



Education and Activism Initiative Around Herstory's Prison Project

Herstory Writers Workshop, a community-based memoir writing network for women, is seeking partners and venues for a series of forums, mini-courses, readings and multi-media presentations targeted to reach those in the system who most impact the lives of incarcerated women, as well as the general public. The centerpiece of this initiative, partially funded by the Long Island Fund for Women and Girls, will be wide-scale dissemination of Herstory's magazine *Voices: Memoirs from Suffolk County Corrections*, which we will take into a second edition, as we build programs for judges, corrections officers and students of criminal justice around its content. Our experiences over five years of working with over 700 women incarcerated in Suffolk County lead us to believe that the programming we propose will help change the system that incarcerates those in our society who are most helpless, remedying consequences that such incarceration has on women and girls for many generations to come.

Mission Statement and Background

Founded in 1996, Herstory Writers Workshop provides opportunities through guided memoir writing that empower women from all walks of life (regardless of age, race, religion, financial status or sexual orientation, whether incarcerated or free) to turn their intimate stories into works of art crafted so that others can hear. Herstory is committed to providing an environment of intensive instruction which, in addition to creating literary works, upholds our values of empathy, inclusiveness, self-guided healing, safety and the search for social change in the expression of voices that historically have been most profoundly silenced.

Since its founding, HERSTORY has engaged and connected the most isolated and vulnerable populations of women on Long Island: women in homeless shelters, women living on disability payments and welfare, Asian, Hispanic and Caribbean immigrant women, Spanish language only women, victims of domestic violence and adolescents living in court mandated group homes. The organization's remarkable engagement with women in prison is for many of us where HERSTORY does its best and most profound work.

Our Arts and Education Initiative

This project will provide law enforcement agencies and individuals with an awareness that will influence the decisions and aftercare plans they make. In order to act responsibly in behalf of these women we must begin by examining the experience of their lives. We must be able to look beyond the crimes they have committed and the laws they have broken to see that these stories have common threads that are deeply sown into the system.

We propose a 3 stage program beginning with mini-seminars in law school, or criminal

justice classes:

The project will “connect the dots” as we map these women’s lives

Who are these women?

How did they get there?

What were their resources?

What do their stories tell us about their life experience?

We would like to visit selected classes 3 times per semester.

- 1 On the first visit, we will show the documentary and suggest that students read selected stories from *Voices: Memoirs from Herstory Inside Suffolk County Correctional Facilities*. There will be a discussion looking at the uses of these materials as we examine effective ways in which to increase the capacity of these women's resources in helping them to define and achieve goals that will be both possible and meaningful.
- 2 Our second visit will focus on a discussion looking to "connect the dots". We will pay particular attention to available community resources and ways in which we can best maximize a positive outcome. We will brainstorm discharge plans that can be effective in rehabilitating these women once they re-enter the greater community. We will look at ways in which what the women have achieved through writing their stories can enable them to give back.

On our third visit we would like to bring one of the participating prison writers to class so we can present a “living laboratory” to the students that will give face to the background stories they have read after the first session.

We will also be looking to present these ideas to interested others who have an influence on the corrections system.

Non-student presentations – one time presentation or in-service:

1. Show our prison video, made by Black Media Foundation.
2. Lead a discussion covering why we wanted to reach the prison population
3. Discuss why we are reaching out to our present audience

Setting up opportunities for interns

1. Having them help us look at measurement tools so we can gather needed data, as well as designing more innovative evaluation tools
2. Developing and exploring resources
3. Developing the prison portion of Herstory’s website
4. Recording the women’s voices

GOALS FOR MAGAZINE CIRCULATION:

Prison libraries
Required reading in criminal justice schools
Corrections officers' trainings

Outcomes:

Our possible outcomes would include the following:

