



GIRLS WRITE NOW

Write Now, Girls!

Creating a Volunteer After-School Writing Program that Works

MAYA NUSSBAUM

THE other day, I made Rhonda, a teen from East Harlem, cry in my office during her mid-year portfolio evaluation. Last week, I shocked Alisha, a high school freshman, straight back to her Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood after she dared to arrive an hour late to her weekly mentoring session. Anna, a junior from Cobble Hill, Brooklyn, resorted to sending me a message about missing the upcoming fiction workshop via her mentor, Caron. As a literary agent, Caron is no stranger to negotiation, yet I swear I heard her voice shake as she tripped over Anna's excuse. "Maya, she was too scared to confront you herself," Caron eventually admitted. Scared of me?

Some time during the last nine years, I must have gone from a scared kid myself to an intimidating disciplinarian. This relatively newfound persona is part of my job description as executive director of Girls Write Now, Inc., a New York City-based non-profit matching underserved high school girls who possess a nascent love of writing with professional women writers for one-on-one weekly mentoring sessions, monthly genre-based workshops, and special events such as readings, cultural field trips, and college prep. But, trust me, it is not a firm hand alone that keeps these girls coming back.

In 1998, when I co-founded Girls Write Now, there were many workshop days when my associates and I, a handful of white professionals just out of college, would show up to the donated space we barely managed to secure in time only to discover the at-risk girls we wanted so badly to help were conspicuously absent. Back then we glimpsed the power that a unique program like Girls Write Now could have—to date, we remain the only writing and mentoring non-profit for teen girls in New York City—but we didn't yet have the mechanism to capture it or the infrastructure to contain it. Over the years, we figured out a way for hard-working, unpaid mentors and overex-



Maya Nussbaum introducing mentors and mentees at the Winter Pair Reading, held in Manhattan at the General Society Library in January 2007. Photo by Denise Simon.

tended, hormonally haywire teens not only to come back, but also to join us for up to five years, looking forward to each new event. (One of our alumni, Laura, a young writer from the Bronx who was just sixteen when she joined Girls Write Now as a mentee, is now a senior in college and embracing her new role as mentor-in-training.) These girls and women stay with us not to please the director of the program (who has no money or grades to bestow upon them anyway), but out of genuine respect for the vibrant friendships they find in the program and for the craft of their fellow writers. In other

words, we created a community.

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The Girls Write Now community is above all a safe place where emerging female writers can feel comfortable enough to take creative risks they may never consider otherwise. The girls I discipline aren't really scared of me, they are fundamentally scared of their creative power; it is the mission of Girls Write Now to help them to

wield it. I grew up with males (my father, my brother) as my primary intellectual role models. While I value enormously what they taught me, they unwittingly represented all that I couldn't be as a writer and thinker. I ended up feeling artistically isolated and hopeless despite what they said about my potential. Crippling self-doubt and creative paralysis ultimately followed. My circumstances were unique but I nevertheless made it my mission to break down the myth of the isolated writer and to build an organization based on the guiding principle that writing is a communal enterprise. I have been healed by the organization as much as the students who graduate from it are.

By narrowing the community to women only, we automatically eliminate a handful of the factors, such as overt sexism and fear of ridicule, that typically intimidate us as writers, and especially as vulnerable young women coming of age. We also attract a collection of some of the most sophisticated female writers in New York City—poets, playwrights, novelists, and journalists who work for publications and institutions such as the *New York Times*, the *Village Voice*, *Essence* magazine, McGraw-Hill, Simon & Schuster, New York University, the New School, and Columbia University—who stand as shining, real-life examples to our girls of exactly who you can be as a woman, as a writer, and as a professional.

The communal undertaking of Girls Write Now is built on multiple layers of commitment we make to each other as writers each season. The first is an individual commitment made between each incoming mentor or mentee and the organization itself. Carefully screened candidates undergo a rigorous application process including detailed applications, writing samples, and reference checks. We search out mentors who have not only impressive academic and writing resumes but also a demonstrated commitment to teaching, tutoring, or mentoring youth, as well as the drive to contribute to the overall growth of our grassroots movement. Both our mentors and students come from a diverse range of backgrounds; they are Black, Latino, Asian, Biracial, Caucasian, Middle Eastern, and Indian. We recruit the majority of our students with the help of trusted English teachers, guidance counselors, and administrators in underserved neigh-

borhoods throughout the five boroughs, and especially from high schools that are overcrowded or contain a high number of non-native English speakers. (Roughly 30% of our students are recent immigrants with varying levels of English proficiency). All girls accepted into the program share a passion for and a commitment to growing as writers, regardless of their skill level coming into the program. Each mentor and mentee candidate is interviewed by a panel of both veteran mentors and mentees. This panel method at once gives prospective members a sense of the community they are about to enter, and active members a stake in their community's future. Upon acceptance into the program, each new member signs a series of forms confirming her commitment to the year-long program.

