

Sharing Voices, Acting Crazy

Cindy Frenkel

My first year as a writer-in-residence with InsideOut, I was assigned to Henry Ford Academy in Highland Park, a straight shot down Woodward Avenue from where I live. Before my residency began, we had an orientation where I met the poet Jamaal May. He offered advice that serves me still. He explained how insecure and vulnerable the children feel, “so when you teach, act crazy,” he said. “Make it so that whatever they do that feels like they’re taking a risk isn’t nearly as outside-the-box as what you’ve done.” Before my first day, I took a test drive to the school. Not fifteen minutes from my suburban home, the urban decay surrounded me, buildings increasingly desolate, windows boarded-up or covered with metal grates. There was palpable energy in graffiti, although most was codified gang scrawling, a reminder that the oversize writing and symbols—forms of street art—are an outlet. I saw wig shops, adult entertainment places, and fast-food joints: no grocery stores or drug stores anywhere. In five miles, the world changed.

I turned onto Pilgrim, the school’s street, and after a few blocks, opposite a caved-in house, stood the school. I wasn’t prepared for this. Around the block, I came across a burned-out, factory-size building. What did I get myself into? Then, immediately after, shame hit as I thought that children live and go to school here every day.

What was it like to work there? And work there I did for three happy years—until it became a charter school. The school, though considered nicer than most, had exposed pipes (that was asbestos, wasn’t it?), and teachers handed children pieces of toilet paper en route to the bathroom. The principal, who hailed from Brooklyn, was pleased I had lived in New York, and she was frustrated by the school’s lack of diversity; almost everyone in the school was African American. During my second year, I discovered that the children assumed I, too, was African American because my hair was curly. (I’m

pale and blue-eyed, but no matter.) I took it as the ultimate compliment.

My first day, I began falling in love. The students were open-eyed and talkative. I was animated and a bit off-the-wall, asking questions while moving around the room. "What is poetry? Why does writing matter? Who are you? How can writing transform your life?"

I soon realized how easy it is to attach labels, including the label "failure of the system." The "failure," it turns out, is a function of at least three factors: children living in poverty in one of the most affluent countries on the planet, lack of parental support, and parents' lack of support—a complicated mix. Many of us living elsewhere remain numb in the face of such overwhelming odds and anesthetize our consciousness, so we do nothing. I don't know if it's possible to grasp the challenges the children face without seeing them up close. I have had only a small glimpse, and it has widened the lens through which I observe life. (We use metaphors a lot in the classroom!)

As I taught the fundamentals of poetry (what a stanza is and a couplet and an off-rhyme, etc.), I also introduced them to many poets' work. I was enraptured when they reflected on "How Do I Love Thee?" and "To thine own self be true." When they'd get overly rowdy, I'd pick up "the invisible phone," dive into a one-sided dialogue, and this would reengage them. Those were comical, impromptu conversations. "You want William to do what?" I'd ask incredulously. "But that's illegal! All right, I'll tell him . . ." I'd turn to William, "You're supposed to write about what it's like to drive a car!" I'd try out emerging characters that I'd have improvised for friends or performed during a poetry reading, always speaking in different accents. These became favored requests by the children. When asked to do so, I'd comply by questioning, "OK, you guys. British, Yiddish, or Southern? You choose!" Often a poem had to be recited all three ways. I hammed it up, commenting on the poem in character, and they adored it, hamming it up back. I became a Southern belle, replete with proper mannerisms. Whatever I did, I made it up on the spot, and it worked. "My, my, you kiiiids are actin' wiiiild. Calm down, darlin's!" or "Oy! Youz a beee-u-tiful groowp of childen! Ven I vas yourh h, vee didn't have no plumin'. In de' Olt Countree . . . Oy! Life is hart heeerh, but oy vey! Vee had troublse,

too! And dey vas bik ones!" It wired them up in the best way. Sometimes I'd recite poems and add gestures, which they often wanted to learn. Talk about fun!

For two more years, I followed several fourth, fifth, and sixth graders, and I watched them gain insights while developing their voices. When iO sponsored the National Endowment for the Art's Big Read in Detroit, each student received a copy of Dickinson's poems. First, I explained that once there was a poet, Miss Emily. I described the time, her room, and her clothes. "Where do you think she lived?" I asked. Bobby, a delightful sixth grader with caramel-colored eyes, eagerly raised his hand, tilting his head. I nodded, and he asked, "In the hood?" (I couldn't resist writing a poem entitled, "Emily D. in the Hood.") I watched a husky, impatient fifth grader light up, waving his hand in the air, announcing, "This is my favorite Emily poem!" and then, moments later, blurt out, "No, this is!"

