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Herstory Writers Network's Erika Duncan of Sag Harbor helps migrants, former inmates and grandmas tell their stories



Herstory Writers Network founder Erika Duncan meets with a team at Stony Brook University, whose students write alongside former inmates and their families. Credit: Newsday/John Paraskevas

By Arlene Gross

[Special to Newsday](#)

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How do you encourage people to tell their personal stories in an open and honest way to elicit empathy in their readers?

That's the question that novelist and essayist Erika Duncan posed to herself following a conference she co-organized in Southampton in March 1996. Duncan was influenced in part by one of the conference's attendees, a Bosnian woman who escaped from her war-torn country with her three children, who witnessed their father's killing.

“She felt that if only she could speak and write her story powerfully enough, maybe people would listen and the war would stop,” said Duncan, 76, of Sag Harbor.

After the conference, Duncan was inspired to host five days of writing workshops open to the public. Right from the start, she said, the workshops engendered a sense of community, an atmosphere of healing and a call to political action.

Duncan secured space from the Town of Southampton, where she continued holding workshops twice weekly. From there, she founded Herstory Writers Network, a nonprofit based in Centereach that works through guided, personal storytelling to give voice to people who are often not heard.

Since that conference 27 years ago, the organization has worked with writers ranging from women passing their stories down to their grandchildren to immigrants, young people involved in the criminal justice system and cancer survivors.

“It grew like wildfire. And the rest is Herstory,” quipped Duncan, the organization’s executive and artistic director.

‘PAGE ONE’ MOMENTS

At those early Southampton writing workshops, Duncan asked participants to imagine a stranger walking in on any “page one” moment of their lives, to create a narrative that would help that stranger truly connect with them.

“I decided to work with the idea of, ‘How you are going to dare that person to care,’ which created a safe space and a boundary,” Duncan said.

By this point, Duncan had already had a long career as a writer and an educator. She was a contributing editor at Bookforum magazine, spent five years developing a “new way of personalizing the long research paper” at New York University, where she earned her master’s degree in literature, and worked with the Rural Education Program in Maine, according to a biography on the Herstory website.

But from the moment she began her facilitated storytelling workshops, Duncan said she has been amazed at the effect the stories have had on both the storytellers and the listeners.

“By the third day, I knew that I had discovered something very interesting pedagogically: that writing could be taught based on what would be moving to a reading stranger. . . . You are daring the members of the writing circle to dare one another to write more and more deeply until even the most hard-hearted reader will have no choice but to care,” Duncan said.

Since then, Herstory has held many writing workshops utilizing Duncan’s empathy-based approach at schools, prisons and jails. The program has six people on staff, who are supplemented by 12 to 25 consulting facilitators, fellows and youth mentors. It now offers between 12 and 17 weekly workshops on Long Island each year, reaching about 1,500 people. Topics include disability, fertility and pregnancy loss and mental health. Since about 2010, Herstory has been open to both sexes.



Renata Anqa, standing, who leads the Newcomer Academy for Uniondale schools, visits a Herstory class for new immigrant high school students and talks about her own experience as a refugee. Credit: Linda Rosier

'WITHOUT HEALING THERE'S NO LEARNING'

Currently, the organization is working with the Uniondale and Freeport schools’ Newcomer Academy, offering multilingual workshops for young people who emigrated from Central America and Haiti less than a year ago to help them tell their stories of courage in the face of adversity.

“It is the beauty of the human spirit that the young people are taught to capture that allows people with anti-immigrant sentiments to soften,” Duncan said.

Helping the Newcomer Academy for Uniondale schools is Renata Anqa, herself a refugee from the Bosnian war. Anqa recalls not being able to express herself when she immigrated in 1992.

“Once I read a quote that said, ‘Without healing there’s no learning,’” said Anqa, director of secondary multilingual learners for the district. Since then, she said, “I’ve been a huge proponent of addressing trauma and teaching using social-emotional pedagogy to address issues at hand.”



Gerson Sermeno, center, a mentor and Herstory facilitator, conducts a workshop at Uniondale High School. Credit: Linda Rosier

The Newcomer Academy workshops start with the students, seated in a circle to foster a sense of community, reading from stories by other new immigrants in the Herstory collection.

“Suddenly they start noticing they have so much in common,” Anqa said.

The workshops also help them to relate to the school curriculum, whether it’s global history or literature, she said.

STRIPPING AWAY LAYERS

The Herstory workshops have impacted novice and experienced writers alike.

Ama Saran, 75, has been a writer her whole life, but she said it wasn't until she participated in a workshop through Herstory four years ago that she began to write authentically.

