

Writing Our Stories

*An Anti-Violence
Creative Writing Program*
CURRICULUM GUIDE



*Developed by The Alabama Writers' Forum, Inc.,
& The Alabama Department of Youth Services*

Introduction

The Value of Arts/Juvenile Justice Partnerships

IN 1997, writers teamed up with juvenile justice educators to embark on new territory for the state of Alabama. “Writing Our Stories: An Anti-Violence Creative Writing Program” began with the idea that published writers could teach juvenile offenders to write about their lives as a way of enriching their therapeutic experience.

The Alabama Writers’ Forum, Inc., a not-for-profit literary arts organization, devised the blueprint, hired the published writers to teach, and worked with the Alabama Department of Youth Services (DYS) administrators and educators to integrate creative writing into the DYS school district.

From one class on the Mt. Meigs campus in the Lurleen B. Wallace School, the program has grown to include the Sequoyah School on the Chalkville campus and McNeel School on the Vacca campus. The three teaching writers work with two classes of up to 24 students each week on each campus. The program has published nine anthologies of student poetry and prose. All over Alabama, people are becoming aware that this partnership helps the boys and girls who enter the Department of Youth Services System to find a productive voice with which to speak.

The concept behind the program is very simple: Young people who are angry, frustrated, ill-informed, and just plain “off the track” need a way to be heard. They crave respect and identity. Learning the craft of poetry, fiction, and/or creative nonfiction writing gives them a way to gain the identity they yearn for and to express wishes, fears, and deep-seated frustration that they might not otherwise release.

The “Writing Our Stories” curriculum

It is my belief that young people who have made mistakes can regain control of their own lives and destinies...

Writing their own stories, without doubt, opens their minds to new possibilities for redirecting their lives.

—J. WALTER WOOD, JR.

Executive Director, Alabama Department of Youth Services



guide is designed in a step-by-step format so that teachers in other correctional education facilities may also use creative writing as a means for their students to tell their stories and express themselves in a nonviolent manner. The teaching writers have developed various lessons and have cross-tested each other's, and they have used every lesson and strategy in this guide successfully over and over.

This book contains suggested uses for the curriculum; a complete set of lessons that may span nine months of class time; instructions for incorporating character education into the creative writing curriculum; and guidelines for testing, grading, and assessment. In addition, the teaching writers discuss the highly effective practice of inviting other published writers to visit and to lead classes as well as the process of editing and publishing the anthology of student writing. The curriculum guide includes a useful bibliography of books about the writing process, primary texts by poets and writers, and other reference books. The guide also provides information about the project partners, a tally sheet for supplies, and an offprint of the first full-length article about "Writing Our Stories" published in a professional correctional education journal.

Key to this program's success are the members of the team. Some words from the teaching writers, the cooperating (or classroom) teachers, and the program administrators follow.

WORDS FROM THE TEACHING WRITERS

One unique feature of the "Writing Our Stories" project is that it places professional writers in the classroom as teachers. The participating teaching writers bring diverse backgrounds and

experiences to their students. Marlin Barton, a published fiction writer and college writing instructor, was the project's first teaching writer at Mt. Meigs in 1997. Priscilla Hancock Cooper, who joined the project at the Chalkville campus for young women in 1998, is a poet and dramatic artist. Danny Gamble began teaching at the Vacca campus in 1999 and is a poet, journalist, and college English instructor.

These teaching writers share a passion for writing and a commitment to the development of young writers. Working from their varied perspectives, they empower their students by providing them with the tools to effectively express themselves through the written word.

The teaching writers describe these results in their introductions to the anthologies produced by the students in their classes:

"I've...been pleased to see the way in which my students



continue to develop their writing abilities and to take a hard look at their lives, their world, and the choices they've made...It is my hope that these young writers are able to find some sense of release through their words, and that perhaps the reader will too."

—Marlin Barton, *Open the Door III*.

"These young writers are not afraid. Unflinchingly, they use their writing to journey into the human spirit. Some of the places they visit are dark and ugly, while others are bright and beautiful. But whether the subject matter is youth violence or young love, sexual abuse or the morning sunrise, the students write with honesty and clarity. And in so doing, they allow us, the reader, to glimpse their souls and challenge us to look into our own."

—Priscilla Hancock Cooper, *Look Into My Soul*.

"...I learned to measure my students' evolution as writers through the usage of a single word—thug. The students referred to each other and to themselves as thugs. As the students began to mature as writers, the word 'thug' disappeared from their work.... Here we read the words of budding writers, not those of dormant thugs."

—Danny Gamble, *Lock Down*.

WORDS FROM THE COOPERATING TEACHERS

The "Writing Our Stories" project is a model of collaboration at both the administrative and classroom levels. The project was created through the joint efforts of a state juvenile justice agency, the Alabama Department of Youth Services, and a statewide arts organization, the Alabama Writers' Forum. At each campus, the classroom teacher and the teaching writer work as partners to nurture the efforts of the student writers.

The classroom teacher is responsible for identifying and recruiting students, assisting the teaching writer, and serving as liaison between the writing class and the campus administration. The classroom teachers are the biggest boosters of the project. Not only do they support and encourage the students in the writing class, but they expand the project's impact by sharing the writing lessons with their other students.

Sandra Whatley-Washington has worked with Marlin Barton at Mt. Meigs since 1999. She takes particular pride since the fact that "students are transcending classroom skills and creating works that deserve special recognition." One student was recognized by the Alabama Writers' Forum statewide 2001 Literary Arts and Scholarship Competition. The National Commission on Correctional Health Care recognized another student for his poem addressing HIV prevention.

Words cannot express how I've felt when I have seen some of these young girls' pain and anger turn into something beautiful.

