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## ABSTRACT

The Dewey Center Community Writing Project is a community-based, summer writing program collaboratively designed by students, teachers, and community members in Detroit's inner-city. During the first summer of the project, fifth- through seventh-grade students, primarily from the Jeffries Homes (or "Projects") worked with seven teachers from the University of Michigan and the Detroit Public Schools to desk-top publish their writing in "Corridors: Stories from Inner-City Detroit." Julia Pointer, a student in the program, incorporated elements of fact and fiction in her story about Ms. Rose Bell, a long-term volunteer director for a service for unwed teenagers in the Jeffries Homes. Knowing that fiction is what she does best, Julia "made up" a person who had met and learned from Ms. Bell so that her story could be told in a "more complete" way. At the party celebrating the publication of the book of stories, Julia read part of her story and a poem. Students need the opportunity to write themselves out of their often troubled worlds. Educators must create opportunities for such students to share their understandings and their visions of the world. (RS)

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# Julia, "Miss Rose Bell," and a Detroit publishing party

by David Scharisma

The Dewey Center Community Writing Project is a community-based, summer writing program collaboratively designed by students, teachers, and community members in Detroit's inner-city. The project is held at the Dewey Center for Urban Education, a K-8 Whole Language Public School near the Jeffries Homes (or Projects). During three weeks in June and July, 1989—its first of several continuing summers—thirty fifth through seventh grade students, primarily from the Projects area, worked with seven teachers from the University of Michigan and the Detroit Public Schools and desk-top published their writing in *Corridors: Stories from Inner-City Detroit*.

The project is community-based in that it works hard to make connections to the often troubled neighborhood of the school. Students and teachers conduct research into issues most important to them in their communities, and in the process interview community members, visit local sites, and desk-top publish some of the writing that comes from their exploration. We try to develop a writing community together; teachers write and publish with students; we share our writing with each other in writing workshops and conferences. We try to make it clear: Everyone here is an Author.

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One of the community members that many of the students interviewed in the summer of 1989 was Ms. Rose Bell, a long term volunteer in the Corridors' Jeffries Homes, who has been directing a service for unwed teenage mothers called 961-BABY. Julia wrote her story after being one of Miss Bell's interviewers, incorporating elements of fact and fiction in her writing. The story, one of several pieces Julia Pointer wrote during the program, was written quickly, with little help from her peers, though she did consult several teachers and read it in its various stages to her workshop groups and received some advice. Julia's best friend Camille was her most influential reader. They responded to each other's stories candidly and often.

One September day after the summer she had written her story, I discussed it with Julia. In the course of our conversation, I asked her what she thought was successful about the story. She said, "I think the moral is that here's a lady that lives in the Projects who is just living in the same environment as the people she helps, and is just as bad off. But she's bringing so much joy, and it shows you that if you are in a hole, it doesn't mean that you can't help somebody else and get out of it. And at the same time, I think that she has a sense of self-fulfillment about this thing that she's doing. So, both parties are benefiting, and I think that that's the basic moral of the story. And when you think about it, here she is living in the projects, and here I am living in a middle class neighborhood less than two miles away, and she's going through all of this, as poor as she is, and I'm not doing anything. I do little things, but it makes you think about how much you really care about what is going on."

"For example," she continued, "when you get a Christmas card from the Salvation Army, asking for money, some people throw it out without even reading it. Some people get angry and say they can't afford it. But here's a lady that is helping people and barely making it herself. She's just wonderful. Like I said in my story, I don't know how she's made it this long time. It has to be God that has let her make it. But that story has to be told, and I wanted to tell it, in my own way."

I asked her how she came to write "Miss Rose Bell." She said: "Sometimes when I hear things—a movie, or a song—I'm inspired. Well, Miss Rose Bell inspired me when I heard about her work and all the good she is doing. It just came to me that if I could make up a person that had met Miss Bell and learned from her, then I could tell the story in a more complete way. It would be more real."

"But why fiction?" I asked her. "Why not just tell the facts?"

"Well, fiction is my thing," she said. "That's what I do best. I thought it would be better to mix the fact with the fiction than just give you the facts about her life. The things about Miss Bell, that's the fact part, but the fiction—I just can create stories in my mind, put myself in a person's life, imagine what it would be like to be there, and hopefully I can get readers to the same thing. You get drawn into it if it's a story more than if it's just facts."

"But what about this difficult subject, teenage pregnancy? Isn't it a hard and potentially negative thing to write about?" I asked.

