

Writing a Different Future

In a Writing Workshop at Homeboy Industry's Gang Intervention Program, Participants Discover the Power of the Pen

LESLIE SCHWARTZ

MY FIRST EXPERIENCE with Homeboy Industries in the Boyle Heights neighborhood of East Los Angeles came about a year and a half ago after I'd spent the morning teaching a creative writing class at Dolores Mission School. A friend of mine, who knew I'd wanted to visit Homeboy and meet the organization's founder, Father Gregory Boyle, S.J. invited me to come along with her after my class.

Dolores Mission School is about a mile west of Homeboy. Situated just across the street from the school is Dolores Mission Church, one of Los Angeles's oldest and most activist Jesuit churches and the spiritual anchor of the Boyle Heights community. These institutions sit at an intersection where the territories of two of the neighborhood's toughest rival gangs overlap. It was not unusual, particularly in the late 80s and early 90s to hear gunshots here throughout the day and night.

In 1988, Father Greg, a Jesuit priest and a one-time pastor of Dolores Mission Church, stepped in to try to stop the bloodshed that took place among the dozens of gangs in the six square miles that comprised the boundaries of Boyle Heights. His stated philosophy was both purposeful and pragmatic: "Nothing stops a bullet like a job." He founded Homeboy Industries' Jobs for a Future project to offer an alternative to neighborhood youth, through both job referral services and gang intervention. He was tired, he says, of burying so many children who had been lost to the turf wars of the neighborhood and was equally saddened by



Leslie Schwartz teaching her class at Homeboy Industries. Photo by Ibarionex Perello.

It felt like chaos—loud, boisterous, lots of energy and testosterone—but at the same time, there was a palpable sense of hope and kinship among everyone working there, from the teens, the case managers, and the social workers to Father Greg. It was one of those places you either loved or you fled from out of fear and misunderstanding.

the perpetual grief of their mothers. Father Greg's years as pastor of Dolores Mission had led him to believe that gang activity was an addiction—a response to the poverty and isolation felt by many in the neighborhood of mostly Latino immigrants. He also believed that everybody deserves a second chance in life.

The day of my first visit, I was surprised to see that the building that houses Homeboy Industries was quite literally next door to the parking lot for the Hollenbeck Police Station. Hollenbeck is one of LA's

busiest police stations, responsible for patrolling some of the city's toughest barrios, and has a controversial record of community policing.

I noticed something else, too, that day, just before entering the doors of Homeboy. Next to the police station was a mortuary. I had an unhappy mental tangle with the irony I saw in this juxtaposition. Before I was swept inside the glass doors and into a world that would change my life, I had the morbid thought that it was a full service operation—police station, mortuary, Homeboy Industries—all within a single city block.

Once inside Homeboy, the first thing I noticed was that several teens, all wearing the brown vest “uniform” with the Homeboy logo on it, were cleaning the windows that overlooked the streets. This would be a constant every time I arrived at Homeboy. No matter what day of the week or what time of day, two, three, sometimes four of the junior staff, as they are called, would always be out front cleaning the windows. The place had the cleanest windows of any building anywhere along the vibrant hub of Boyle Height's First Street.

My second impression was of walking into a vortex of energy, energy spiraling like a tornado, but also spiking off into different directions, like, say, a high voltage pinwheel. Phones were ringing off the hook, teens and young adults, some in wheelchairs, some limping, some with visible bullet scars, most with tattoos and bald or closely shaved heads, were laughing and working. Formerly involved gang members who might once have been enemies were standing side by side, working together to clean the cabinets, file papers, or just “kickin' it” while they waited their turn to speak to Father Greg. The pitch was so loud that almost every sentence spoken had to be repeated.

Father Greg, usually called “G-Dog” or just simply “G,” was ensconced in his glass office in a meeting, his eyes darting constantly outward to the main room, back to his visitors, then over to the Homeboy staffers who were always opening the door for a quick question.

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For me, it was love at first sight. When I left, I knew that I would get back there some day, and that I would get back there to teach a writing course in that tiny conference room in the back that overlooked the morgue and the police station.

