



With the generous support from Suffolk County's Office of Cultural Affairs, Herstory Writers Network was able to build exponentially on the six Freedom Forums that our organization has developed since having been chosen to represent Long Island in a statewide initiative to use literature to examine the cracks in the liberty bell. On September 15, 2024, for the fourth year in a row, it took place in the Wyandanch Plaza overlooking the railroad station. With attendance of about 100 people in person, as well as 110 views of the livestream during and after the event, high school students from Wyandanch, a formerly incarcerated teacher, a family court judge and the youth writers assigned to his court, Herstory fellows and law interns from Stony Brook, Adelphi and Touro Law Center, and members of the community read their stories and shared spoken word and dance performances with an audience of spellbound listeners. With each performance, passers-by trickled in, drawn by the power and beauty of the words they heard. One woman who lives in the apartments at the Plaza, was drawn down from her home and into the audience. She said she was watching from the window and was impelled to come down to truly appreciate the performances that called to her.

This year, as part of Hispanic Heritage Month celebrations, the Freedom Forum was built around the theme of "Hands Across Our Communities: Heroes Stories for Our Time." We centered the program on bringing together writers from all over Long Island, Queens, and New Jersey, showcasing students, teachers, and community members of all ages, advancing cultural tourism with Wyandanch as the center. The event was hosted in English, Spanish, and Haitian Creole so all members of the community would feel welcomed.

The program opened with a spoken word performance "If My Words Had the Power" by Shamah ShaRize, a Herstory Beyond Bars fellow and a member of Time Out of Joint, an organization of formerly incarcerated teachers. He spoke with passion, asking people to increase their compassion, open their minds and hearts, and forgo violence for peace and love. Herstory's 2024-2025 Social Justice Fellows, MSW students from Adelphi University working with Wyandanch High School students and the Wyandanch community, followed suit with their own "If My Words Had the Power" statements in English, Spanish, and Haitian Creole.

The program continued with an inspiring collage, "Mother Warriors," by Herstory's summer 2024 Social Justice Fellows. The piece combined personal stories and dance, highlighting the strength and love that mothers show, even through the most challenging times. The three readings were followed by an interpretive dance, "I Rise Up."

The first section of the program culminated with a featured reading by a Wyandanch High School student, "Now Rise," which gave listeners a glimpse of the mixed emotions she felt



during the day she was adopted. Her words conveyed hope and empowerment that resonated deeply, especially for young people navigating their paths.

The refrain, “If Your Words Had the Power,” returned to open section two of the program where the audience was asked, “If your words had the power to change a heart, mind, or policy, what would you say?” The first audience member to spring to the front of the stage was a brave seven-year-old named Mark, who said he would like to stop wars, create homes for the homeless, and make the world a better place so people could appreciate the lives they had. He was followed by a young woman who wanted to end depression and give people hope. Other members of the audience echoed their statements, adding their dreams for equality, compassion, understanding, an end to bullying, and advocating for children.

The audience quieted to listen to a featured reading written by a Herstory Beyond Bars junior fellow entitled, “When Are You Coming Back,” which was written with the National Behind Bars Fellowship Program. The piece beautifully probed the question of what is a memory and what is a dream, as she told the story of the loss of her father to incarceration from the voice of a very young child.

Shamah ShaRize returned to the stage to perform the spoken word, “Introducing Myself,” where he took the audience deep into his personal journey—sharing raw and vivid memories of his life, the struggles he faced, and the resilience he found. Through the reading, he invited the audience to see the world through his eyes, where moments of pain, loss, and survival were woven together with hope, self-reflection, and transformation.

The performance was followed by a special presentation, “Finding the Light Inside Us,” by the Honorable Judge Fernando Camacho, an activist in the arena of youth justice and carceral justice reform, whose vision has played a major part in Herstory programming over the years. The Judge asked the audience to strive to re-ignite the light in troubled and suffering children’s eyes with patience, compassion, empathy and love. He described the elation of seeing the metamorphosis in some of the youths in his court, and how they found new paths from attending Herstory’s Linda Howard Weissman Youth Justice Program at Touro Law Center. Four Suffolk County teens from the program bravely read their stories to the mesmerized crowd.

The second section of the program culminated in a play, “Law and Chaos” written by Shamah ShaRize, read by participants from a Community Reentry Consortium in conjunction with Hofstra University and Time Out of Joint Herstory fellows. The scene imagined a criminal court proceeding where the person accused of the crime was presumed guilty before the trial even began. The performance invited the audience to consider the struggle for freedom, justice, and equality.



The third section of the Freedom Forum returned to the refrain, “If Your Words Had the Power,” with a teacher and students engaged in the Herstory special elective in Wyandanch High School. They wished for people to persevere and believe in themselves, for opportunities for all, no matter the challenges faced. They envisioned a world where acceptance and understanding replaced judgment and prejudice, a world where every individual was respected and valued, a world where equal rights prevail.

The final featured reading, “Grita Tu Nombre” (“Scream Your Name”), was presented by a Herstory workshop facilitator who first joined Herstory through a workshop at Long Beach High School as a sophomore ten years prior. Her performance described memories of her grandmother’s stories of Chile, of the fear of authority and dictatorship that followed her family to America. She described her mother’s bravery for calling out the forbidden name of her teacher who disappeared at the hands of the corrupt government. She recalled the bravery of the Chilean people who demanded the right to live in peace and her appreciation for the freedom she now has.

The Freedom Forum culminated with a Call to Action, led by Herstory’s founder, Erika Duncan, Judge Fernando Camacho, Shamah ShaRize, and the Freedom Forum hosts. Erika shared the hope that each Freedom Forum would lead to a plan of action to make positive changes in the world. Judge Camacho asked for people to be the voice for troubled children, the marginalized, the abandoned and betrayed to empower them to raise their own voices, and encourage them to use their own voices to advocate for others to create. He asked the audience to be a voice for change. Members of the audience joined the call, committing their voices to empower others and use their words to tell their own stories to connect to others and inspire compassion, understanding, and love.

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