"Yes, it is a hard thing. But grown-ups don't give kids credit for things. We observe. We experience things in the world and some of them aren't nice, but we need to speak about them. Many of us have friends who have been or might be threatened with the problem. We need

to deal with these things. We need to get our feelings out instead of keeping them inside. And this also gives grown-ups a view of what teenagers are thinking.” Julia also pointed out that while seemingly negative stories can inspire people

to change their lives, her story is a positive one. Of her story, which she wrote with the help of Camille and other readers, Julia says, “I wanted to let it be known how much Rose Bell does do in the world, that there are people doing these good things for others, that there is someone there, and not to give up.” She said, “At first, it sounded too much like a fairy tale, but then I realized there aren’t perfect people— things don’t happen like that—and I changed it to make it more real.”

At the publication party for *Corridors* at the Dewey Center, many community members, parents and students, University and Detroit Public School teachers, administrators and school board members came to listen and participate. Reporters from the *Detroit News* and the *Michigan Chronicle* became the first of many media representatives to write about what we had come to see as a successful project. We were publishing our book, so naturally we threw a party to celebrate. Students dressed up in their “Sunday best” for the occasion. They were proud to be seen as Authors. They signed copies of the books for their guests. Banners lined the walls, proclaiming: Welcome! Corridors’ Publication Party! The Dewey Center Community Writing Project! Balloons hung from the ceiling and posters with snapshots from the writing program lined the walls. We served cookies and punch and cake, and everyone with a camera was taking pictures. On stage in the auditorium, students read their writing aloud. Julia read part of her story and a poem.

People were excited to be part of it all. This writing was important, and people would buy this book in the community and beyond. As people began to drift out, the first year of the Dewey Center Community Writing Project was

in many respects complete, though it would continue as readers read these stories and poems:

Of course, writing alone won't change Julia's world. The conditions in her community are, at least statistically, far worse than they were during the late '60's riots—some scars of which are still evident in her neighborhood. The threat of violence is with her every day as she continues to go to school. But as Nelson Goodman said, "The object of understanding human events is to sense the alternativeness of human possibility." How important it is for those of us who teach and read newspaper accounts of the inner city to hear teenagers responding to their world with such conviction.

As Julia says, "We experience things in the world and some of them aren't nice, but we need to speak about them." Today Julia's in high school, making her progress toward college and a career. In what? "I'd like to be a psychologist, I think. Or maybe a writer."

Students need the opportunity to write themselves out of their often troubled worlds sometimes. "We all need hope," Julia said. "And that's one good reason to write about hard things—to give hope." Students like Julia deserve the opportunity to share their understanding, their visions of "the alternativeness of human possibility," in the process of speaking on their own behalf, and it's important for us to create opportunities so that we and others can hear them.

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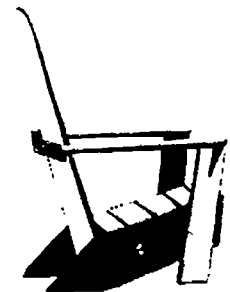
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# EDITOR'S NOTE

This issue of *Bread Loaf News* focuses on the variety of publications and writing practices of teachers and students at the Bread Loaf School of English. Their contributions are not confined to their classrooms, but spill over into educational programs nationwide.

Ann Lew, a Bread Loaf student and a member of the Humanities Education Research and Language Development (HERALD) in San Francisco, writes with commitment about her theories for helping her students, many for whom English is a second language, improve their writing. Bread Loaf teachers participating in Writing and Performing Across Cultures (WPAC) are using drama and improvisation to help students write, revise, and publish their work in a new way—through performance. Lanniko Lee, a Bread Loaf/WPAC grantee, uses her honor shield to inspire students to create their own shields to give a visual account of themselves as writers. Bette Ford, a state leader from Mississippi for the Bread Loaf Rural

Teacher Network, writes about getting her students to “publish”—by going public. Bob Weston, a Bread Loaf student who teaches at a private school in Newport, Rhode Island, gives us two stories from the book he’s working on about his life as a student of writing and a teacher of writing. Richard Brodhead, in the Bread Loaf/Elizabeth Drew Lecture, share his views about the changing canon of American literature. And David Schaafsma, a guest speaker at Bread Loaf, summer 1992, describes Detroit’s Dewey Center Community Writing Project, an interview with a seventh grade author about her writing process, and the project’s publication party.

The fall/winter 1993 issue of *Bread Loaf News* will focus on teacher research/classroom research. We welcome queries and submissions. If you have, at any time, received a Bread Loaf Teacher Researcher grant, we would like to hear from you.

Leslie Owens

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Some names in these articles have been changed to protect people. Statements and interpretations of contributors are not necessarily those of Bread Loaf and the Schools or the Bread Loaf School of English.

DIRECTOR,  
BREAD LOAF SCHOOL  
OF ENGLISH

James Maddox

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*Bread Loaf Rural Teacher Network (BLRTN) leaders Alfredo Lujan and Vicki Holmsten (New Mexico) and Lois Rodgers (Mississippi) at the project's planning meeting in South Carolina, March 1993. (See page 6.)*

