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Word of Mouth

PEOPLE & STORIES
GENTE Y CUENTOS

In rural Alabama, teens connect literature to life

by Anndee Hochman

Eve Engle Kneeland was a veteran librarian, head of the youth services division for the Auburn, Alabama city library. She'd worked with members of a local Boys and Girls Club; they'd even performed a poetry slam.

But she wasn't sure what would happen if a group of Auburn teens—mostly African-American and Southern-born, kids more comfortable in the woods than among skyscrapers—gathered to read and discuss short stories.

"The first challenge was just getting them to open up," Kneeland recalled of last winter's Story Talk series, her first at the Auburn Boys and Girls Club. "They weren't sure what we were doing. They weren't sure they could just say anything."

A breakthrough came in the first session; the teens were discussing "Thank You, M'am," by Langston Hughes, the story of an older woman who, after experiencing an attempted purse-snatching, brings the young would-be thief home for a face-washing, a meal and some unexpected life lessons. As the teens talked, one girl revealed that she had stolen items from other girls' purses and backpacks a few years earlier.

"After this one kid admitted something she didn't want other people to know, the others opened up. And I did a lot of storytelling of things that had happened in my own life, or to my children."

Gradually, the teens became more engaged. Kneeland said it helped that Story Talk took place "on their turf," at the Boys and Girls Club, rather than in the library.

The teens responded powerfully to "The Shawl," a story of sorrow passed through generations of a broken family, by Ojibwe writer Louise Erdrich. "A lot of them have Native American background. They do have family that's broken up. They really got into this story because it was so disturbing to them."

Some stories edged uneasily close to home. The week Kneeland planned to read "The Man Who Found You in the Woods," a counselor at the Boys and Girls Club let her know that the brother of a participant—a young man who had formerly attended the club—had just been arrested; in the story, the rebellious teen Nat is arrested for attempted robbery with a shotgun.

Kneeland could tell that the group was roiled with emotion about their former classmate's arrest. She quickly swapped stories, doing Jamaica Kincaid's "Girl" that week and saving "The Man Who Found You in the Woods" for a less volatile moment.

When the teens did read that story, in which a man saves the baby Nat, abandoned in the woods shortly after his birth, "they embraced the idea of saving something that is worth saving, not running away and ignoring it. They didn't get upset [about the gun incident] like I thought they might. The brother [of the arrested student] actually opened up a little bit."

Kneeland said Story Talk became a place where students could connect literary metaphors to their lives. In a discussion of one story in which a character is stuck in an elevator, they "caught onto the whole metaphor of being halfway up, thinking about which way are you going to go."

In discussing "The Day It Happened," by Rosario Morales, or "Chin," by Gish Jen, Kneeland also learned more about the teens' lives: "who's close to their grandparents, who has a pet they love. I learned a lot about who's already writing stories; I wasn't aware of how much they do that outside of school. Also, the kids trust me in a different way now. They wanted to be part of Story Talk and to work with me."

Seeking evidence that humanities make us human

by Patricia Andres

In her book *Not for Profit: Why Democracy* Needs *the Humanities*, Martha C. Nussbaum makes a comprehensive, insightful and scholarly case that the humanities are not only helpful, but also necessary. She argues that the humanities are key to the cultivation of "complete citizens who can think for themselves and understand the significance of another person's sufferings and achievements."

As educational investments migrate more and more from the humanities to the sciences and technology in an effort to foster "useful and highly applied skills suited to profit-making," Nussbaum urges us to counter this trend, which she repeatedly refers to as a "crisis."

She cites studies that document the very tangible—indeed essential—benefits the humanities offer. Deep engagement with the humanities, she says, helps develop the ability to think critically; strengthens the imagination, including the moral imagination; and deepens the capacity for empathy by encouraging people to widen their perspectives beyond themselves.

This last has long been a subject of literary scholars, who argue that, by offering a range of narrator perspectives, literature allows the reader an in-depth, multi-faceted view of a character's interior world. That experience deepens our understanding of others' motivations and emotions.

