



Urban Writers

The voices of teens really do matter.

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“I love writing in a journal, said Hayes. “It makes you feel like you can do anything.”

After searching through pages of handwritten poems, Breanna Hayes decided to read what she titled “Truth.” Her best friend, Yasmeen McPhaul, listened and waited while her hands grazed the stop of her personalized journal. Following almost immediately, McPhaul read her poem with the intent of depicting the life of her boyfriend. Both voiced their struggles with pride, and had there been no clock in the room, these two eighth-grade students would have shared their stories for days.



“I love writing in a journal, said Hayes “It makes you feel like you can do anything.” Like Hayes and McPhaul, other eighth-grade students at Amy Northwest Middle School in Philadelphia are eager for their voices to be heard, and in their writing class, they have been given a unique opportunity to do so.

“Class used to be real boring, but since we talk about stuff I can relate to, it is fun to express yourself,” said student Tiara Butcher who fully supports the new program that has been implemented in her class.

The Urban Writers Program began working with Amy Northwest in 2009, and has already made an impact on students. With its focus on empowering students through writing, the program emphasizes themes of personal experience in order to create a building block for the future that students find safe and comfortable.

“I don’t really talk to people about my feelings. It is much easier to write them down,” said McPhaul.

Project director Robert Vogel of La Salle University has been developing this program since 2004. The inspiration came from Erin Gruwell’s similar project in Long Branch, California, known as the Freedom Writers Diary Program. Gruwell worked with high school students

with the same premise of using students’ written life accounts as help for them to learn the skills of the writing process. Vogel chose to bring this type of program to middle schools where he believes the skill development and change are more dramatic.

“It is easier to work with middle school teachers because they are less content-oriented,” said Vogel. “High school teachers have to worry more about grades and testing.”

The first school to participate in the Urban Writers Program was Grover Washington Jr. Middle School in Philadelphia where eighth-grade teacher Michael Galbraith became Vogel’s partner. Because Galbraith had been trained by Gruwell as a Freedom Writer teacher, Vogel found him to be beneficial to the development of his program. The two collaborated to design a model for teachers to use in other schools. Through the use of this model, they were able to gather examples of students’ writing which further enabled them to write and publish the program’s book *Voices of Teens: Writers Matter* in July 2008.

Teachers and students have different versions of the book. The students in Pino Leporace’s eighth-grade class have found it to be both interesting and useful.

“I have been told that my students are reading this book all the time. They read during lunch and sometimes even in other classes,” said Leporace.

The Urban Writers Program focuses on the use of journal writing as well, in order to encourage an increase and improvement in student writing, and the book provides many writing themes and prompts ranging from family matters to dreams and aspirations. Students easily relate to the topics.

In Leporace’s class, the students have hard-cover journals lined with a map of the United States on the inside and individually designed covers on the outside. Every day Leporace allots time for his students to write in their journals based on the topic for the day, but due to students’ enthusiasm, journal writing has become less like class work and more like a hobby.



Student Nadiyah is excited, waiting for daily journal writing.

“I never used to write in a journal, but now I do and really like it,” said student Benjaminn Hernandez. “It helps me a lot to be able to write down what you’re feeling and thinking whenever you want.”

Much like Vogel and Gruwell have reported in the past, Leporace has seen writing advancements and more excitement when students have to write other class essays as well.

“These kids are starting to learn on their own, and by writing about their lives in their journals, they are practicing, which leads to improvement,” said Leporace.

Another dimension of the Urban Writers Program is the use of La Salle University students as mentors. Currently there are about 18 to 20 mentors who visit the same classes every week providing extra writing advice.

“I like this program because I feel like they help us improve our writing,” said student Justin Pullins. “I think since they’re college students they are somewhat of a role model.”

Mentors also build friendships with the students. Students find them to be easy to talk to and always utilize their presence.

Recognizing an age difference, McPhaul said, “You can’t really talk to Mr. Leporace because he’s like a real teacher.”

Leporace appreciates this extra help.

“These kids are talking about really meaningful stuff,” he said. “Since I teach 170 students, it’s hard to read every entry of every journal.”

Having the mentors around gives the students extra opportunities to share their stories and receive the necessary positive reinforcement.

“I love these teachers,” said student Keaira Faulks, who was instantly corrected by her friend. “I mean, I love these wannabe teachers.”

With so much positive feedback, Vogel hopes to really expand the Urban Writers Program. There are currently 12 participating schools, and with time, he wants to involve many more in the Philadelphia area. Vogel’s big plan is to develop an Urban Writing center on La Salle University’s campus.

With these bright plans for the future, the Urban Writers Program will continue to inspire this age group of Philadelphia that is not often heard.

“There is no reason to hold all of this in,” said McPhaul. “A closed mouth never gets fed.”