then Barbara H., a devoted participant who rarely missed a class, spoke up. She is a heavy woman who uses a motorized scooter. "People think if you're fat, you're going to walk around with your shirt hanging out and not be well-dressed." She told of her own self-consciousness in restaurants, when she orders something rich

and wonders if the server is thinking, "'She's so fat; why is she eating that?'"

Hearing Barbara's story, others began to speculate about the fat man's history: Perhaps he grew up with food scarcity and was trying to compensate; maybe a traumatic event transformed him into an "emotional eater."

We began to see the fat man for more than his stunning size; we began, along with the waitress, to care. "She changes her mind when other people [in the restaurant] start being mean to him," Barbara T. said. The waitress even rises to his defense when her own boyfriend, Rudy, the restaurant's cook, sneers, "Harriet says you got a fat man from the circus out there. That true?"

"Rudy, he is fat," the waitress responds. "But that is not the whole story."

"She's saying that who he is on the outside isn't everything," said Barbara T. We talked, then, about nicknames, which often caricature a person's difference—"Crisco" or "Mooch" or "Slowpoke"—and can be hard to live down. And we talked about what happens at the story's end. The waitress goes home with Rudy, who expects to be waited on, reminisces about "a couple of fat guys" he knew as a child and finally insists on sex, although the narrator shows no interest.

"But here is the thing," she recalls. "When he gets on me, I suddenly feel I am fat. I feel I am terrifically fat, so fat that Rudy is a tiny thing and hardly there at all."

"Maybe she's identifying with the fat man," someone said. "Maybe she's pregnant." Anne, who had been quiet for most of the session, said, "In her fantasy, Rudy disappears."

The fat man, once so arrestingly strange, has become the catalyst for the waitress's transformation, the person who enables her to see Rudy, and herself, in a clearer light.

What will happen to the waitress, to the husband in "Cathedral," now that their eyes have opened to complexity, now that some stereotypes have been shed? What will happen to each of us once we leave this room, where the story emboldened us to reveal ourselves, and where imagination helped us to see each other anew?

I like to think we will act differently—with less prejudice, more curiosity, with the knowledge that everyone, including the stranger beside us, yearns to be loved.

"If we read one another, perhaps we won't kill one another."

--Salma Khadra Jayyusi,
poet and translator

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On the Bookshelf...

Heaven's Coast: A Memoir, by Mark Doty. New York: Harper Collins, 1997.

by *Katelyn Michaud*

As a member of the People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos team, and as an English major in college, I have thought a lot about stories. They come to us in the form of fiction, non-fiction, novel, memoir, short story, poetry, and in countless veins: personal or collective narratives, familial, historical and cultural tales. Stories are, by nature, complex, knotted creatures. They entangle us with one another and bind us in an interconnected web of narratives.

In *Heaven's Coast*, Mark Doty skillfully crafts a memoir that interweaves his own story with that of Wally, his partner of twelve years, and the struggle and grief of losing Wally to AIDS. By calling the book a memoir, Doty makes specific address to

his own story. On a larger scale, however, he writes a collective narrative for anyone facing AIDS or other life-threatening illnesses. Doty's own story is intertwined in Wally's, just as pieces of Wally's life are wrapped up in a larger chronicle of illness.

Doty notes the pressure of telling not only Wally's story but also the stories of others who have perished after an AIDS diagnosis. He writes, "Wall and Bobby, David and Doug, others I never even knew. I am here today...filled with the presence and weight of their stories. What am I to do with them?"

Ultimately, what he does is create a poignant and enduring work of literature that truly shows the connectedness of humanity, the universality of our narratives, and the genuinely awe-inspiring fact that we can experience such connectedness by reading words on a page.