More recently, scientists—with the help of brain imaging technology—are examining exactly how this works. In a recent *New York Times* piece titled "Your Brain on Fiction," Annie Murphy Paul writes, "Fiction—with its redolent details, imaginative metaphors and attentive descriptions of people and their actions—offers an especially rich replica. Indeed, in one respect novels go beyond simulating reality to give readers an experience unavailable off the page: the opportunity to enter fully into other people's thoughts and feelings."

Scientists have found, for instance, that the sensory cortex of the brain is stimulated when someone reads a metaphor involving touch. "The brain," Paul writes, "…does not make much of a distinction between reading about an experience and encountering it in real life; in each case, the same neurological regions are stimulated."

We at People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos are searching for ways to further document what we have been observing and practicing for forty years. We have been working with Anne Hewitt, professor at Seton Hall University and founding director of the Seton Center for Community Health. Hewitt will study our work with seniors, youth and re-entry populations with the goal of providing evaluation tools that will help us measure our outcomes.

At the same time, Danielle Allen, a social science professor at the Institute for Advanced Study, has embarked on a five-year research project that will examine four humanities programs—People & Stories /Gente y Cuentos; the Clemente Course in the Humanities, an Honors Program at Princeton University; and the Africana Studies Program at Amherst College—to document outcomes that humanists intuitively grasp, but rarely measure metrically. "Learning outcomes pursued by humanists range across multiple domains," Allen says, "including, but not limited to: cognitive development, creativity, linguistic competence, affective development, personal empowerment and civic engagement."

When Sarah Hirschman founded Gente y Cuentos in 1972, she knew intuitively what she was doing. In some ways, the fruits of that first group of Puerto Rican women in Cambridge, Massachusetts, were hardly imaginable at the time. But the tree is lodged in the seed. Hirschman knew that literature delights, edifies and refines—that it enlarges the heart and mind and helps the imagination to soar. As Goethe wrote, literature carries "a mysterious power that all may feel and no philosophy can touch." Forty years later, we continue to practice what we know: the humanities humanize!

"It is the function of art to renew our perception…The writer shakes up the familiar scene, and, as if by magic, we see a new meaning in it."

--Anaïs Nin

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Gente y Cuentos “cultivates the soul” at Children’s Home Society of Trenton

Talking with Rosaura Lopez

Rosaura Lopez was pregnant when she learned about Gente y Cuentos at the Children’s Home Society of Trenton, and the program piqued her curiosity. In her native Guatemala, she hadn’t learned much about literature or different authors. She was hungry for that knowledge.

CHS, tucked by the side of a strip shopping center, draws Lopez and other parents for early childhood and parent education, adoption support, behavioral and mental health services and programs for parents and children at risk. In the large, airy main room, where Gente y Cuentos sessions are held, enlarged black-and-white photos of families line the walls.

The first session, led by coordinator Ana Mejia, had Lopez hooked. “I wanted to read and learn more about writers and their stories. I like it because when we read, I get into the story like I’m the main character. I was interested because everyone had different opinions, a different point of view. Other people don’t think the same thing as me.”

Once her daughter was born, Gente y Cuentos became a tranquil island in the midst of a busy week. Lopez describes it as “una hora especial para imaginar y sonar”—“a special hour to imagine and dream”—and says she’s learned to appreciate other cultures through the stories.

Some favorites include “La Prueba,” by Rodrigo Rey Rosa, the story of a child who questions the existence of God, demands proof and accidentally kills a pet canary in the process. Everyone in the story—the child, his father, the maid—tries to hide or deny the canary’s death. “Everyone is trying to cover their guilt,” Lopez said.

“In Gente y Cuentos, I learned to cultivate my soul, my spirit, through reading. You fill that need to know more,” she said. “It makes me feel good.”

And the program has already touched the next generation. The daughter with whom Lopez was pregnant when she first started Gente y Cuentos is now four; she reads in both English and Spanish to her dolls. “She acts like a teacher with them,” Lopez said. “I want her to love reading like I do.”

