



Getting the Word Out

The New York Writers Coalition Helps Develop both Voice and Audience for those Who Have Neither

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IN the spring of 2000, writer and teacher Aaron Zimmerman was asked to run a workshop at the Prince George Hotel, a New York City shelter, as part of National Poetry Month. During his time at the shelter Zimmerman says he felt a strong emotional connection with the clients, low-income and formerly homeless adults, not because he had a similar background, but because he could identify with their efforts to become writers. “In my family, creative expression was not encouraged,” he explains. “Finding my own voice was an extremely powerful experience, so I really wanted to share that with other people.”

The workshop was a huge success and in the following year Zimmerman began to receive requests from other social service agencies wanting him to run similar writing groups. Spurred on by this enthusiastic response, in 2001 Zimmerman created the New York Writers Coalition, a private nonprofit organization whose mission is to provide free creative writing workshops to underserved communities throughout New York City. Zimmerman serves as executive director of the Coalition, whose workshops have been attended by more than a thousand people to date, including at-risk youth, survivors of the attacks on the World Trade Center, formerly incarcerated women, seniors, and residents of supportive housing. In addition to the workshops it runs, the Coalition has also branched out to start its own publishing house, a summer literary festival in Fort Greene, Brooklyn, a reading series, and a literary e-zine.

“Each person will give a different reason why our writing workshops are important to him or her,” says Zimmerman. “Some people use the workshops for processing experiences, some as an escape through writing fantasy fiction, and some simply want to hone their craft.” But all who attend these workshops share a similar quality, he says: the need to express themselves and have their often-painful stories heard. With the tag line, “everyone has a voice,” the group’s basic mandate is to reach people who have, for one reason or another, been marginalized from mainstream society and to assist them in finding that voice.

For a while Zimmerman, a writing teacher and author of the novel, *By The Time You Finish This Book You Might Be Dead* (Spuyten Duyvil, 2003) as well as numerous poems and stories, ran the Coalition out of his apartment and relied on writer friends to lead the workshops that he didn’t have time to run himself. “It took a year or

so from having the idea for the Coalition until I could put it all into action,” Zimmerman says. He spent his time applying for grants and juggling requests for workshops. But just one year after he started, the demand for workshops had become too great for Zimmerman and his friends to handle all by themselves. He set up training sessions and began recruiting potential volunteers to lead workshops.

Before launching into a major fundraising initiative, Zimmerman focused on the primary component of his ever-expanding organization: the workshops. “I really wanted the workshops to be as strong as they could be,” he says. “There was never a shortage of people who wanted to be in the workshops nor of writers interested in running them.”



Brian Leong, age 5, reading his work from the New York Writers Coalition anthology, *If These Streets Could Talk*. Photo by Mary McGrail.

Some of the first groups that the Coalition worked with were supportive housing facilities run by the nonprofit Common Ground; the Blossom Program For Girls, for teenagers at high risk of gang involvement; Gilda’s Club, a non-residential support community for people affected by cancer; and St. Francis Residence, another supportive housing organization. As the organization grew, it continued to expand its reach, running workshops in public libraries in the outer boroughs; with youth living in low-income housing; and in alternative to incarceration facilities. For many years, the Coalition has run a workshop for retirees at the 14th Street YMCA in the East Village, and it is their most popular program for seniors. “Many have discovered a talent for writing that they didn’t know they had,” explains Camille Diamond, director of senior programs at the Y. “It also gives them a sense of community.” In the Ali Forney Center, an emergency housing program for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered homeless youth, the workshop provides structure and consistency for people whose basic needs aren’t being met, says Michele Maraziti, program director. The workshop has been one of the most consistent activities that they’ve had at their drop-in center.

These organizations all recognize the clear benefits for their clients who take part in these innovative workshops. It is the opportunity to take something difficult or even damaging in their lives, and, through writing about it, connect with other people and gain a sense of empowerment. In order to achieve this goal, the workshops are all designed to provide an atmosphere that is the most conducive to creative writing. The trademark of a New York Writers Coalition workshop is that it always provides a supportive and safe environment. Every workshop leader goes through a training process to learn how to establish trust and mutual respect among the participants. The workshops emphasize building participants’ self-esteem through creative self-expression, and many of the exercises given in the workshops focus on issues of identity and personal history.

For each session, the workshop leader brings in exercises carefully chosen to accommodate a range of education levels and writing experiences. The leaders not only offer support and encouragement, but also are active participants themselves, writing

and sharing their work to model taking risks in a group setting. Participants are encouraged to highlight the positive elements of each other's work and steered away from outright criticism, especially when discussing brand-new writing. This is crucially important in working with underserved communities, where many grapple with low self-esteem, explained Zimmerman. "Disenfranchised people have usually had bad experiences with either school or institutions," he says. "And who hasn't had a negative experience with a teacher?"

These negative experiences can make already vulnerable people especially reluctant to participate in a group setting, let alone feel comfortable enough to reveal deep-seated emotions or read their writing out loud. "Sometimes people resist the workshops because they don't feel like writers," Zimmerman says. Over time, usually even the most reluctant workshop participants find a way to enjoy having an audience for their writing. "Once they see the workshop is really for them and that they can have total freedom, then they really open up," he says. "And when someone decides to share their painful experience with the workshop, and then realizes other people can relate to it, that is huge."