About six months later, I met with Father Greg and suggested that I teach a once-a-week writing program for the young staffers who worked in the building. Father Greg, soft-spoken, eloquent, and compassionate, was receptive to the idea, but I wouldn't say he was jumping out of his seat with enthusiasm. It didn't take me long to understand why. It turned out that people who had heard of Homeboy (many from seeing some of the Homeboy staffers as guest actors on popular TV shows, or from news segments on NBC, CNN, ABC, or the BBC, or who had read about the program in some hipster Hollywood blog) came in by the dozens to say they wanted to "help out."

But good intentions are only that, and Father Greg knew that many with good intentions either never showed up at all, or lasted a week and were never seen again. This, for him, was especially hard to bear, because most of the young men and women who came into Homeboy, fresh off the turf wars or out of prison and trying to leave their old lives behind, had already experienced a lifetime of abandonment.

Nevertheless, I decided to get busy making good on my own good intentions. Unknown to me, Celeste Fremon, a friend of mine and the author of *G-Dog and the Homeboys*, a book about the inception of Homeboy Industries, was talking to Father Greg about getting a grant from PEN Center USA (where she and I were both board members) and the California Council for the Humanities to start an "Oral Histories" program at Homeboy. Unknown to Celeste, at the very same moment, I was busy convincing Adam Somers, the executive director of PEN, to do a PEN-in-the-Classroom (PITC) program at Homeboy. PITC is a PEN USA initiative that brings writers to underserved school communities, juvenile detention facilities, and other organizations in Southern California where youth are at high risk for gang involvement and violence, in order to teach the students creative writing and literature.

Call it kismet, call it a coincidence, call it what you want, but between Celeste, myself, Adam Somers, and Father Greg, not to mention a generous grant from the California Council of the Humanities, the Oral Histories Project was born.

The grant we received would fund a ten-week PITC program, taught by me, and a two-week introduction to journalism techniques class, taught by Celeste, that would include interviewing skills, ways to be interviewed without feeling powerless, and how to use the brand new, 21st century digital recorders we were able to purchase with the grant money. To say that we knew what we were doing, however, would be another story altogether. Though we stuck to the stipulations of the grant, none of us had ever

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tried to pull together a writing/oral histories/public performance project as unique as this. It was a project born out of the philosophical and, in some ways, spiritual idea that people whose voices are silenced by race, class, disability, sexual orientation, or even criminal records, could access their power and find transformation through the telling of their stories. A program of witness writing, as it were, where young people on the margins who, as Jonathan Kozol might say, are expected by society to fail, would be given the opportunity not to fail, but to succeed.

But pedagogy and ideology are one thing. Implementing and organizing the seemingly simple but, in fact, complex components of the project were another chal-

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lenge altogether. Add to that the highly transitory population of Homeboy, and the program became even more challenging. For instance, I would have to arrive very early just to round up the reluctant students. It was like chasing kittens on horseback. You'd get them in the room and then they'd disappear again. This could go on for up to a half hour.

My second week there, one of my most promising students was shot. He survived, but because he was on probation he was arrested again and is now serving several years on gun and gang charges in a California state prison. I lost other students too—many to arrests, to the lure of the streets or drug relapses. For some, writing their stories was too painful. But for every student I lost, a new one always came.

And while it is safe to say that the attrition rate was high, as the class continued and the students came to see me as that white girl who wasn't going away, the population of students did stabilize and soon I had a core group of about fourteen fledgling writers.

Having taught in school communities at greatest risk for gangs, dropouts, drugs, and violence for nearly ten years, as well as at Central Juvenile Hall in Los Angeles, I was no stranger to the prospect of being the only white person (a petite, female, freckle-faced one at that) in a roomful of young people of color. Nor was I unused to the blank, bored, or hostile stares (often exaggerated and meant to be intimidating, though for some reason they always made me chuckle inside) of the writers when I brought in poems by Mary Oliver, Robert Hayden, or Leslie Marmon Silko. I also understood, from experience, that the students would know in ten seconds whether I was tough enough to handle them so I had only ten seconds to prove my muster.

I had no lack of confidence—at least not in reaching out to the young writers. My biggest concern was in coordinating and implementing the program and seeing it through to the end when we would have our multi-media reading and performance. I knew that the first day was pivotal and I had learned how to win over my other students from similar backgrounds by starting not with Oliver, Hayden, or Silko, but rather with the poetry of Eminem and his brilliant song, "Lose Yourself."