Talking with Edwin Simón

Edwin Simón was interested in the mechanics of stories: how they were told, what they were about, how to relate them to his three children, now twelve, nine and six. He’s a Gente y Cuentos veteran who’s attended three series led by Mejia.

His most recent Gente y Cuentos group included other Guatemalans, along with people from Costa Rica and Puerto Rico. Simón loved the mash of opinions and cultures. “In the Hispanic community, some people make fun of others because they use different words. They don’t realize that Spanish is so rich; we have different words for things,” he said.

The exchange of views was a crucial aspect of Gente y Cuentos for him—a practice he carried to his church, where he used his new analytical skills to interpret Bible passages and share views about them with other congregants. “The exchange of opinions is very important,” he said. “Someone else’s opinion can be as important as your own.”

A recent story Simón loved was “Esta mujer que baila sin moverse,” by Tomás Eloy Martinez, a short tale of a former New York City ballerina who is now homeless in Penn Station; the group explored the story’s images of light and shadow.

Because of Gente y Cuentos, Simón said, he reads differently now. “Now I read twice; I want to go into the heart of the story and explore. You go back and find something different. You find something deeper.”

He’s also discovered, at 32, a passion for language. “I want the children to read Spanish literature,” he said, waving toward the tables where children at CHS were gathered, giggling, for a snack. He’d like to learn the language of his Guatemalan grandmother, who spoke a native dialect rather than Spanish.

“Me gusta seguir apprender,” he said. “I want to keep learning.”

“What marks the artist is his power to shape the experience of pain we all have.”

--Lionel Trilling

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P&S, GyC move into bold realm of imagination

by Marcy Schwartz

In Córdoba, Argentina, a library of books once banned by the military junta's censors (1976-83) now resides at a center called the Espacio para la Memoria ("Space for Memory"). The site, where prisoners were once held and tortured, houses workshops inviting schoolchildren to think about this terrifying period in their history. Under the junta, even children's books were banned, and after reading a few of these titles with the children who visit the center, the workshop leaders ask them why they think the books were prohibited. One of the reasons the censors gave for prohibition was that these books offered "unlimited fantasy."

To explore this idea, in one workshop the kids sang the song "the Backward Kingdom" ("El reino del revés"), by the well-known Argentine singer María Elena Walsh. After hearing the charming lyrics (birds swim, fish fly, babies have beards, 2+2=3, etc.), students brainstormed to generate their own inside-out or upside-down examples. One child mentioned raining up, another suggested that big kids nap while little kids play, and a third proposed cars driving on the sidewalk while kids play in the street. Upset by this disorder, one of the children exclaimed, "No, that's impossible!" until the boy who imagined cars on sidewalks explained, "But we're just imagining!" His classmate responded, "Oh, okay, in that case it's possible."

The experience of the imagination is a human right, and literature invites and enhances this right. This power of the imagination lies at the core of the program People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos. For more than thirty years, People and Stories/Gente y Cuentos has organized groups of adults in community settings, in the United States and in Latin America, to listen to short stories read aloud. The program reaches a new public, one that never had access to these works before and never would have enjoyed and discussed them without it.

…People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos goes beyond introducing literature to a new audience. The program has been difficult to classify; rigorous but accessible, it owes a debt to Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed.* The program's originality lies in how it spurs conversation among voices that are rarely heard. Instead of teaching, People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos encourages marginalized voices to speak out, welcoming them in expanded cognitive landscapes. Since the program is completely oral, it does not rely on participants' reading skills or educational levels. A story is read aloud, and photocopies of it are distributed to the participants so they can follow along if they wish. Even those who read poorly or feel intimidated by books or have had alienating experiences in school can participate fully and freely in these groups.

