



Our Mission

To bring unheard voices, both near and far, into the public arena; to transform lived experiences into written memoirs powerful enough to change hearts, minds, and policy.

Our Vision

Over time silences will be broken, and previously unsung stories will be heard as we reach out to more women and men-- young and old, incarcerated and free-- in an ever-widening circle of languages and cultures – across the United States and beyond.

If it were easy to walk in another person's shoes, the world would be a very different place. In 1996, novelist and essayist Erika Duncan gathered a small group of women who had never written for an audience, with the mission of writing their life stories in a way that would stir identification, empathy and compassion in even the hardest-hearted stranger. The result was staggering, not only in terms of producing writing far more powerful than that which would be expected from a group of beginners, but in fast-forwarding a sense of connectedness and of individual and community empowerment and healing. Together, the women joined Erika in designing a new set of tools that could allow anyone—regardless of level of education or previous writing experience—to partake in the process, working side by side across the differences in race, class and culture that keep us apart. And so Herstory Writers Workshop was born, with a groundbreaking mission of shifting the power structure so that those whose voices had been silenced would have a place in the decision-making that affects their lives.

The organization grew rapidly as participants found their voices and brought in others. First there was one workshop in one community, then two, then a third in another community – and so it went, spreading from one community to another, then to the jails, and finally to the schools, as educators, human rights activists and human service providers became aware of the potential of the methodology to create major changes, not only in the participants but in the wide circle of people the writings were able to touch-- county legislators, school officials, prison guards and community organizers looking for a story-based strategy for change.

Between 2006 and 2010 two training manuals were developed and piloted at Stony Brook University over the course of three summers. In 2016, an institute to train Herstory facilitators was established in partnership with Hofstra University's Center for Civic Engagement, and in 2019 this program moved to the Humanities Institute at Stony Brook University. A "Youth Writing for Justice" program was established in partnership with 5 colleges and 6 school districts, to advance the pedagogy in a way that would give students a voice and ultimately create a place for their stories in the school curriculum. In 2019 that dream was realized when 8 Herstory workshop series were incorporated into curriculum in 3 school districts and 2 more districts were signed on for 2020.

With NEA support, Herstory began developing a sophisticated online model for the purpose of geographic expansion, providing virtual workshop series for Hispanics in Philanthropy and the Winthrop Rockefeller foundation, generating stories of the American Southwest and Rural Arkansas, and seeing 2 of its anthologies circulated across the U.S. by First Book. Thanks to this move, Herstory was able to make a quick transition from in-person to online workshops when COVID 19 hit and put an end to in-school programs, continuing to bring forth the voices of students, migrant workers, Head Start parents, formerly incarcerated people, recent immigrants and differently abled people.

Moving forward in uncertain times, Herstory will offer a combination of online, in person and hybrid models to continue gathering stories from near and far that shed a personal and compelling light on systems that have

failed the writer, injustices faced or observed, families torn apart, the consequences of poverty and hopelessness. Many of the stories that emerge from Herstory workshops become instruments of change, tools more effective than graphs, charts or statistics at changing hearts and minds.

In the Schools (In-Person, Online and Hybrid Models)

Herstory's Youth Writing for Justice program brings high school students whose lives have been impacted by discrimination, poverty and inequality of opportunity to write together with college students for in-school and afterschool workshops throughout the school year and summer season. In workshops conducted in English and Spanish, participants are asked to write about an issue they care deeply about, something that happened to them or that they witnessed.

As participants learn how to weave their own stories into powerful pieces of writing exploring racial justice, police practices, discrimination against immigrants, and the impact of mass incarceration on families and communities, they develop shared actions around the policies that affect their communities the most.

As the young people write together, side by side, the college students acquire new lenses through which to experience the needs of the populations they are studying and will eventually serve, while the high school students - many representing the first generation in their families for whom college is an option - begin to imagine new educational and career possibilities.

As these semester-long workshops progress, the students slowly begin to realize that their stories are not isolated, and that many of their lived experiences are the result of systems failure rather than personal failure. As a result, not only are their feelings of helplessness and vulnerability reduced, but many of them become interested in trying to change the systems that are affecting their lives.

In the words of one teacher/escort from Long Beach High School, "I have witnessed transformation. I have witnessed lives being saved."

In the Jails: Herstory Behind Bars

2020 marked the 15th year in which Herstory Writers Workshop has given people incarcerated in Long Island jails the opportunity, in weekly writing groups, to share their deeply tragic stories. Begun at one site with a workshop for incarcerated women, the program rapidly spread to all three of Long Island's correctional facilities and expanded to include adolescent girls, aged 16-20, and incarcerated men. Designed to give those who have been voiceless a voice, the stories are not only shared in the groups, but are brought into the larger community to be used by students of criminology and law, policy makers and human service providers.

Herstory's work in the jails is distinct from other writing programs in that it engages the participants, week after week, in developing longer prose pieces, and then offers support for continued writing and public presentation, web and publication opportunities once the prisoners are released back to the community.