—JANET DIXON
Classroom Teacher



Janet Dixon is also a veteran of the project, serving as cooperating teacher since its inception at the Chalkville campus in 1998. She writes that “it has been great...for me as a teacher.... I had no idea how talented our students were, never had a clue as to what their potential was. These students poured their hearts and souls into their work, and I am very pleased with the results.”

Classroom teacher Cynthia Wilburn works with the project at the Vacca campus. Ms. Wilburn says of their anthology *Lock Down*, “Reflecting the experiences, dreams, hopes, and fears of our students, the poems and stories in this edition will give readers a better perspective of life within the juvenile justice system.”

WORDS FROM PROGRAM ADMINISTRATORS

“Writing Our Stories” is a unique partnership because it blends the artistic community and the juvenile justice community. The result is a realistic, arts-based approach toward curbing Alabama’s burgeoning juvenile offender population. Like many states, Alabama has seen the number of incarcerated juveniles rise. Now, through the collaborative efforts of the Alabama Department of Youth Services and the Alabama Writers’ Forum, boys and girls who are being educated through the DYS school district have the opportunity to learn writing skills, and also to gain hope. As young writers, and improved readers, they are equipped to survive better once they leave DYS—either to return to school with new skills and a better sense of themselves as students—or to enter the working world, again with a stronger self-concept that, it is hoped, will help them succeed and not offend again.

According to J. Walter Wood, Jr., executive director of the Alabama Department of Youth Services, “Writing Our Stories” is important to the DYS population because it “...opens their minds to new possibilities for redirecting their lives.”

Mr. Wood writes, “It is my belief that young people who have made mistakes can regain control of their own lives and their own destinies, if they are given a chance. In a program such as ‘Writing Our Stories,’ the arts professionals and the classroom teachers with whom they work offer these young people such a chance.”

Arts administrators echo Mr. Wood’s confidence in the program. Al Head, executive director of the Ala-



bama State Council on the Arts, administers a strong arts-in-education program through the Council. "I am very impressed with the progress that has been made in developing and establishing a program where artists, in this case writers, and juvenile justice professionals can help young people return to a more productive life," said Head. "I am proud of the fact that the Alabama Writers' Forum and DYS have made arts-in-education a priority for juvenile justice in Alabama."

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Finally, the Forum and DYS deeply appreciate the curriculum development grant awarded for 2001-2002 from the Alabama Children's Trust Fund. The grant funded the research, development, and printing of the guide, as well as training sessions to help both DYS and teaching artists better understand the entire process. Our deepest thanks to the staff and board of directors of the Children's Trust Fund for having confidence in "Writing Our Stories."

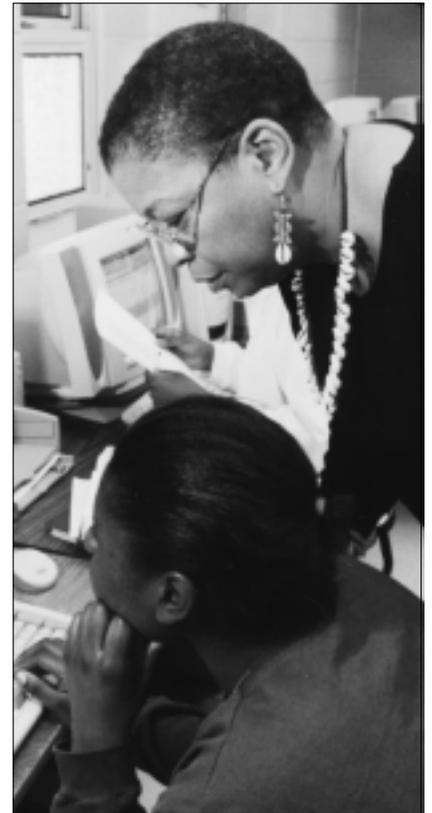
SUGGESTED USES FOR THE CURRICULUM

As a tool for:

- Professionals in the juvenile correction environment, including both the therapeutic and educational aspects of short and long-term settings, as well as group homes.
- Arts educators, including arts-in-education program managers who place artists in schools and the arts educators themselves (i.e., the teaching writers).
- Teachers in general and alternative school programs where a key component is adapting to the learner's individual ability level.

CLASSROOM DEMOGRAPHICS

This curriculum has been developed over a five-year period in school settings that were gender segregated with students ages 12-18, in classrooms that were multi-ability level. For instance, a classroom might have girls ages 12-17, some who read at a college level and others who read at third grade level. The challenge to the teaching writer is to adapt the lesson, even as it is being taught, to these various levels while not losing sight of the goal (i.e., individual work and revision). However, creative writing lessons such as these have been used quite successfully all over the country in co-ed classrooms in public and private schools, also.



SUGGESTED TIMELINES

This curriculum is designed for a nine-month residency, with classes meeting twice a week for at least one hour, plus two months for anthology development and publication. However, it could be adapted to a shorter-term residency, from 10 class lessons to several months. Because the lessons build incrementally, starting with basic aspects of figurative writing such as incorporating the five senses, making comparisons, and discriminating between abstract and concrete language, and because the lessons are designed as discrete modules, teachers may design their own units of study.

EXAMINING THE STRATEGIES

Not every child will write the same level of work. The goal is to improve in his or her individual areas of need, such as improved reading comprehension or vocabulary development, as opposed to everyone scoring uniformly on a test.

LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

- Processing data through techniques, i.e., meeting the goals of each individual lesson.
- Interpreting content.
- Modeling or expressing productive behaviors, including character education development.
- Achieving breakthroughs in therapy.
- Building self-esteem.

Writing Our Stories

An Anti-Violence Creative Writing Program Curriculum Guide

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