

The “Where I’m From” Project

Connecting to History and Community Through Poetry

SUMMER BRENNER

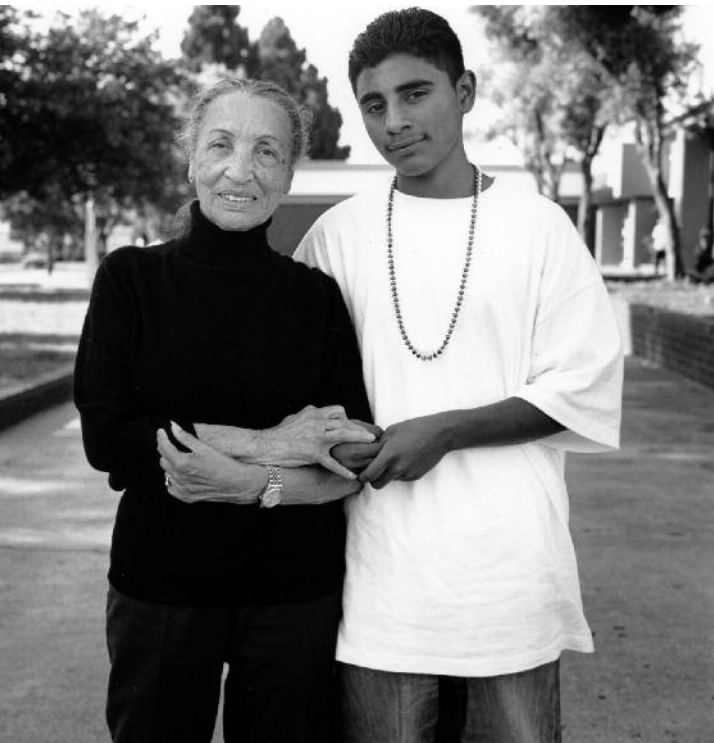
AROUND THE WORLD, stories have always passed from one generation to the next. Though these stories can refer to lives far removed in time and place from our own, they almost always focus on the same core questions: core principles of story-telling remain the same: what insights can one generation impart to another, and how do we connect—and stay connected—to family, history, place?



The “Where I’m From” project evolved from a belief that these family stories can help guide youth, validate elders, and provide an intersection for their shared experiences. I developed the project in partnership with Ruth Morgan, Executive Director of Community Works, which seeks to provide disenfranchised populations in the San Francisco Bay area with opportunities to build community and give voice to their experiences. In late 2006, we received a grant from The Christensen Fund to initiate the project and were invited by an enthusiastic history teacher in nearby Richmond, California to meet weekly with his ninth-grade students during the upcoming spring semester.

The project was designed to achieve three primary goals: to train students to conduct oral history interviews with older relatives; to have the students write poems inspired by these interviews; and to create a community exhibit of student writings, with accompanying photographs of the students and their family members.

Summer Brenner has received grants from The Christensen Fund (to underwrite “Where I’m From”), the California Arts Council, California State Library, The ED. Fund, and Friends of the Berkeley Public Library to conduct literacy-related projects at schools, libraries, and drug-recovery programs in the Richmond and Berkeley area. She is a member of West County READS (a coalition of literacy advocates) and the Youth Transportation Coalition (advocating for free/reduced bus fare for low-income students). She is the author of eight books of poetry and fiction, including the young adult novel, Ivy, Tale of a Homeless Girl in San Francisco, and 1-5, a crime novel which will be published in fall 2008 by PM Press.



Two fountains tastes one slightly irascible.

“Where I’m From” is a poetry format that inspired our project’s name. It consists of a dozen or more lines, each beginning with the phrase: I’m from ____; each blank is followed by an instruction to complete the line with place names, family names, brand names, favorite foods, et al. The format is used by teachers to entice students to reflect upon themselves and their surroundings. I first encountered it in a Richmond, California classroom whose walls were plastered with “Where I’m From” poems, each an expression of energetic street grit and wistful longing.

Richmond, California is a small city on the northeast shore of the San Francisco Bay, heavily populated with

low-income families and a diversity of cultures. In parts of the city, crime is high, employment is low, and “murder capital of California” occasionally splashes across the headlines.

Although the “Where I’m From” project can easily be adapted to other demographic groups, our target was the at-risk high-school population of Richmond. The school district that encompasses Richmond serves over 30,000 students and cites 80 languages within its 65-square-mile jurisdiction. Our initial group of fifteen students was comprised of African-Americans, Mexicans, El Salvadorians, Guatemalans, and first-generation Latinos. Because of the ever-increasing tensions between Black and Latino teens, we welcomed the mix, hoping our project would diminish their perceived differences and underscore a mutual history of migration, peonage, and discrimination.

The project’s success depended on two critical factors: insuring that students were sufficiently comfortable and competent to conduct interviews with family members; and familiarizing them with the “Where I’m From” poetry format so they could create poems of their own.

To prepare for interviews, we met weekly to discuss personal migration patterns, reasons for migration, and the meaning of oral history. We also discussed interview techniques (such as “active listening”), and helped the students become more familiar with the “Where I’m From” format.