Poetically interesting and complex, rife with relevance and meaning, “Lose Yourself” is a song that not only urges those who feel powerless to take their chance now or never, but also allows me to show that even hip-hoppers have to write the words first before they start rapping them.

Not surprisingly, the first poems that came in after that were, well, exactly what you might expect. Three or four lines long, simplistic, confused, getting-through-this-crap kind of writing.

Poems like this:

I am brave
I am happiest when getting home
I am going home
I love my lowrider bike.

Still, I would encourage them each week with written comments, tell them when a particular word or thought stood out, when a sentence made for the possibility of a beautiful first line of a poem. Each week the work improved, the students got better and better.

Then one day I walked into Homeboy and the typical commotion seemed louder than usual. There were some Swedish photographers taking pictures of some of the more elaborate gang tattoos on the naked backs of the staffers. Shirley Torres, the director of curriculum and training at Homeboy approached me with one of my students, Hector Verdugo.

Hector was one of the older, senior staffers, somewhat new to Homeboy, whose past was troubled and complicated, but who had, in poetry class, shown up every week and who had done some fairly good work. My biggest issue with Hector at the time was whether he was serious enough about the class. He seemed to be popular with the ladies and at least once every class, I had to ask him to turn off his cell phone.

“Hector would like to have a conference with you,” Shirley said. She made room for us in a small corner where there were two chairs and a computer. I was worried. The first thing I thought was that I had done something to hurt him or to offend him. Not to put too fine a point on it, Hector struck me as someone you really didn’t want to cross. Very professionally, he shook my hand and we sat down. Then, without preamble he said, “I don’t mean no disrespect, but are you bullshitting me or do you really like my work?” I breathed a sigh of relief because only that last week had Hector turned in something that I thought showed potential. But instead of pointing to that—



Luis Flores. Photo by Ibarionex Perello.

I knew a challenge when I saw one—I answered his question with my own question.

“Why do you want to know?”

“Because,” he said, looking me dead in the eyes, “I want to be a writer.”

I tried to keep my cool. This is the moment any teacher dreams of. That feeling of success, however singular or small it might be, when one of your students, in a population of young people who have been groomed by the system for failure, makes the choice not to fail. I very calmly (though I admit my hands were shaking a bit) handed over the copy of *Poets & Writers* magazine I happened to be carrying and I said, “If you want to be a writer, go home, read this, come back next week, turn off your [expletive] cell phone, and prove it to me.”

The next week, Hector came to class. His cell phone was turned off and tucked away in his pocket. He had purchased a notebook and what looked like a new pen. He spoke to no one. We got down to business and we wrote. When it came time to read our work, for the first time, Hector volunteered.

. . . You had us fooled for quite some time
 had us thinking we were inferior
 low class
 low rank
 and you superior
 with your whip in hand
 supposed ruler of my land.
 Homeboy, you jus' don't understand,
 we've reigned for thousands of years. . . .
 While you were living in your caves
 We built buildings with mighty tiers
 It's our history you've tried to smear
 But it's my people you actually fear. . . .

A long silence ensued—something one rarely experiences at Homeboy—tears were pouring down many of the students' cheeks and then the applause was thunderous—so loud that it drowned out the police officers outside next door loading their rifles, something they seemed to do every Tuesday right outside the windows of our class. It was a moment of sheer creativity, of one man finding his voice.

From then on, the class was theirs. My role switched from “teacher” to “facilitator.” Hector set the bar. And others began to appear from seemingly out of nowhere to meet that bar. There was Abel G., who, when he first showed up at Homeboy, became known for his anger. Abel had had a blow-up with just about everyone at Homeboy at some point.

Suddenly Abel was transferring his rage to the page. He was writing political poems about his dissatisfaction with the war in Iraq, the Bush Administration, and then, too, his own transformation, trying to free himself from the past and write his way into a different future.

Abel hardly ever said a word. He always sauntered in with his hoodie over his head, his face to the ground, pierced chin, slanted intelligent eyes always focused on the page. He wrote more like the pen was a weapon and the paper was the war he was fighting in. It was not unusual to find that he had written right through the paper with his pen.

