



Writers Matter

La Salle University • Urban Writers

Newsletter, Volume 2

Words from the Director

Welcome to our second newsletter for the Writers Matter program. As founder and director, I take great pleasure to announce we are currently in our sixth year providing innovative writing opportunities for students in the Philadelphia metropolitan areas. The Writers Matter program is an adaptation of Erin Gruwell's Freedom Writers program, a program for high school students started in Long Branch California. Writers Matter has been designed for middle and lower high school students specifically adapted to the developmentally – oriented learning needs of this age.

The Writers Matter's major goal is to improve written communication skills through instructional strategies which engage and motivate middle school and lower high school students and which lead them to academic achievement. Through Writers Matter, students learn to:

- Write better and with more confidence by writing about personal experiences
- Become more confident and engaged learners
- Make better connections with benefits of academic success
- Utilize research-based writing strategies aligned with state and school district curriculum standards
- Increase writing abilities and foster a love of writing and creative expression through the use of journalizing.

This program was first piloted at Grover Washington Jr. Middle School, in the school district of Philadelphia in 2005. Teaming up with Michael Galbraith, an 8th grade middle school literacy teacher, I worked for three years with over 200 students developing the program. The project culminated with the publication of a book called *Voices of Teens: Writers Matter* published by the National Middle School Association in 2008. This book celebrated the many successes of the students and resulted in 107 middle school students having their work published. The book includes teaching strategies and writing samples for both teachers and students.

The program spread to more schools with many more teachers implementing the model with their students. Research was conducted every year and results were extremely positive. The program not only led to higher achievement in writing but provided a more student-friendly environment allowing students to more freely express themselves and discuss important issues among their peers. As the students became more motivated to write, they wrote more frequently, coherently and creatively. Cliques, stereotypes, and racial boundaries within the classrooms began to decrease, as students began to truly see all their peers as thinking, feeling, people with the same problems and insecurities as they face. Students began to emerge as more confident individuals using their personalities and own unique voice to express themselves through writing.

This fall of 2009, the Writers Matter program underwent a major expansion with the School District of Philadelphia and other schools in Philadelphia and New Jersey area. Through the collaborative efforts of Pamela Brown, Northwest Regional Superintendent, Marco Zaroni, Principal of the AMY Middle School and myself, a partnership was created that included eight schools. Recently, Pamela Brown was appointed Chief Academic Officer and Penny Nixon was named Northwest Regional Superintendent. Penny has been a wonderful addition to our team and a strong advocate to help the program move forward.

In addition to the eight schools located in the NW region (Amy Northwest, Charles, W. Henry, John Story Jencks, Anna L. Lingelbach, Morris E. Leeds, Theodore Roosevelt, Louis Wagner and NW Parkway), the program also serves the Vare Middle School in South Philadelphia, DePaul Catholic, Friends-Select, Paul VI High School and our newest member The San Miguel School in Camden, N.J. The program involves more than 900 young students at this time. *(continued on Page 2)*

Family Matters

*Eighth Grade Student
Leeds Middle School*

Have you ever felt? That you don't belong?
You're so different from everyone else.
Your family is people of sports and video games.
Parents push you to do what they want or did
when they were young.
It's like two football teams;
My mom the Quarterback,
My sister the Wide Receiver,
and My brother the Running Back,
and My dad the tackler.
And me, I'm on the other team trying to protect
my dreams and goals.
But the score is 0-97.
I try my best to get around my dad by giving him
his favorite toy: the Basketball.
I get by my brother with the latest video game.
I get by my sister with H&M clothes.
But... **BOOM!!!**
I hit the floor.
My mom is never distracted by anything.
The score is 0-100.
They have won the game by crushing my dreams,
what they don't realize is that they lost the best
point of the game:
ME!!!

In the News

Read an article published in the La Salle Collegian by following the link below:

[Urban Writers Still Active After Five Years](#)

The teachers from all the schools are involved in a year-long professional development program where we meet once a month at La Salle University to coordinate writing assignments and to deal with the many challenges and opportunities that are presented on a daily basis. Teachers communicate electronically through our website to share teaching ideas and to help each other with everyday issues. A real community of professionals has been created to serve the needs of the students.