1. monthly meetings to discuss progress and brainstorm solutions to system barriers
2. the creation of a data base on Karma411 – a social collaboration tool that will allow us to reach out and connect with new and existing audiences to raise awareness.
3. connecting with Long Island's restorative justice movement, a philosophy and field of practice that is rapidly growing among those involved in criminal justice work.
4. the creation of a conference that will bring these issues to the public discourse.
5. building Herstory option into discharge plan
6. further development of Herstory's existing Bridges workshop network

Addendum

Social conditions that our project will address

With national recidivism rates of 70% for all inmates, we can certainly understand why our funders might want to see statistics that prove that this workshop is rehabilitative. Well over 90% of the women we work with are doing time for drug and alcohol related offenses. Addictions are at least the superficial roots of their criminal behaviors, but to dig deeper, you will find the source of these addictions in multiple early childhood traumas, rape and sexual or physical abuse. While we can show numbers that indicate that these women return at a significantly lower rate than the general population, these numbers don't mean a great deal, as this is a self-selected group in RCF.

In addition, while the workshop is mandatory in the Yaphank DWI facility, so are many other workshops and therapy groups there designed to help these women maintain their sobriety on release. What we can show are stacks of letters, cards, testimonials, and hand-made gifts from our participants expressing deep love and gratitude and extolling the unique benefits of this program.

What we can show you is our first issue of *VOICES: Memoirs from HERSTORY INSIDE* that we feel speaks highly for itself with the deeply wrenching and expressive writing of the women who contributed. We would like to be able to include some of the first drafts of these same pieces to show how much work and growth each woman achieved and how far each has come as a writer.

We can tell you a hundred anecdotes of women like Dawn, whose appearance would tell a hard story, one that you imagine would be kept well hidden under multiple layers of defense, only on this day, as she began to read, after multiple protestations and claims of her inadequacy, she began.... And then stopped.... And then began again. "I don't think I can do this." She begins weeping. "It's weird. I've talked about this lots of times before, but it's really different reading about it. But I have to do this. I just have to." Will Dawn, and so many other participants like her in our workshops, succeed in shedding her demons through this process? Certainly, some. And if she joins our workshops on the outside, and continues to write and read her truth aloud, maybe she will join the group of other former inmates from HERSTORY INSIDE who are now in school, or have been offered new jobs, and are making their way, day-to-day, clean and sober, and keeping in touch with us as they do.

While our workshop in Riverhead continues to be as full and vibrant as always, we can now attest to the growth of the workshop for the women in the Yaphank program. This has always been the more difficult of the two as it is our only mandatory program and many of the participants in the past have been reluctant to work, citing complaints and excuses of "not being a writer." We have changed our tactics somewhat in this group, offering them the opportunity to use this writing process as a way to look closely at whatever issue/relationship/life event they feel may have been instrumental in turning them towards their current circumstance. We also include in our introductory remarks to newcomers that this is being offered for their benefit, not to satisfy our needs, but as one other tool for their rehabilitation, thereby emphasizing their own responsibility in making the most of the

offering. This slight direction and encouragement for the women who say they are not writers has made all the difference in this group. Now, virtually all of the women work with the process and have writing to share each week.

Memoir is about the past, and nowhere is the shadow of the past more present than in prisons, where one pays for what cannot be rewritten. Women participating in the HERSTORY INSIDE prison program have in common experiences of disruption, dislocation or trauma that can accentuate their emotional as well as their physical isolation from the community at large. This reinforces the elements of disorder and societal marginalization that have inhibited their personal growth and their ability to employ individual assets. While many of the project participants have been exposed to a rich oral tradition and may have at their command skills in oral expression, most have had little experience in exercising the discipline and skills required to employ written language to order their experiences and to transform them into works of art meaningful to a wide audience. Through this process, women drop layers of shame and uncover a self-esteem and sense of potential and personal strength that most have never experienced.

There are 1.1 million women who are incarcerated or on parole in the U.S. today. Female offenders represent the fastest growing population within jails and prisons. As most of these women are single parents, the disruption to their children's lives is profound, often setting the stage for the incarceration of the next generation. Furthermore, multiple studies have shown that prison and jail unduly and disproportionately affect communities of color. In spite of a 70% recidivism rate, incarceration is perhaps the only public project given unlimited resources despite decades of consistently horrible performance.