…Most of my own experiences coordinating the program have been in a medium-security prison in New Jersey with young adult Hispanic inmates, although I have coordinated many groups in English as well and participate in training new coordinators. In 2006 I helped launch the program in Bogotá, Colombia, where I trained more than twenty new coordinators. The resonances of the stories shared in community groups—whether in public libraries, shelters, soup kitchens, and rehabilitation centers across the United States; in adult education programs in Colombia; or in France's largest prison, just outside Paris—unleash and resensitize the imagination. While this program may not seem concretely connected to human rights, it addresses the same kinds of concerns as the librarians and social workers whose work helps children in Argentina grasp the loss caused by censorship and appreciate the recovery of the democracy of reading. To imagine is a human right; to imagine is to be free.

…A few examples from People &Stories/Gente y Cuentos groups illustrate how the stories generate dialogue. Two stories by the Colombian writer and Nobel laureate Gabriel García Márquez are favorites in the program…In "Balthazar's

> ***"You are going to have to give and give and give, or there's no reason for you to be writing…There is no cosmic importance to your getting something published, but there is in learning to be a giver."***
>
> --Ann Lamott

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Marvelous Afternoon" ("La prodigiosa tarde de Baltazar"), Balthazar is a humble but talented carpenter who makes beautiful birdcages out of soldered metal and wire. When a young boy in the village asks him to make a cage for his bird, Balthazar works on it night and day for weeks, and the result is astounding.

…The poetic description of the birdcage evokes conversation:

> The cage was on display on the table: with its enormous dome of wire, three stories inside, with passageways and compartments especially for eating and sleeping and swings. In the space set aside for the birds' recreation, it seemed like a small-scale model of a gigantic ice factory. (107-08)

…The beauty and skill of this creation prompt discussion about construction projects, building models, and other artistic endeavors. In a recent group at the prison, one of the participants illustrated nearly every story we read. Discussing this story validates talents and interests beyond reading and comprehension, stimulating participants to recognize and embrace their imaginations.

Another favorite is Isabel Allende's "Two Words" ("Dos palabras"), a story that highlights what we call in the program "shadows." Shadows are the ambiguities, the silences, the gaps and distances that produce doubt and uncertainty, increase suspense, and call on the reader's ability to visualize…The big secret in this story are two words Belisa Crepusculario pronounces to a colonel, which seem to cast a spell over him. Belisa, a self-taught Cyrano de Bergerac, climbs out of extreme poverty by selling words. She writes letters, baptism and marriage announcements, legal documents, whatever her clients ask her to draft. When the colonel, a violent rural caudillo, decides that he wants to run for president and hopes to earn the public's affection rather than take the position by force, he contracts Belisa to write his campaign speech. The price for the speech includes the bonus of two secret words that Belisa whispers in his ear before she leaves.

…The story never reveals the two words. The most obvious message, "I love you," is expressed in two words in Spanish. But the participants suggest other options: "Find peace," "I'm American," "Let's arrive" (referring to crossing the border from Mexico into the United States), or even silence. I ask whether words can really exert so much power over people, and the participants confirm that they do, and mention prayer, chanting, Santería rituals and mantras. One of the participants commented that "words can be buried like swords," evoking Spanish sayings such as *having a dagger instead of a tongue* and *using your words like swords.* I asked if anyone had ever felt language like a sword, and a participant responded, "When I heard the judge pronounce the words of my sentence."

…According to Daniel Moyano, an Argentine writer whose stories we include in the program's bibliography, reading stories "is our most familiar, generous, intense, and violent way of stepping out of our routine and our boring reality. The short story is a violent, fast, and beautiful medium for taking you outside that reality, for connecting you to another reality that we only glimpse, that we long for…"

…How telling for Moyano to notice the "violent" nature of stories. Born in Córdoba, the city with the library of banned books, Moyano himself was a victim of human rights violations. Arrested and then exiled just after the military dictatorship took power in 1976, he lived in Spain until his death in 1992. In Spanish, *violento* suggests abrupt, sharp transitions, jarring stimuli, gripping and shocking input that produces an intense reaction. How can reading a story be both "violent" and "generous"? This is a kind of question we ask participants in People and Stories/Gente y Cuentos sessions. Between violence and generosity is an inviting space for eliciting strong responses from unassuming but emboldened new readers, a space where reading together enhances our collective lives.

