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Fitness, fun and literacy

University of Iowa workshop SCORES with inner-city teachers

Imagine a hot July day in an old stone building on a Big Ten university campus in the Midwest, where a roomful of elementary school teachers are writing poems.

Do you hear the soft scratching of pencils, the whisper of an occasional page, a discrete cough interrupting 20-odd separate trains of thought? If you do, you are not in the University of Iowa's newest writing workshop.

Now, imagine a classroom full of laughs and a lot of motion. Imagine colorful poetry clotheslines overhead, as participants tap-dance, perform "flash" poems (in English and in Spanish), jazz to jump-rope lyrics, play poetry poker or poetry hopscotch, and hang with folks like Chicano writer Juan Felipe Herrera, jazz poet George Barlow and South Carolina children's author Dianne Johnson.

Imagine the Urban Teachers' Poetry Workshop for America SCORES, a nationwide after-school program that combines creative writing and soccer. That's right: literacy and fitness, the two most urgent issues in U.S. schools today. The program's Web site, www.americascorers.org, says, "America SCORES links soccer to academic success by placing one demand on its 2,000 student-athletes: to stay on the soccer team, they must report to their writing coach."

For the last two summers, as teaching assistant to workshop leader and Iowa poet laureate Marvin Bell, I have been privileged to be part of America SCORES — the poetry part, that is. Teaming me with a soccer ball is not a lyrical experience!

Teachers (or "coaches," as they are called) from inner-city schools throughout the country attend the workshop, during which they practice new techniques for writing poetry with children ages 8 to 12. Our textbooks are collections of multicultural poems and crazy writing exercises. In the evenings, we write crazy poetry of our own. That's Bell's Rule No. 1: The teacher must write, too.

Guest speakers enrich our workshop. One favorite is Dave ("Dr. Alphabet") Morice, who shows us how to draw poetry comics and run a poetry marathon. "These folks are on the side of the angels," Bell says of SCORES teachers. "We need to give them as many ideas as we can."

America SCORES' band of fund-raisers, which includes Dave Barry, Stephen King, Amy Tan and Scott Turow, couldn't agree

more. As King has said, "Teaching kids to write is equivalent to teaching kids to think. Giving kids the tools to write is giving them the resources to be successful in life."

The hope is that the program will eventually be in every major city in the country. During 2003-04, America SCORES will serve about 2,700 students in more than 80 schools across eight cities.

Any teacher worth her salt learns more than she ever teaches. This summer, from Sudecia Brown of Boston's Roxbury community, I learned about commitment. Like most SCORES teachers, Brown spends a full day in a regular classroom before poetry and soccer kick in. She barely has time to erase her chalkboard.

For Brown, America SCORES is well worth the extra time and energy. Fifteen million children wander our cities' streets between the hours of 3 and 5 p.m. Studies show that any after-school program helps. American children who participate in one to four hours of extracurricular activity each week are 60 percent less likely to drop out of school by the time they are seniors.

From Chicago teacher Norma Redmond, I learned that teaching children is a team effort. "That's where I often meet a student's parents for the first time," she says, referring to SCORES' neighborhood poetry slams and soccer games. "I meet parents who have never been to the school before. Sometimes they don't realize how important their encouragement is."

After-school programs should be fun, believes Redmond. When did learning and fun get so far apart? Without the pressure of grades, and with the freedom to use language in new ways, Redmond and I have seen children, as well as adults, gain confidence and verbal agility — attributes so crucial to academic success.

I Used To

I used to be afraid of El Barrio, Harlem, the South Bronx.
I used to be afraid of Washington Heights, Brooklyn, and South View.
I used to be afraid of the trains, the buses and the short walk to the bodega.
I used to be afraid of the loud music, the block parties, and the water pressure of the pump.
I used to be afraid of the local drug dealer, John the bully, playing football in the street.
But now that I have moved to the Suburbs,
I am afraid because those things are not there.

— Luis Guerrero, Teacher
New York SCORES



MATTHEW HOLST, IOWA CITY PRESS-CITIZEN

Poet Dave Morice, also known as Dr. Alphabet, leads a session for SCORES teachers.

As we begin planning next year's Urban Teachers' Poetry Workshop, I continue to learn from my teacher, Marvin Bell. Working with Bell, I'm reminded of another teacher, Furman's own Al Reid. It was Dr. Reid who first introduced me to contemporary poetry, showing me the magic in everyday objects and ordinary language. It was Dr. Reid, and the black armband he wore on campus to protest the Vietnam War, who taught me that poetry and politics connect, that everything can connect. Even an Iowa college town and a roomful of big-city teachers.

Imagine that.

— Cecile Hanna Goding '73

The author, former director of the Florence (S.C.) Literacy Council, teaches at the University of Iowa and Mount Mercy College. Examples of her work are in 45/96: The Ninety-Six Sampler of South Carolina Poetry (Ninety-Six Press, 1994).