The Coalition workshops use a method created by the Amherst Writers & Artists Institute (AWAI), a nonprofit organization based in western Massachusetts, where Zimmerman received his own training. Pat Schneider, the founding director, started a writing workshop for women in a housing project there in the mid-eighties, and since then, each of the women who participated in that original group has gone on to receive further education and most eventually moved out of public housing. They all cite the workshop as the impetus for the major changes in their lives. Schneider and the women set up AWAI in order to train people to run their own workshops. Zimmerman felt that this model could be successfully replicated in New York City, home to a wide spectrum of disadvantaged communities and individuals as well as a plethora of writers.

The Coalition works in tandem with social service agencies to create and maintain the right atmosphere for a successful workshop. The agency contributes the facility and the participants, while the Coalition provides the workshop leader. Occasionally, a writing workshop will end after its initial sessions over attendance or scheduling issues. Many workshops, however, continue for years with a regular core group that participates every week, and others who come on a more irregular basis due to work or other conflicts in their lives.

In addition to running workshops, the Coalition, now housed in an arts building in downtown Brooklyn, has embarked on several other endeavors, including running its own publishing house.

Nelson Figueroa, one of the participants from the early workshops that Zimmerman led at the Prince George Hotel, was the inspiration for the imprint. At



Participants in a workshop at Manhattan's Sol Goldman Y Educational Center for Retired Adults.
Photo by Harry M. Mahn.



A participant in a writing workshop at The Blossom Program for Girls in Brooklyn, NY.
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first, Zimmerman remembers, Figueroa seemed to struggle to stay awake during the workshop. After a while, Zimmerman realized it was Figueroa's AIDS medication that was the cause, not a lack of interest in writing. As it turned out, Figueroa was not only a brilliant poet, but also extremely prolific, showing Zimmerman notebooks full of writing. As Figueroa's health continued to deteriorate, Zimmerman helped him put together a manuscript of his work. After

pulling an all-nighter at a local Kinkos, the book *Pigs, Parrots and Pain* was ready just in time for the Coalition's first reading, which was held at the Prince George. Figueroa invited everyone he knew, including an estranged sister, and went on to sell the books on the street.

The chapbook served as a major validation for Figueroa as a writer, and it also made Zimmerman realize the power of making the workshop participants' writing available to a wider audience. They started publishing chapbooks "whenever there was a critical mass of work," Zimmerman says. Since the publication of Figueroa's book, the Coalition has put out numerous collections from their various groups, including several books from the Blossom Program for Girls, a book of writing by older women in a Brooklyn church group, and a chapbook of writing from children at the Queensborough Public Library.

The Coalition has continued to host a reading series at the Prince George which is curated by a different workshop leader each month.

For the past two years, the Coalition has produced the e-zine *Plum Biscuit*, a literary website of poetry and fiction from the general public. "This is an opportunity to flip the tables of power," says Zimmerman. Participants from a different workshop take on the task of putting together and editing each issue. This involves a lengthy process of going through all the poems, essays, and short stories which have been submitted—usually numbering in the hundreds—and winnowing them down to a manageable size.

Last year, the Coalition sponsored the Fort Greene Park Summer Literary Festival in Brooklyn to support writing within their local community. The festival, which was held again this year, begins with a six-week series of free Saturday creative writing workshops for young people in Fort Greene Park. It culminates in a public reading in the park where the young writers have the opportunity to read their work alongside contemporary luminaries such as Jhumpa Lahiri and Sapphire.

In June, the Coalition hosted its first Write-a-Thon, a fundraiser which was held at the Bowery Poetry Club. Like a walk-a-thon, volunteers collected pledges and then took part in an all-day writing session which ended up raising over \$26,000. The event also included opportunities for emerging writers to get advice about the publishing world from local writers and publishers through panel discussions and workshops.

Given the proven excellence of their workshops and other initiatives, it is not surprising that the Coalition has received numerous awards and grants. The Coalition is a recipient of the Union Square Arts Award for organizations making an important contribution to communities. And in 2005, Zimmerman was awarded a fellowship from the Petra Foundation, which recognizes “unsung individuals making distinctive contributions.”



A participant in a writing workshop at The Blossom Program for Girls in Brooklyn, NY.
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This winter, the Coalition will embark on a completely new project: partnering with the New Orleans-based Neighborhood Story Project, a community documentary program run out of a high school. The students at the school, a majority of whom live below the poverty level, have put together several books of oral histories, photographs, and essays about life in their neighborhoods before and after Hurricane Katrina.

The Coalition plans to replicate this program here where it will be based at the Urban Academy, an alternative public high school. “We picked the Urban Academy because it has students from all over the city, “project-based” learning, and flexible class schedules,” explained Zimmerman. “It also has an amazing track record of innovative projects.”

The Neighborhood Story Project will provide the curriculum as well as other basic assistance to the Coalition. In January, students will take classes in oral history/ethnography, writing, and photography. Next fall, they will spend the entire year producing books about their neighborhoods. Zimmerman hopes to one day turn this into a national storytelling project.

In the meantime, he will certainly be kept busy with the ever-expanding projects and day-to-day operations of the Coalition. This includes promoting their first anthology of writing, *If These Streets Could Talk*, a compilation of poems and stories from the workshops, in a series of readings and events. The writing in the collection is as diverse and varied as the writing groups themselves. A seven-year-old girl from Chinatown describes herself as being “from big white dumplings with things inside . . . [and] quickly-spoken Chinese.” A survivor of the World Trade Center writes that he is “from the ruins with all of my parts intact. Living to move on and get on despite the images of the Armageddon and that special smell.”

“When you write in the kind of safe place the Coalition provides and then put it out in the world, there is the worry that it won’t work,” Zimmerman says of the writing in the anthology. “But in fact, it is even more powerful than we had ever imagined it could be.”