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"What was any art but an effort to make a sheath, a mold in which to imprison for a moment the shining, elusive element which is life itself."

--Willa Cather

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P&S sessions offer alternative to war of words

by Anndee Hochman

In "American History," Judith Ortiz Cofer describes Paterson, New Jersey, as a place where "the Straight and Narrow (streets) intersect." It's an ironic note, because the storyline quickly deviates from the "straight and narrow." It depicts a blue-collar town in November, 1963—a place unified in sorrow by the death of President John F. Kennedy and fractured by class, ethnic and racial prejudices.

When I brought this story to a group of older adults at the Camden Senior Day Center in Blackwood, New Jersey, our discussion began with the same jagged faultlines.

> *At almost any hour of the day, El Building was like a monstrous jukebox, blasting out* salsas *from open windows as the residents, mostly new immigrants just up from the island, tried to drown out whatever they were currently enduring with loud music.*

"The music today is horrible!" Anna burst out. "You can't even understand it. And they play it so loud!" Other residents offered stories of teenagers who blast rap from their car speakers, neighbors whose music pounds through flimsy apartment walls.

I could see where this discussion was headed: down a narrowing road of assumptions, a path where loud music would soon be linked to poverty, laziness, ignorance and general up-to-no-goodness. The graying heads around the table would nod, their voices a unifying huff of righteousness: *Ach, kids today!*

Except that's not what happened.

Instead, quiet Lorraine recalled how her parents reacted when she and her friends began listening to Elvis Presley; the older generation, she said, was scandalized by those swerving hips, that come-hither voice. Rita said, "It's true, the music today is different. You have to understand it. My grandson helps me out with it."

Even Anna changed her tune. I read the "monstrous jukebox" passage again, and she said, "Well, either they were celebrating being in a new country or drowning out their problems. Music, to me, always soothes your soul."

Again and again, I have witnessed this pattern in People & Stories sessions: someone voices an outrageous statement, rippling with prejudice—*Hispanic people are like that, so insular…Teenagers don't think of anyone but themselves…The new ones who come here, they don't even want to learn English!*—only to hear someone else challenge or question the assumptions beneath it.

In other venues, voicing a deeply-held prejudice could be inflammatory; the conversation could devolve into a war of words as each side drives the other to vociferous extremes. In People & Stories, words are not weapons; they are tools we use to pry beneath the surface, picking our way ever closer to a complicated truth. "Sometimes," Anna said, shaking her head in vexation, "I hear Spanish language on the television and I want to throw my TV through the window. They just need to learn English!"

That hung in the air for a moment, and then Rita remembered the Italian spoken by her grandparents, a tongue that barely exists in her family today, and Lorraine said her grandmother had stopped speaking German during World War II. The women were sad about these lost languages and the stories they housed.

"I guess it is very hard for foreigners in this country," Anna said. "And I shouldn't say 'foreigners,' because we're all foreigners."

No one could argue with that.

"American History" ends with a grim image—pure snow "turning gray as it touched the ground below." Or maybe it's a hopeful emblem, because the story's narrator keeps her gaze on the still-white snow as it falls. In either case, Cofer seems to say, history is neither straight nor narrow; it is a wide, complicated and messy unfolding. It is what happens beneath the screaming headlines, where good people sometimes say reckless things and then—if they are lucky—have the chance to cross-examine their ideas, re-think them and speak again.

"When, for instance, you are painting a landscape, don't leave out the rain just because you've started with the sunshine."

--Henri Matisse

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Quaker values dovetail with P&S mission

Talking with Bill Strong

Outside Bill Strong's Princeton home is a sign that reads, "War Is Not the Answer."

Inside is a man who walks that talk.

For more than fifty years, Strong has visited Cuba regularly as part of Witness for Peace. He repairs books as a way of preserving literature and values for the next generation. And recently, he joined the People & Stories board, drawn by the connection between his Quaker commitments and the mission of bringing literature to those on the margins.

