

Stories shaped in our prison writing project become required reading for incoming officers in Suffolk County's corrections academy.

December 17th was an historical day for the women and teen girls incarcerated in Suffolk County's two correctional facilities, as they learned that their stories had become part of mandatory training for incoming corrections officers in the academy... read more The women are part of "Herstory Inside," a memoir-writing project that has provided weekly workshops to nearly a thousand imprisoned women and girls over a seven-year period. In the chapel of Riverhead Correctional Facility, where 33 workshop members and a dozen guards assembled for a holiday reading, Erika Duncan, Herstory's founder and artistic director announced that the entire graduating class of the corrections academy had used [Voices: Memoirs from Suffolk County Correctional Facilities](#) as part of their class work, to a round of applause and tears. When the women learned that the jail had purchased 250 copies of this book of their writings, edited by workshop facilitators Linda Coleman and Lonnie Mathis, they just shook their heads in wonder, hardly able to believe this was so.

There was a round of applause for Lieutenant Darlene Mc Clurken and Sergeant Noreen Fisher who had originally suggested the purchase and who taught the class, which received a resoundingly positive evaluation from the 42 men and 8 women who reported that before the presentation they hadn't given any thought to the lives of the women who would be in their charge. The lieutenant and the captain confessed that even after several decades of guarding the women, until they heard the stories in the women's own voices, they too hadn't given the magnitude of their struggle much thought, which was why they felt that it must be a requirement for every new officer who would come in contact with women in jail.

It all had been part of a larger initiative supported by the Long Island Fund for Women and Girls and the Long Island Unitarian Universalist Fund to bring mini-forums, classroom presentations and readings to those who impact current decisions around incarceration, probation and parole as well as to students of criminology, sociology and law. As one of MS Foundation for Women's 2010-2011 grantees, Herstory has been able to pursue this work with "Youth Writing for Restorative Justice and Racial Equality" with the goal to empower college activists and teen girls caught at various stages of the juvenile justice system to write together to uncover roots causes and to use their stories to help in the struggle for justice and understanding.

Herstory is most grateful to the MS Foundation for Women for supporting our work with girls under 21 caught in the juvenile justice system, allowing us to take this work from Suffolk County where we have developed a track record, into Nassau and Queens County through new collaborations with the [Nassau County Youth Board](#) and [SUNY Old Westbury's Community Engagement and Partnership Center CALL for Change](#), to create bridge workshops where teen girls at imminent risk, involved in probation or parole, or returning from jail will be writing side by side with college activists. Together they will study the parts of juvenile justice system which their stories might impact. As part of the grant, we will be adding a special teen section to Voices, with the hope that the new edition will be widely used in schools and prisons throughout the country, and that our model of having a county's correctional system use stories by the women who are incarcerated in its facilities as the basis for officer training, will spread to correctional academies nationally and internationally.