One day not long after Hector's performance (and the performances of other writers in the class who began to emerge as the "stars,"), Abel raised his hand to read. Once again, an uncanny silence filled the room. Everyone knew about Abel's temper. He read:



Abel Garcia.

Killing, drug dealing, store stealing,
That had no feeling.
The blood spilling is thrilling,
Revealing blood from the floor to the ceiling.
Every day there has to be killing.

I got two people inside me
One wants to kill, the other wants to chill.
So I got to stop the situation and feel
My two twins don't want to sin
But between there's a good-and-evil line within.

My head spinning, the tone ringing
Gotta stay focused and stop the sinning
Cuz killers are never winning
They keep on sinking
Cuz their mind ain't thinking.
Wars, blood on the swords, always gore
You kill you ain't going with the Lord.
So the killing should stop
From rich to poor.

Again, stunned silence, then the roar of applause.

The next week as I was rounding up the students Father G motioned me into his office. He said, "Hey, what happened with Abel last week?" Again, as with my "conference" with Hector, I had that sinking feeling in my gut—I'd done something wrong, Abel was angry with me, or worse, something had happened to him.

I said, almost like a question, "Um, he read his poem?"

"Do you know?" Father Greg said, "That after class last week, it was the first time I ever saw Abel walk with his back straight, it was the first time I ever saw him smile."

Again the relief. What I had hoped would happen had begun to happen. The class began to teach itself. Each new writer motivated the next. And the trust had grown to the point that they were now ready for the oral histories phase of the project.

This was Celeste's gig. Her first day, she said, was so nerve-wracking she could hardly stand up. Part of her case of the nerves grew out of the fact that we were now passing the baton. The students had been with me ten weeks, who was this new person coming in? But the disaster she'd anticipated—teaching interviewing skills to students, many of whom had not even finished high school—never materialized.

“Here I was teaching juniors in a high-ranking University of California classroom and now suddenly I was coming into Homeboy and expecting them to do the same thing that my college kids, with years of education, did,” Fremon says. She thought it was asking a lot of her Homeboy students, perhaps too much and yet, she says, not only did they rise to the occasion, once they understood how important it was to give witness to their stories, they set right to work. They compiled a list of questions to ask each other and learned to use the equipment. Though we had some major equipment failures, accidental erasures, and even a few students forgetting to turn on the record button, many of the interviews were brilliant.

“Once they realized their work was going to be published they began to take it far more seriously. The interviews took on greater significance and it became clear that it felt more relevant to them,” says Fremon.



From left, Serena Fuentes, Arnold Hernandez, Leslie Schwartz, and Hector Verdugo. Photo by Ibarionex Perello.

They spent two classes recording each other. Then the staff at PEN downloaded the recordings and had them transcribed. Some of them didn't work. In addition to the equipment malfunctions, some of the interviewers were too shy, or the person being interviewed felt too exposed to answer the questions honestly. All of this made sense, again, given that we were working with a group of writers who'd had serious criminal pasts and life issues that would likely be unimaginable for people who do not live under the same duress of poverty, violence, and drugs.

Nevertheless, we did capture a few gems. Perhaps one of the best interviews was between Hector and one of the young women, Serena. They

hit it off instantly. They were both serious, yet not so serious that they couldn't relax and find ways to have some fun.

Serena: Okay, what was your worst moment of your childhood?

Hector: Hmmm... Seeing my mom getting fucked up by her old man.

Serena: How do you wish your childhood had been different?

Hector: Probably if my father wouldn't have died and drugs weren't in the family, I think that would have been different. I think that would have made, changed a lot of shit.

Serena: Did you ever gangbang?

Hector: But of course.

Serena: What did you join, when, where, and why?

Hector: I joined my neighborhood [name of gang deleted] when I was about twelve, thirteen, but that was just the tradition to get jumped in. I was from my neighborhood... I was born in my neighborhood, so we were just following tradition. Banging, which sucks.

Serena: Have you ever done time? Where, when, and why?

Hector: I went in juvenile hall for [conviction deleted], um went to prison for [conviction deleted] and why? Both of them were because I needed money.