Some things can't be rushed; they develop slowly and deliberately—the rapport one has with kids is such a thing. Once they knew me well enough, I heard their heartbreaking realities. When one student was more withdrawn than usual, I questioned her, and she casually explained her cousin was getting out of prison that day. "He was playing Russian roulette with his brother . . ."

Writing worked its cathartic powers. They hungered to put their voices to paper. (I know its draw firsthand; it is my balm in troubled times, my trumpet in happy ones.) When I taught Bobby, word was out among teachers that he and his friends formed a gang. I walked up to him with paper and pen in hand. "I heard you've formed a gang," I admonished him. "What's its name?" He looked up, stating, "School Boys." I wrote it down. "Who's in the gang?" I demanded. He politely listed names. I wrote them down, aware of his tender compliance. I pointed my finger at him, "You don't want to be in a gang! I want better for you. Do you hear me?" He nodded. I felt honored by his trust, but I also knew full well that by the eighth grade, it was unlikely he would be so open.

I'd like to say that these things were anomalies, but that's not accurate. When the fifth grade teacher changed classrooms in mid-day to teach across the hall, she locked her classroom door. Someone pried open that door with a crowbar and stole her purse.

The violence, poverty, and despair were more than I could have imagined, yet some children have indomitable spirits. Their buoyancy helped me. It was as if I were working with angels, spirits housed in small, beautiful bodies. They wrote about the joys of family life, loving parents, pets, siblings, grandparents, and they wrote of broken homes and broken-down neighborhoods. When they read their poems, their self-esteem seemed to rise; they stood up straighter, and they spoke loudly and with pride.

They understood Mies van der Rohe's line, "God is in the details." One time, after we'd finished going over metaphors and similes, a shy, quiet boy wrote:

The Pencil

This pencil in my hand
is rough. Like an old table,

orange like a tiger.
Short eraser, like a light switch.

Hard as a desk.
Skinny as a line.

JOHN CRAFT

That light switch/eraser image is one I can't forget. Another poem is by a sprightly fourth grader who improvised characters with me and held his own as if we were contemporaries (I swear our unlikely pairing was so strong that we could be on stage together). His name is Robert Porter-McDowell. We made up stories about a mouse in his "office" (because of the computer mouse) and when we entered different places via the computer's keys, we had to press "enter" to go to the oddest stops. I'd call out, "Rooooooooooooooooo-bert!" and he'd jump up, match my movement, then add his own zingy twist.

We couldn't have been much wittier or more inane, but when he got down to writing about sad things, he entered a whole other world. I admire this poem for its heartbreaking grace and honesty in a story aptly told:

Worst Days of My Life

On December 3, 2010,
My cousin Ray Ray
Got shot ten times at a store.
Somebody shot him for no reason.
The first time they shot five times,
Then he got up and started running.
He got shot five more times.
Then he died.
I was devastated on that day.

On November 23, 2010, at 11:45,
My pastor died.
Cause he had cancer.
We went to his funeral.
I was scared.
Everyone was crying, screaming
And when my sister Latrice
And my cousin Martez and I
Went up there and saw him
I almost dropped a tear on his face.
I miss him.

ROBERT PORTER-MCDOWELL

That poem was published in their last anthology, and when I came to school bearing those books—one for every author!—I felt like Santa. The book was the tangible thing, yet what I like to think I left the children with was the value of articulating their ideas, and the gift of reading, a way to journey without leaving home, their ticket between the covers of a book.

What I didn't know was how much the children would affect me. At year's end, Bobby approached me and said, "Ms. Frenkel, thank you for never giving up on me." Teaching them transformed me, and nearly every day I think about them. It has been two years since Bobby told me about the gang. I hope he is alive and headed in a good direction. I still want to be present in my students' lives and help them improve their writing and verbal skills. How easy it is

for outsiders to make generalizations about Detroit, focusing on urban decay intertwined with a general malaise. That's not what I notice, though. I see some areas in bloom, and others budding. I know that if those budding areas are given enough light, they, too, will bloom—and they'll become as powerful as a Motown song.

In that last anthology, I also included a farewell letter:

A Letter to Students

Chances are this will be the last time we will all be learning poetry together. I say "we" because I have learned so much from you. It has been a privilege and a joy to teach you these past three years. Please remember what remarkable talents spring forth from your writing and the safe haven writing provides. Never forget that literature is something readily available—good reading and good writing are things you can always access. And don't forget how much correct English elevates you and can improve your life!

Wherever you wind up, always kindle your curiosity and desire to read and write. Recall the magic of poetry and bring it forth. Once you enter the world of the written word in order to create it, you can create any world you choose. The miracle is that this world—which originated in your mind—then influences the material world, and who knows where your talents, desires, and dreams will take you?

With love and gratitude, I thank you. I have been blessed to call you my students and to have worked with the devoted staff and faculty at Henry Ford Academy.

CINDY FRENKEL

I wept as I wrote it.