Drug abuse is the primary reason women go to prison, not violent crime. The few studies of female offenders with substance abuse disorders depict a population with multiple psychosocial problems and treatment needs, and one that is characterized by frequent exposure to sexual abuse and other violence. (Rivas, Gil) The National Institute on Drug Abuse reports that 70% of female drug users have been sexually abused by the age of sixteen, and that most of these women had at least one parent who abused alcohol or drugs. For women offenders in particular, the prison environment reinforces a victim role that originated in childhood and adolescence. In addition, such settings discourage both emotional expression (except for aggression) and responsibility, since basic needs such as food, lodging, and clothing are provided. (Taylor, SD)

These statistics have certainly been confirmed by our experience in working with the women of HERSTORY INSIDE at the Riverhead Correctional Facility (since March 2003) and at the Yaphank DWI facility (since March 2006). Among the approximately 300 women who have participated in Herstory at these two facilities, 90 – 95% are survivors of childhood sexual abuse and/or violence and the majority are drug addicts. One after another they find the courage to slowly, ever so painfully, describe to the “stranger- reader” these hidden truths that have darkened their lives for so many years. Though we never direct women in which part of their lives they choose to write about, many begin in these most traumatic moments. As facilitators, we gently keep the focus on the writing, on the needs of that “stranger-reader” so that the writer can safely revisit these events, looking with both deep intimacy and simultaneous objectivity.

While Riverhead Correctional Facility offers a few skills classes to women inmates (i.e., GED, sewing, and plumbing), Herstory addresses the critical issues that have led each of these women into incarceration. Often women will choose to start with the most painful events of their lives. What is perhaps unexpected for listeners on the outside is the number of women who choose to find moments of light amidst the darkness of the past, light that they may have forgotten even existed. Women who have known each other on the streets, who have even been enemies, begin to see beyond what they think they know and begin to openly express love and respect for their Herstory sisters. They begin to speak of being inspired by one another and of wanting to change both themselves and their worlds. They are often surprised and pleased to relate that others (outside of the group) are noticing their growth. The key to being a good facilitator in a prison setting in many ways rests on our ability not to judge, but to compassionately and attentively receive and listen, no matter what the content that is revealed, and to stay focused on the writing, not the individual. In doing so, we are guided by an ideology and principles that are essentially the same as those of the Unitarian 7 principles. If they were not the same, we would be viewed by the participants as two more authority figures, not to be trusted.

One unusually gratifying outcome of this process is witnessing the community that forms between the women. When they come together to bear witness to the deeper truths of their experiences through the writing, barriers of race, ethnicity, and class begin to dissolve, and an entirely other depth of relationship is formed in the space of the Herstory circle. Through their writing and sharing of their stories we recognize that the women of HERSTORY INSIDE are a microcosm of the larger society of women, separated only by the green scrubs they must wear.

Of the approximately three hundred women who have worked with HERSTORY INSIDE in either program, only ten have returned to us as repeat offenders. While this number does not reflect the participants who went on to serve additional time in state facilities, it does suggest that this process may have helped some to make different choices when they reached that same crossroad again and certainly indicates a more positive outcome than the 70% national average of inmates who return to jail shortly after release. It is important to note that the cost of housing one inmate at RCF is \$203.47 per day, or \$6,104.10 per month, or \$61,041.00 per ten-month stay. If the Herstory program succeeded in keeping one woman from returning to RCF for a ten-month stay, that would save taxpayers \$61,041.00. ⁱ

ⁱ Henderson, D.J., *Drug Abuse and Incarcerated Women*, Journal of Substance Abuse, Vol. 15, Issue 6, 1998.

Rivas, Gil R., *Sexual abuse, physical abuse, and posttraumatic stress disorder among women participating in outpatient drug treatment*, UCLA Drug Abuse Research Center, Neuropsychiatric Institute, 1996.