

Writing Your Way to Success

While budget cuts continue to force public schools to cut arts programs from their curriculum, a number of nonprofits throughout New York City are providing underserved youth with quality writing programs, ensuring that the younger generation learns to write in a skilled, creative, informed, and empowering way. While some of these organizations have a specific social justice focus, all of these organizations have found themselves at the forefront of social dialogue, providing youth with the tools and opportunity to think critically and share their stories. Here is a look at four of these organizations.

By Marissa Fariello

New York Writers Coalition

New York Writers Coalition (NYWC), one of the largest community writing organizations in the country, aims to give formerly voiceless members of society the opportunity to be heard through the art of writing.

"Our agency has been around for ten years, and was born out of our Founder and Executive Director, Aaron Zimmerman, running creative writing workshops out of his own apartment," said Rose Gorman, NYWC's Program Manager. "We were initially called the Manhattan Writers but were renamed New York Writers Coalition and aimed to be an all-inclusive organization within the community. During our first few years, our programming aimed at providing writing programs for adults who have been historically deprived of voice in our society—those with chronic illnesses, those who are homeless, seniors, immigrants. Three years in, we started building up our youth program."

NYWC's young writers participate in a variety readings and events, including the Fort Greene Park Summer Literary Festival, in which 40-45 young people participate in a six-week series of free outdoor creative writing

workshops and in an end-of-summer reading each year. "Our free summer creative writing workshops serve seven-to-eighteen year olds. They need to register in advance, but the application process just serves to get contact information so we can build a community of writers. These kids meet every Saturday morning throughout the summer. They are really dedicated." The Write Stuff and the Writing Aloud Reading Series are also popular programs among the young writers.

"What's special at our workshops is that we focus on the positives in every piece of writing, and leave the critiques for another time," Gorman added. "We like to use the analogy that all writing pieces are like new born babies. We are just happy that they made their way into the world. We started with this model of thinking and it really empowers our writers."

The young writers' voices are strengthened through their publication in NYWC's online literary journal, Dig Deep, and in high-quality books. NYWC, for example, has published young writers' work in its Making the Trees Shiver: An Anthology of the First Six Years of the Fort Greene Park Summer Literary Festival.



New York Writing Coalition's youth writing workshops were a success this summer.

"The strength in our programming comes through strategic partnerships with social service agencies, such as New Alternatives and the Brownsville Justice Center," Gorman explained. "We also offer workshops in public libraries, like Bay Ridge, to bring together as many kids as possible. Public libraries are like a golden petri dish; they are always looking for free programming to offer the community, and we find that the strongest writers often come from libraries. These workshops have been going strong for years."

NYWC relies on grants and individual donors to keep their programs going. "Sometimes we have to shift things around to work within our budget, with the publication of our participants' work always being our main priority," Gorman said. "Pinker-ton Foundation and Amazon.com have been huge supporters of ours."

NYWC's success can also be attributed to the commitment of its staff. "We have three people on staff full-time, one on part-time, and two interns

or volunteers from Citycorps," Gorman said. Everyone here is a writer. Erin Hopkins, our Development Manager, is a blogger; Nancy Weber, our Program Director, writes prose; Aaron Zimmerman, Executive Director is a published novelist; I write memoirs and nonfiction. As a team, writing is a big part of our lives."

"Bringing in writers also helps build an audience and empowers the kids. The young writers who participate in our Fort Greene Park Summer Literary Festival end

up reading their work next to established writers. It's become a community tradition. In the past, we've had Amiri Baraka, Jennifer Egan, and Rick Moody read their work at our summer lit festival. These authors believe in our mission and do whatever they can to encourage youth. In a sense, big names bring the stories of these kids to the forefront."

NYWC encourages its young writers to address social issues in an informed, empowered way. "Two of our teens from

the lit workshop interviewed Angel Nafis, the author of *BlackGirl Mansion*, which addresses street harassment." The interview was played in a podcast to promote NYWC's summer workshops.

NYWC's goal is to empower its youth, Gorman concluded: "We provide them with the tools but leave it to them to find their voices."

For more information on NYWC's initiatives and events, please visit <http://ny-writerscoalition.org>.