"It allowed me to write — because of Erika's model — in a way that stripped the layers," said Saran, a community organizer, policy advocate and teacher who lives in South Carolina's Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor. "I couldn't even lie to myself. You write out of a place that is very personal, very intimate, but you do it in a fearless way, without hesitation."

A professor at Adelphi University, Devin Thornburg has taught community writing programs at high schools through Herstory, and now directs the organization's summer programs in Uniondale and Freeport.

But it wasn't until he wrote his own story about his father's killing when he was a young child that Thornburg said he realized his passion for gun control, which led to his becoming an advocate.

"My writing of this really accentuated how families in their grief can bury the truth," Thornburg said.

His next story, which focused on his bout with cancer 10 years ago and how people who have cancer are seen differently in our society, has helped him deal with his daughter's recent struggles with leukemia, he said.

"I'm so grateful to have Herstory's power in my grasp to be able to not only work through my own feelings about this but to also communicate to others how important these issues are," Thornburg said.

SELF-ADVOCACY

Herstory has also worked with writers who are drug addicts and who want to help their families and law enforcement better understand them, and with teachers and school counselors to help them connect with their students. Another recent project involves young people on probation. The Linda Howard Weissman Youth Justice Program is a collaboration between Herstory, the Suffolk Family Court and the Touro Law Center. The young people on probation generally have a history of trauma, Duncan said.

“It helps them become aware of their own journey in a way that allows them to move forward, but it helps people in the court system really see them as human beings who need second chances,” Duncan said.

The program both serves to liberate the young people to tell their stories, many for the very first time, and empowers them to begin advocating for themselves, said Suffolk County Family Court Judge Fernando Camacho.

The stories also have a tremendous impact on the listeners, he said.

“When you listen to some of these kids and what they’ve been through, and listen to their stories and their suffering and realize what they’ve overcome to get to where they are is incredibly, incredibly powerful,” Camacho said. “It really moves the listener to try to do more to help kids in similar circumstances.”



Erika Duncan, center, with members of the Herstory working team at Stony Brook University, including from left, Herstory contributor Marcellus Morris Sr. of Hempstead, Stony Brook English professor Susan Scheckel and Tanasha “Tee” Gordon of Huntington, a youth mentor. Credit: Newsday/John Paraskevas

Another recent program is through the Humanities Institute at Stony Brook University, where undergraduate students write side by side with formerly incarcerated individuals and their family members.

This initiative has been transformative for students as well as for the people who have been imprisoned to help them see that their humanity and complex life stories are being understood, said Susan Scheckel, the institute's coordinator of public humanities initiatives and a board member of the Herstory organization.

"It equalizes when everyone writes together," Scheckel said, adding that instead of the word teacher or leader, they use the word facilitator. "What they do is create community in the workshops in that everyone present writes together, listens to each other, offers feedback and shares their own personal stories, and I think that that is part of the transformation."

HERSTORY BEYOND BARS

Duncan adapted her teaching to create "Herstory Beyond Bars," a guided writing method that has been used in workshops at Central California Women's Facility, the largest women's prison in the state. Herstory Beyond Bars will be part of a permanent archive developed in collaboration with Stony Brook University and Ivan Kilgore, a self-taught writer who is serving a life sentence and has worked for years to encourage other incarcerated people and their families to write. Participants' manuscripts will be used by scholars and teachers, and the work will also be posted on a website and archived in Special Collections at Stony Brook University Library.

"To bring that voice into the classroom so that it will humanize those who are part of these larger social issues . . . is one of the very important goals of the project," Scheckel said.

Meanwhile, Duncan continues to find new avenues to explore societal inequities, including collaborations with the Syosset-based group ERASE Racism, the Adelphi School of Social Work and the Wyandanch School District.

Despite the nearly three decades she's dedicated to Herstory, the exhaustive search for grants to fund programs, and the telling of thousands of stories, Duncan bristles at the thought of slowing down. At 76, she said she never tires of each new story and each new Herstory partner.

"I don't have any plans ever to retire or to let go of this," Duncan said.

CORRECTION: Erika Duncan created “Herstory Beyond Bars,” a guided writing method. The name of the method and its creator were incorrect in a previous version of this story. Also, Ivan Kilgore is a self-taught writer. And Herstory Writers Network offers workshops in the Uniondale and Freeport schools for young people who emigrated from Central America and Haiti less than one year ago.

Want to get involved?

All of the Herstory Writers Network workshops are free. Many are available online at herstorywriters.org, where donations can also be made and books of collected stories, including “Brave Journeys/Pasos Valientes” written by migrant teens, can be purchased.

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