Next, each mentor undergoes an intensive full-day training conducted by the Girls Write Now program board in conjunction with experts from Columbia University, New York University, Community-Word Project, Girls Scouts of America, Planned Parenthood NYC, and Urban Word NYC, among other community institutions. This training serves as an introduction to adolescent development, cultural diversity (including working with immigrant and ESL students), mentoring tools, editing and revision for teens, and writing workshop facilitation. Above all, the mentor training emphasizes our belief that those who can access the fear and excitement they themselves felt as teenagers become the most empathetic and effective mentors.

The following week, mentors and mentees meet for the first time, engaging in a fast-paced orientation consisting of "Speed-Writing Field Day" with prompts like: "write about your most disastrous family gathering" and "write a letter to someone you miss or feel passionate about" followed by "Speed Dating," where mentors and mentees get to know each other by sharing their speed-writing drafts. After that, girls go "Career Shopping" by visiting mentors divided by profession (this year we had poets, playwrights, and performers; editors, agents, and publishers; teaching artists; and media moguls) who share their career experiences and resources. The day ends with a group contract, conceived and signed by and for the entire crop of new and returning members. "We, the fabulous, incredibly cool, awesomely talented, downright fly, literary, smart, and dedicated women of Girls Write Now, Inc. promise to strengthen and build the GWN community by honoring these three really, really important ideals: respect, commitment, and creativity." Written under each of these ideals is a long list of member-generated promises.

The mentor-mentee pairs seal the final commitment shortly after they are matched at the start of the season's first workshop. Pairs are made by a "matchmaking committee" consisting of board members and veteran mentors who consider geography, genre interest, and the unscientific but no less meaningful "x-factor" or chemistry between a mentor and mentee (members are alerted to the presence of the matchmak-

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ers, encouraged to share their preferences, but warned there are no guarantees we will grant them). Our tried and true method results in a 90% success rate. Those pairs who don't "click" are often successfully rematched by mid-season. Each mentor-mentee pair signs a mutual agreement explicitly outlining the responsibilities of their writing partnership.

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Weekly pair writing sessions are punctuated and informed by monthly, genre-based, full-group workshops conducted in alternating solo, pair, and small group formations. The workshops are carefully balanced between spirited fun and curricular rigor. Each workshop begins with an icebreaker to warm members to each other as well as to the idea of writing for four hours on a Saturday afternoon. "My name is [insert name]. My name is me because____. My name is not me

because____"; "I am [insert description of self without name] and my confession is____"; "The three most important things I'm storing in my [literal or figurative] closet are____, _____and____. _____ is the one I will get rid of to lighten my load." "My character for the day is [insert lovely, fun, or energetic color + food you like the sound of]" No one wants to miss reinventing herself as "Rainbow Meatball" or the chance to be introduced to "Royal Blue Hot Dog." And so we have the built-in incentive to arrive on time and to engage in the exercises. Indeed, an impressive 80% of all 60 pairs attend each and every workshop.

The workshops help to remove the mentor/mentee labels we initially assign, allowing these relationships to transcend racial, ethnic, and religious boundaries in a city where many young people rarely leave their neighborhood. Here, in the midtown Manhattan Center for Imaginative Writing of our two-year old home at Teachers & Writers Collaborative, mentors learn from mentees, peers from peers and, with simultaneous surprise and delight, we inevitably find that the resulting magic of a mass of writers creatively engaged can never be measured by the sum of its parts.

Each workshop (memoir, poetry, fiction, journalism, and playwriting are our staples) is led by a rotating team of mentors, capitalizing on their particular field of expertise. We strongly suggest that mentors also work with us to develop the program itself, taking ownership of not only what our girls learn, but also the organizational framework in which they learn it. Some mentors who return for multiple years eventually earn their way onto a hard-working planning board responsible for all program decisions.

But great mentoring is not about strict sacrifice. Mentors who make the best role models are those who are inspired and fulfilled as writers themselves. Out of my own need to return to writing, and from my struggle to balance it with my organizational duties, I created "Ladies Write Now," mentor-only, multi-genre writing circles open to all mentors, mentor alumni, and program volunteers. So far, it has provided

mentors a much-needed outlet for socialization apart from the girls, as well as the opportunity to experiment with new genres and techniques while getting high-level, constructive peer critique. A spin-off of Ladies Write Now is the “Freelancers Support Circle,” an idea that took shape when a handful of mentors simultaneously made the leap from magazine writing to freelance work. The Circle provides moral support, facilitates networking, and even helps with time management and financial planning. Last month, mentors launched their own reading series and we look forward to creating an anthology of their works.