The Writers Matter program utilizes LaSalle University undergrads to mentor and tutor students on journal writing and specific content-related writing assignments. In addition to assisting with student's writing, the young writers develop meaningful relationships with the university students and (perhaps for the first time) see a college future for themselves. La Salle students gain as much, if not more, than the young writers do, as they form sustained friendships and gain a rich understanding of communities with which they otherwise may not be familiar. These students come to better understand their opportunities and responsibilities as they become engaged citizens. This year we have 31 mentors in the schools.

Our partnering does not end with the schools we serve. This year we have entered into an exciting new relationship with Philadelphia's Mural Arts Program and Philabundance to create a mural that will include work of the Writers Matter students. This initiative will team with nationally known mural artist, Meg Saligman to design a mural focusing on nutrition and hunger. This mural theme coincides with La Salle's essential question of economic justice. Fifteen (15) middle school students will be selected as "mural scholars" to participate as writers and artists in the design of the mural. This mural will be constructed on the site of Philabundance, located in the food distribution center of Philadelphia only a few blocks from the sports stadiums. Many thanks to Alan Casnoff, Bill Clark, Jane Golden and Judy Hellman for making this initiative a part of the Writers Matter program.

Also, special thanks to other members of my team that include Marjie Allen, Deb Yost, and Conrad Gleber who have taken a major role in the mentoring, digital storytelling and research component of the program. Many thanks to my four La Salle University students Suzanne Liposky, Shannon Prendergest, Tom Wingert and Alice Scottiantuo serving as mentoring coordinators and digital art support.

The Writers Matter program is providing unique opportunities for so many young students to express themselves through the writing process while learning critical writing skills. In addition, they are developing personal relationships with peers that allow them to be more tolerance and appreciative of others. This program is generously supported by the PTS Foundation (Pam and Tony Schneider) and the Tyler Aaron Bookman Memorial Foundation (Neil and Jill Bookman). These contributors have been supportive and helpful to me with their welcomed suggestions and continuous attention to the vision of the program.

Thank You,

Bob Vogel
Director, *Writers Matter*
Professor, Department of Education
La Salle University
vogel@lasalle.edu



La Salle University Mentors

La Salle students become mentors for the Writing Matters program in two ways: as volunteers through the University Ministry and Service at La Salle and as a service learning experience in the Introductory Leadership and Global Understanding course. Some of the students have never before been inside an urban school; some of them are graduates of schools much like these. For each, it is a unique learning experience. Being role models for younger students is exciting; even more exciting is the opportunity to nurture the talents and passions of these students. Building relationships with students whose lives may be significantly different from their own, La Salle mentors come to understand the more significant things they have in common.



GIVING

Contributions can be made to the *Writers Matter* program by sending donations to:

La Salle University
attn: Dr. Robert Vogel
1900 West Olney Ave.
Philadelphia, PA 19141

- or -

Make a gift online at

www.lasalle.edu/makeagift

In the comments section, please type "Urban Writers Program: Writers Matter"

Student Reactions

"It will let you know that you're not the only person going through problems in life. It would help you grow up mentally and give you the strength to WRITE!"

"The program just brought out the writer in me and showed me what a good writer I am."

"Write about memories and wishes, friends and family, love and hate – that's what I did and I have learned more about my character as well as others!"

Educator Reactions

"...the Writers Matter program repeatedly forces me to step back, and open my eyes to exactly what my student's lives are like, the troubles they face, the obstacles they overcome, and the strong desire they have to be heard and understood."

"The program seemed to enhance the quality of students' writing. Students who rarely hand in writing assignments or complain about writing will write copiously in their journals, with higher level skills than they typically exhibit on traditional assignments."

Mentor Reactions

"It made me feel special because I realized just showing up and talking to them gives them comfort, trust and a sense of hope-- that even though life is tough you just keep going and you can make it through."