Students devised a uniform questionnaire, incorporating “Where I’m From” prompts (as questions rather than declarations), starting with basics, such as date and place of birth. The information they gathered from using this questionnaire for their oral history interviews would ultimately be used to create the lines of their poems; I’m from my birth on March 16, 1994 / I’m from a 14-hour labor at Highland Hospital and my mama’s pain.

The students also added queries of their own. “What were the worst (or stu-

pidest) things and best (or smartest) things you ever did?” I’m from driving without a license and getting popped / I’m from visiting my grandma every summer in Seattle. The group process of designing the questionnaire allowed for a great deal of individual creativity as well.

Creative opportunities abound in designing an interview questionnaire

Once the questionnaire was finalized, we were ready to proceed. Students began with several “practice” interviews with members of the local community. These proved crucial in helping the students understand the process. Interviewees were mostly thoughtful, open, and generous. The group setting in the classroom relieved any single student of responsibility for a full interview. They each took turns asking a question and jotting notes. If nothing else, students learned from these initial interviews that every life holds a story.

Over four weeks, they interviewed:

- an African-American elected official whose father’s family fled Louisiana under death threats and who himself was a draft resistor during the Vietnam War;
- an octogenarian Mexican-American who grew up in San Diego and moved to Richmond after the Korean War;
- an Irish-American whose immigrant parents raised nine children in a nearby two-bedroom house (an introduction to white poverty); and
- a Chinese-American whose parents were engaged at six months in a remote village north of Shanghai and whose father left at sixteen to seek livelihood, first in Europe and then New York, and did not return to China for his bride for almost twenty years.

Students were notably impressed by these jaw-dropping, dramatic narratives.

Following the group interviews, students worked collectively on poems that described their interview subjects, debating which highlights to include. This aspect of the project expanded the self-referential responses of “Where I’m From” into external observations of the interview subject: “Where He’s From” and/or “Where She’s From.” Concretizing Converting the interviewees’ answers into lines of poetry was an essential element in building bridges between generations.



Two fountains tastes one slightly irascible.

In an area like Richmond, where poverty puts primed with teens at risk for dangerous behavior, we looked forward to our students sitting down with a family elder and gleaned words of advice from a seasoned voice of experience. However, when the time came to schedule actual interviews, obstacles arose immediately.

"I don't feel comfortable with anyone in my family," a boy confessed. "Troubles at home," a girl told me. "They're all crazy," another said. Some families had no elders; others lived too far away. Some family members refused to be photographed; others could not take time off from work.

We adapted: if no relations were available, members of the community could be invited in their stead. In fact, interviewing outsiders proved to be the unexpected proverbial "blessing in disguise." Teenage angst and family baggage dissipated. Inhibitions for both parties noticeably decreased. In a few cases, the interviewee instantly became a mentor.

By the last day of school, in spite of absences, sickness, dropouts, delays, and no-shows, the students had completed their interviews and composed their poems. In addition, they had comportednduct themselves beautifully. In all cases, the interviews reflected totalwere conducted with an air of mutual respect respectfulness. Under these particular circumstances, students were not trained both to interview and take notes at the same time. Nor were there resources to record and transcribe the interviews. While they conducted the interviews, I took notes. Later, in the classroom, students used my notes and their own memory to write poems about interviewees as well as "Where I'm From" poems about themselves.

Interviews with family generally took place off campus in their home; community interviews took place at school. Ruth Morgan and I oversaw each interview and afterwards, Ruth took photographs.

When relatives were interviewed, students usually learned something amazing about their own family ("You mean he's my great-grandfather!"). When they interviewed outsiders, they heard from role models who contrasted with the adults at home. Interviewees also appreciated the rare opportunity to express themselves. As one elder remarked, "Nobody ever asks you to sit down and tell them about your life, and by the time they think of it, it's too late."

Overall, the project exceeded our expectations in helping students connect to history and place: not just their own,



Jabberwockies quickly perused the botulisms. Umpteen irascible pawnbrokers laughed lamely. Two sheep ran away, but Pluto.

but also that of their peers, and their elders, most of whom were born into a different world. It also helped them give voice to the power and beauty of these connections, and, through the culminating exhibit, the opportunity to share these honest and life-affirming views of themselves and their community with others.

Ruth Morgan and Community Works (CW) have produced several outstanding exhibits of youth art with important social themes. Working mostly with high-risk, under-served populations, CW exhibits have focused on the Civil Rights movement, the Japanese-American internment camps, and the experiences of children of incarcerated parents. These exhibits have traveled coast to coast, from Harlem's Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture to the San Francisco Public Library.

In the spring of 2008, the "Where I'm From" exhibit, fifteen 4' x 2' panels displaying student poems and Ruth Morgan's photographic portraits, opened at the Richmond Museum of History. The "Where I'm From" youth helped plan the event and acted as co-hosts and speakers. In attendance were over a hundred family members, friends, and community leaders, including the Mayor of Richmond and superintendent of schools.

In the coming months, the "Where I'm From" exhibit is scheduled to travel to storefronts at Richmond's regional Hilltop Mall and a community art gallery in Berkeley.



Two fountains tastes one slightly irascible.Umpteen partly putrid aardvarks gossips. Two Macintoshes tickled Santa Claus.

**A Study Guide will be mailed to you upon request.
Please contact: community_works@yahoo.com or
summerbrenner@earthlink.**