We have also developed special programs to meet our evolving view of girls’ needs. For the last nine years, we have been awed and moved by the passion and skill of our students’ writing. But we have also been listening closely to what they have to say. We heard them talking about boys, sex, their bodies, race, religion, and their need to change the world. We recognized pride, confusion, and frustration in their voices, and we wanted to try to help in ways their schools and families often do not. So, in collaboration with viBe Theater Experience (a theater troupe for high school girls) we created “Girls Life Adventure,” an arts-based/life-skills pilot program that guides girls through writing and performance workshops and publications in order to discover both practical and creative solutions to the most important of everyday challenges. Quests on “sex,” “beauty,” “spirituality,” and “justice” have given girls new tools and resources to approach their art with fresh understanding and enthusiasm.

Girls Write Now also offers customized college counseling sessions from a certified guidance counselor, field trips to college campuses, and a full-day college informational session hosted by the Dean of Admissions and the Director of Financial Aid at Barnard College.

These new programs, like all Girls Write Now programming, are 100% free and almost entirely volunteer-run. Less than two years ago, when our program quality and reputation started exploding, we began transitioning to a staff-driven organization in order to keep our model sustainable, and, though we are still in the early stages of fundraising, in this short time we have secured many important grants from foundations, corporations, and generous individuals.

With our guidance, mentees have been accepted into PEN American Center’s writing institute, and won numerous Scholastic Gold and Silver Key Awards including the Alan G. Ross Memorial Award as well as an American Voices nomination for one of the best five pieces in show regardless of age or genre. In conjunction with Teachers & Writers Collaborative, we are also proud to have awarded a handful of students Lotos Club scholarships to Columbia University’s Summer Program for High School Students. Among our most rewarding successes has been our exponentially increasing retention rate (65% last season for both mentors and mentees) combined with a 100% college attendance rate for all mentees who have completed the Girls Write Now program over the last four years. Our ultimate program success can be measured by girls who are giving back the rewards of mentoring to their own communities. Jaselyn, a 2003

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Girls Write Now graduate, started her own creative writing program called “Mad Hot,” based in her native Bronx neighborhood. “Girls Write Now really encouraged me to be a positive person,” Jaselyn says. “I saw all of these women around me doing positive things with their lives and I was like, ‘what the hey, maybe I should take a crack at that.’ When I got to college and I realized

that most of my friends and family members didn’t even graduate from high school, I knew I *had* to become one of these positive people.”

Perhaps the most dynamic manifestation of the Girls Write Now program is our reading series, culminating each spring in our signature event at Barnes & Noble, in Greenwich Village. Throughout the season, the girls in the program produce portfolios packed with pieces written during group workshops and mentoring sessions. At least two works by each girl are honed and polished with the guidance of her mentor to become the material for our readings as well as our annual professionally produced anthology of writing by girls in the program. Students typically anticipate performance and publication of their work with a mixture of enthusiasm and fear. It is an understandable challenge to open up to family, friends, and strangers beyond the safe confines of our workshops, but the full enterprise of communal writing is incomplete without the eyes and ears of the public. With editing support and performance technique training, students eventually come to appreciate this and rise to the occasion.

The synergy between mentors and mentees that makes Girls Write Now succeed was brilliantly and poignantly on display at our most recent event, the annual Winter Pair Reading, hosted in January by the landmark Library of the General Society of Mechanics & Tradesmen. Our authors had traveled to this point as a community yet their works reflected their own brave, humorous, and sometimes bewildering paths: a tongue-twister conversation; a two-voice poem; an alarmingly honest dialogue about finding the time to meet up; an intergenerational, heartbreaking tribute to chances in love not taken; an imagined look “through each other’s glasses”; and a mutual dedication poem. “This is for Sarah, who opened my eyes, spread my words, made me believe, that no deed is too pretty if it comes from the heart... and this is for Stephanie, who reminded me of the power of voice and love, like couplets that should never be separated, like survival, and beauty.” Sarah and Stephanie, and the rest of our pairs at the reading, gave a succinct picture of what a program like Girls Write Now can be and do. One of our members, asked at a workshop to “name one thing in the world you would like to see change and how you would help make it happen,” put it this way: “I want people to stop being so skeptical and to not give up on their dreams just because their dreams are taking too long to get realized. How am I going to change this? By not giving up on mine.” 