In 2010, Herstory assembled and published an anthology of these stories, which has been used to train incoming officers at Suffolk County's Correctional Academy, acknowledging the importance of ensuring that those who would be guarding the women would understand what brought them to this place in their lives. This anthology is also used as a criminology text in many of Long Island's colleges, and is the basis for numerous presentations - to students of criminology, psychology and law - by formerly incarcerated women whose lives began to change when their stories were heard.

In 2013 a special folio edition, featuring the writings of nine incarcerated teen girls, was developed in collaboration with the Correctional Association of NY for use throughout the state in support of their Raise the Age Campaign seeking to stop the incarceration of young teens in adult facilities, without access to the age appropriate rehabilitation provided by juvenile justice facilities.

In 2015, Herstory joined with Prison Families Anonymous to conduct a workshop for children affected by the incarceration of a family member. Ten of these narratives were compiled into a brief anthology and published as a folio edition entitled, All I Ever Wanted...Stories of Children of the Incarcerated. This folio is being used by Prison Families Anonymous to

raise public awareness about the impact of incarceration on the families left behind.

In 2019, in the midst of the opioid crisis, Herstory's created I DREAM ABOUT YOU: Stories of Addiction, Incarceration and Family Love.

In the Community: Memoir as a Tool for Action

There is urgency now, as never before, around the restoration of the core human values of empathy, compassion and inclusion - in our world, in our nation and in our communities. In a nation founded on tolerance by those who fled oppression, fear mongering, intolerance and hatred of the other have reached epic proportions. This "othering," has had a serious effect on policies and practices nationally and locally, on our campuses and in our neighborhoods.

Since 1996 Herstory has been dedicated to giving voice to isolated and marginalized populations of all ages, those least able to participate in the decision making that most affects their lives. We adhere to a mandate, created at a time of heartbreaking violence against the day laborer community in Farmingville, to work wherever communities are experiencing outbreaks of violence and hatred. Thus, the populations with which we work vary, depending on emerging situations and needs.

In the wake of the pandemic we worked most closely with the part of our constituency that includes recent immigrants, migrant workers, Head Start parents living below the poverty line, domestic workers, families struggling with lack of health care and other resources, representing the most disenfranchised communities, first responders, veterans called back into service and people struggling with disabilities. We created new workshops to address systemic racism, with connections to the deep south and other parts of the country.

In inter-age in-person, hybrid and online formats, we work locally and nationally in Spanish and English to form small writing circles with the goal of generating stories that will advance the movement for equity, inclusion and justice at this time when every one of our voices is needed to protect our most basic human rights. Organizers in the forefront of the struggle for racial, criminal and economic justice, human service providers, laborers

from all walks of life, young Dreamers, neighborhood elders, legislators, survivors of domestic violence, and college students come together in shaping their words to change hearts, minds and policy.

Some participants come for only a few times, to tell a particular story that needs to be told, while others continue year after year, pursuing book-length projects. Special techniques are used to generate powerful short pieces, wherever the shifting political landscape leads, to use memoir to resist injustice, restore dignity and give voice to our common humanity.

Training, Fellowship and Partnership Programs

Each semester Herstory reaches out to graduate students from colleges and universities across the nation, along with teachers, writers, retirees, community activists, and human service providers interested in contributing to the movement to use story-based strategies to give voice to those whose stories most need to be heard. In a close working partnership with the Humanities Institute at Stony Brook University, it offers a rich two-semester immersion in Herstory's unique empathy-based pedagogy and practice to those who are interested in working in alternative settings with populations that have traditionally been without a voice.

Each new cohort spends its first semester in a 13-week practicum that combines a hands-on workshop with an intensive immersion in the Herstory pedagogy. During the second semester participants are assigned individually tailored, supervised field placements with institutions, community and advocacy groups partnering with Herstory's College Consortium and community affiliates.

In 2019, through special funding from the Regional Economic Development Council/New York State Council on the Arts, a fellowship program was inaugurated in partnership with Stony Brook University. The program provides individually tailored fellowships, along with mentoring support, publication and presentation opportunities, to graduate students working with the organization to refine and adapt Herstory's distinctive teaching methods for new audiences and formats, engage in research and roll out innovative new programming.

Herstory has partnered with various foundations and institutions to roll out special projects intended to help organizational leaders with long-term

visioning and the roll out of a body of writings to be used in articulating their organizational vision and reflections for the field. Two examples include:

- The Power of Advocacy & Organizing: Courage, Commitment, & Collaboration, a year-long project including in-person retreats in Little Rock, Arkansas and one-on-one follow up coaching sessions for the organizational leaders of the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation and the directors of their funded programs.
- “Writing for Equity in Philanthropy,” a 12-week project designed to give voice to staff, fellows and organizational leaders working with Hispanics in Philanthropy, with the overarching goal of confronting systemic racism and encouraging reflection within the field. This program engaged 23 participants primarily from the Southwestern states and Mexico in a series of online workshops followed by one-on-one coaching sessions.

For more information about Herstory’s programs and special projects, or to order this book in quantity, please email to contactus@herstorywriters.org