Visiting sessions at Bo Robinson Education & Treatment Center in Trenton has affirmed the role of luck and resources in his own life, Strong said. "As a Quaker, I'm highly interested in equality. The whole idea of Crossing Borders is terrific. I'm a very privileged guy in terms of education, mentors, jobs and marriage. I go to Bo Robinson and see guys who made one little mistake, maybe got caught with a drug, and maybe that led them to do something to keep the money flowing… they became addicted in one fashion or another, and before you know it, they've lost five years of their lives.

"It's wonderful to have the hope that they are on a new path, and the cost of that disruption to their lives [can be] corrected."

His own life path was paved with fortuitous "accidents"—mentors, scholarships and work-study opportunities that resulted in an undergraduate education at Yale; a teaching stint in Miami that led him to meet the son of the German ambassador to Cuba. He cut sugar cane in Cuba in the late '60s, learned Spanish in Costa Rica and lived in Peru for several years. He plans to visit Cuba again with Witness for Peace this winter.

Strong, 82, prefers to describe his stage of life not as "retirement" but as "redirection." The former term, he says, implies a downhill slide, while "redirection" suggests new ventures, such as his home-based business repairing beloved, worn-out books.

He started as a volunteer in the Bucks County Community College library, helping to shelve books; he became curious about how books wear out and how to resurrect them. Seven years ago, in Princeton, he began repairing children's books in the public library; as of last May, he'd tended to 4,000 volumes. Now he repairs family Bibles or special titles that someone wishes to preserve.

> "I go to Bo Robinson and see guys who made one little mistake, maybe got caught with a drug… it's wonderful to have the hope that they are on a new path..."

"I'm saving the books for the next generation. If a Bible has been in the family for a generation or two and has the genealogy in it, that book needs to be cared for. Same with a special children's book that a grandmother had first, then the daughter. It's a green activity and a very warm thing. [Customers] come in and sit here across the room from me, on the couch, and next thing you know we're talking about values."

Strong is determined to keep walking the talk. A former runner, he goes to a fitness center fourteeen times a month because he wants to maintain his "good, solid heart." He also likes to quote a Quaker phrase, "way opens," meaning that if one waits with curiosity and open heart, opportunities for growth and connection will inevitably arrive.

That has been true of his life—the chance to work in Latin America, to head the Massachusetts chapter of Planned Parenthood, to relish the oasis of silence in a Quaker meeting, to discuss short stories with men at Bo Robinson who have led utterly different lives. "I didn't plan any of that stuff," he says. "It's an awful lot of good fortune."

"…language is what makes us human. It is a recourse against the meaningless noise and silence of nature and history."

--Octavio Paz

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On the Bookshelf…

Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work, by Edwidge Danticat. New York: Vintage Books, 2010.

by Anndee Hochman

Edwidge Danticat comes from a place where words have literally meant life and death. Her native Haiti, under the dictator François "Papa Doc" Duvalier, was a place where citizens could be imprisoned or killed for owning the "wrong" books or staging a reading of a "subversive" play.

In this series of probing, at times wrenching, essays, first prepared for Princeton University's Toni Morrison Lecture Series, Danticat explores the precarious position of the immigrant artist—someone for whom creating is both luxury and obligation; the one who witnesses, but from the safe and troubling distance of another country.

She weaves her own story—a visit to an aunt who refuses to come down from the mountain where she lives in Beauséjour; a cousin buried in the rubble of Haiti's 2010 earthquake—with those of other Haitian writers, activists and exiles, reminding us that every artist is shaped by countless influences and inspirations.

Danticat's aunts and grandmothers used to say, "In Haiti, people never really die," a phrase that puzzled Danticat, because it seemed to her that Haitians were dying all the time, from political violence and disease, poverty and natural disasters. As an adult, she came to believe that "in Haiti people's spirits never really die," and that the writer has a role in keeping them alive.

To "create dangerously," she concludes, is to write in spite of all obstacles, in the midst of guilt and sorrow, in the hope that words can resurrect and transform. It means, she says, "knowing in part that no matter how trivial your words may seem, someday, somewhere, someone may risk his or her life to read them."

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