Serena: Do you ever want out of your hood? I know you won't be able to because you'll be in the gang file the rest of your life, but would you ever want to get out of your neighborhood?

Hector: No, of course not. Would you ever like to be disclaimed from your house?

Serena: No, but I'm interviewing you. [*Laughter*] Um, do you feel you did anything wrong?

Hector: I guess. I mean, it matters who's wrong, you know. It matters on what, people say oh, you're wrong, but what do they know, what's their guidelines from right or wrong, what are my guidelines from right or wrong? It could be totally different, know what I'm saying? I did wrong sometimes to survive. I did wrong 'cause I fuckin' wanted to do wrong. So what? You know? People sin, it's in our nature regardless of what side of the tracks we're on, but um, you know, I didn't brutally hurt anybody who just, just to do it, you know what I mean.... As long as I didn't kill innocent people, that's cool. That's, you know, that would be on my conscience.

Serena: Do you think you hurt your mom in any way?

Hector: Absolutely not. She knew exactly where I was going, where we were headed and she prepared us. So... it's like being prepared for, for being a doctor when she was a doctor. Catch me?

Serena: No, but okay.

Hector: You don't understand, huh?

Serena: Is your mom a gang member?

Hector: You're making it sound bad. She was from my neighborhood...



Fernando Velez. Photo by Ibarionex Perello.

In the end, even though we struggled with the complexities of implementing this unusual program, we made tangible strides toward helping the writers understand that witnessing their lives can allow them to begin the process of changing their lives.

AS THE PAIRS BROKE OFF and told their stories to each other, some felt fear, some were uncomfortable. But some, like Hector also felt relief. Hector said that in talking and writing about his past, he could find a way out of it. Serena said talking about it still fills her with rage, but she knows from her upbringing what


she doesn't want for herself. "One of the things I am most proud of," she wrote once, "is I am 19 and I still have never gotten pregnant."

The project has yet to conclude. The "oral history" tapes are still being edited, as are the poems and essays the students wrote in the 10-week PITC class. These will all be published by PEN Center USA in a literary magazine that will be handed out to audience members at the culminating performance and reading in July. We hope to make the event a multi-media affair with footage shot from the classes, the voices on the tapes heard over the speakers, readings from the students, and participation (Q&A) from the audience.

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"The program has had an impact on all of them," Father Greg tells me, "because it's about voices, it's about finding your voice. But it's also about this idea that their voice matters to them. And that you as the teacher can reflect back to them that there is no other way to feel valued and favored unless you have someone on the outside valuing you and favoring you. Part of the problem is that people say you're wasting your time, because you're spending time with people who are a waste, people who don't matter, who are not worthy of a second chance, but it's just not true."

He pauses for a long moment and looks outside his glass "command center." I follow his gaze and look for a moment at all the formerly involved gang members, many of them once rivals, now working together peacefully. I feel the life force of the place, its hope, the kinship of those who have sacrificed, have lost people they loved to turf wars, the grief and the joy of people who are not a waste, those who have come back again for a second chance.

Softly Father Greg says, "It's like in *Isaiah*, 'In this place of which you say, it is a waste, there will be heard again the voices of mirth and the voices of gladness. The voices of those who sing.'" He points out into the busy room. "These are the voices of those who sing. If they don't feel heard they suppress their anger and their rage. But when they are heard, it unlocks a door that's going to get them somewhere, some day." 



HECTOR VERDUGO

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and you superior
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While you were living in your caves
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It's our history you've tried to smear
But it's my people you actually fear. . . .

ABEL GARCIA

Killing, drug dealing,
store stealing, / That had
no feeling. / The blood
spilling is thrilling, /
Revealing blood from the
floor to the ceiling. /
Every day there has to be
killing.

I got two people inside
me / One wants to kill,
the other wants to chill. /
So I got to stop the situa-
tion and feel / My two
twins don't want to sin /
But between there's a
good-and-evil line within.

My head spinning, the
tone ringing / Gotta stay
focused and stop the sin-
ning / Cuz killers are
never winning / They
keep on sinking / Cuz
their mind ain't thinking.
/ Wars, blood on the
swords, always gore / You
kill you ain't going with
the Lord. / So the killing
should stop / From rich to
poor.