"Walking into the classroom today feels like I've been doing it forever. I've gotten so comfortable being a part of this class once a week and the students were definitely excited."

"The students' faces light up every time we walk in the class room, and there are always certain students who call out my name in order to wave and get my attention."

Digital Storytelling is an integral aspect of the experience of some of La Salle University Mentors that are pursuing a Minor in Leadership and Global Understanding at La Salle University. These mentors will either work with a student at their school to develop the students story and capture appropriately correlated images with a digital camera, or the mentors themselves will create a digital story about their experiences with the Writers Matter program. For examples of Digital Stories by La Salle University Mentors, please follow the links below:

[Pat Terranova Digital Story](#)
[Amy Czulada Digital Story](#)
[Suzanne Lipovsky Digital Story](#)



STUDENT WRITING

Can You Hear Me?

*Seventh Grade Student
Jenks Middle School*

Can you hear me?
 Through my cries of despair.
 Can you hear me?
 When my heart is full of fear.
 Can you hear me?
 When my dad always bails.
 Can you hear me?
 He's like a broken record that never fails.
 Can you hear me?
 With all my hardships – I just drop and cry.
 Can you hear me?
 It won't hold me back – I have to try!
 Can you hear me?
 Up alone in my room.
 Can you hear me?
 Sweep away my tears with a raggedy old broom.
 Can you hear me?
 'Cause I can't hear you.
 Can you hear me?
 'Cause I don't know what to do.

I Am From North Philly

*Eighth Grade Student
Wagner Middle School*

I am from famine and watching people starve
 I am from the land of meek mills
 I am from hate and every other feeling
 I am from fight pain and struggle
 When my brother would fight my mom with all
 his might
 I am from giving up on their dreams
 I am from sadness
 I am poverty and starving
 I am from dogs
 I am from death of family members and
 sadness
 I am from cops on the block
 I am from drugs and people selling them
 I am from guns
 I am from where people are shot almost
 every day
 I am from the news helicopters
 I am from a split family
 I am from gangs in front of my house
 I am from not being able to have a dream
 I am from broken hearts
 I am from McDonalds, fried chicken and Chinese
 food
 I am from hip-hop
 I am from drug heads
 I am from bills
 I am from robbery
 I am from where you can't trust your friends
 I am from arguments with my mom because of her
 boyfriend
 I am from a family that hates each other but deep
 down love each other.

This House, is My House

*Eighth Grade Student
Depaul Catholic Middle School*

The chaos that surrounds me,
 It's like a hurricane.
 I can't control it.
 I can't handle it.
 All the arguing and fighting

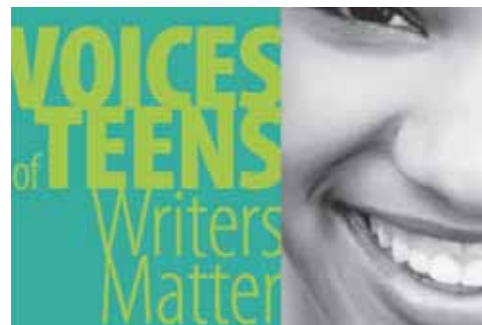
 My house is so crazy.
 There's crying and sadness.
 I can't stop it.
 It's a sad moment.

 She's making me mad.
 She's the reason I think that way.
 They're the reason I keep things inside.

I can't wait until therapy but it seems so weird,
 Talking to someone I hardly know
 Telling them how I feel.

This will never end.
 The arguing, the crying, the sadness, and the
 madness.

It's out of control in this house.
 I just can't take this anymore.
 This is my struggle.
 This is my house.



Flaws and All

Eighth Grade Student

When I smile in class, I sit and think while the time passes.
 I think about whether I'm happy, sad, or just plain mad.
 I think is there a reason for me to smile,
 or am I hiding my anger behind my beautiful brown eyes?
 The eyes that seem like they cry, at night from
 the mean and hurtful things people say that I don't like.

 But that's alright because I get up,
 And stand tall,
 Because I'm Beautiful