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Addressing violence through reading and discussion The Patchogue Arts Council held its first Herstory Book Club meeting this week, which featured anthologies from women in Long Island prisons and immigrant women's stories. In the photo are: Patchogue Arts Council Literary and Music Committee Chair and Recording Secretary Jennifer Brady Cotter, Herstory Immigrant Program Director Sylvia Heredia, Herstory Executive and Artistic Director Erika Duncan, former Nassau Sheriff's Dept staffer Regina Lee and Herstory Advocacy and Justice Program Director Serena Liguori. See story on page 14. ADV/Leuzzi

Unheard Voices of Long Island's Living History will be held on Feb. 11 and March 11 from 6 to 8 p.m. at The Patchogue Arts Gallery, 20 Terry Street, Patchogue. For more information, call 627-8686.

Changing the world one writing at a time, one reading at a time

Patchogue Arts Council kicks off Herstory Book Club

BY LINDA LEUZZI

Serena Liguori was a psychology major at St. Joseph's College in Patchogue when a searing moment threw her life journey off course at age 19. She was incarcerated in the county jail in Yaphank for six months, then served time at the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility for Women for 2 1/2 years. She earned an associate's degree there.

"I was 19 and involved in a family domestic situation," Liguori said. "My mom was struggling with mental health issues. I journaled in jail and in prison and was part of a poetry writing group. When I was there, Barbara Allan, who ran prison classes, said, 'I know about this free writing class, Herstory.'"

Liguori, a luminous young woman who now works as the advocacy and justice program director at Herstory, was at the Patchogue Arts Council's first Unheard Voices of Long Island Living History book club meeting on Monday night. She was there with Herstory Writers Workshop Executive and Artistic Director Erika Duncan; mentor

Barbara Allan, who heads Prison Families Anonymous; Regina Lee, who worked formerly for the Nassau County Sheriff's Office; Herstory Immigrant program coordinator Sylvia Heredia, who brought three women who went through the prison system; and others who are encouraging women to change the world, one writing at a time.

The reading circle focuses on Herstory anthologies written by women and adolescent girls in Long Island's three jails and immigrant women's writing from all over the Island, said Jennifer Brady Cotter, literary and music committee chair and recording secretary for the Patchogue Arts Council.

"The common thread is the issue of violence and its impact to our community," Cotter said. "I think Patchogue still lingers in the shadow of Marcelo Lucero. And there's the issue of women who wound up in prison because family members were in gangs, as well as immigrants who are exploited and experience anti-immigrant bias. We feel that

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by listening to the players, we may be able to heal and come up with solutions.”

Liguori started writing 15 years ago. She’s worked for the Correctional Association of New York and served on Herstory’s board of directors. “It’s not a pity party, but instead, what can you do with that story?” she said. “How do you advocate for better legislation, or finding solutions?”

Two other PAC Herstory projects are currently underway: “Memoirs of Motherhood: Connecting Through Our Stories” is a bilingual women’s writing circle dedicated to the stories that mothers have to contribute, and “Bridges to Justice: Connecting Through Our Stories,” designed to bring together human rights activists, high school and college students and community members with the goal of creating first-person testimony that might change a condition, policy or attitude. The programs are being funded by the Knapp-Swezey Foundation, Briarcliffe College, New York State Council for the Arts and Suffolk County Office of

Film and Cultural Affairs.

Herstory founder Erika Duncan said PAC wanted to include males as well. “It’s still women-centered, but we’re seeing it as a larger movement,” she said. “The male students at Stony Brook wept and cried when they heard the stories. The dream for this project is that these personal stories will move the justice needle.”

Readings have already taken place at St. Joseph’s College. “We did a program with four readers in a criminology class in November,” said Heredia.

“It looks as if St. Joseph’s will use our program in their juvenile justice class,” Duncan added. “And now Briarcliffe is talking about using it.”

A writing by Susan Perretti, who lived in East Patchogue for 25 years and now lives in East Setauket, will be read at the next book club meeting. Perretti wrote about her feelings when Marcelo Lucero was murdered in November 2008 by Jeffrey Conroy from Medford, who plunged a knife into Lucero’s chest, surrounded by six other teens who were looking to attack “a Mexican.” Lucero

was a conscientious 37-year-old immigrant from Ecuador who worked and sent money home to his mother; Perretti was at a world peace party in Patchogue when it happened.

“As a person involved with peace and marches, you can get discouraged,” she said. “Violence keeps coming at us. And writing about what happened gave me a chance to express what I was feeling and to look for the hope.” Perretti is now involved with A Global Day of Listening, which links young people in universities here and gives them an opportunity to speak to Afghan youths living in Kabul. “They are Afghan peace volunteers who live in a housing compound [there],” Perretti said. “We speak to them through Skype once a month on the 21st.” Perretti said her experience of being able to write in Herstory and the power of the writing circle to putting their experiences on the page became a tool for healing and made her go forward with that initiative. “Once you find out you can do one little thing, you get empowered to find out there is something you can contribute,” she said. ■

EDITORIAL

Making a difference

Kudos to the Patchogue Arts Council’s recent offering of programs, specifically the Unheard Voices of Long Island’s Living History book club, which began Monday night as a Herstory project. It’s an impactful game-changer.

We can despair at the violence that seems to overcome our world at every turn, or we can look at ways to create healing. That is what these programs are doing.

The night we spoke to the women who had come together for the first book club gathering — Herstory founder Erika Duncan, Barbara Allan, who is the creator of Prison Families Anonymous, Herstory Immigrant Program Coordinator Sylvia Heredia, Regina Lee, who worked formerly for the Nassau County Sheriff’s Office and Serena Liguori, now Herstory’s Advocacy and Justice Program director — they drove in from places as far away as Sag Harbor and as far west as Port Washington. Their goal was to listen to and add their wisdom to the women who would gather to hear the anthologies written by women who had been in local jails, as well as the deep thoughts of immigrant women. There were others who came who worked in the prison system, hoping to help as well.

They could have all sat back and put their feet up on a cold winter’s night.

Jennifer Brady Cotter, PAC’s Literary and Music Committee chair and recording secretary for the Patchogue Arts Council, has a child and a publishing career she works at from home. But this is what she said: “The common thread is the issue of violence and its impact on our community. We feel in listening to the players, we may be able to come up with solutions.”

What can you do?

Susan Perretti, a former East Patchogue peace activist whose Herstory writing describing how she felt about Marcelo Lucero’s murder, will be read at the next session. She has created a bridge between university and college students here and young people in Kabul, Afghanistan. They Skype via A Global Day of Listening each month on the 21st.

Perretti commented that once you discover you can do one little thing — in this case, writing about her feelings which gave her hope — you feel empowered.

The Patchogue Arts Council, Herstory, and major contributor the Knapp Swezey Foundation, bless them, as well as Briarcliffe College, New York State Council for the Arts and Suffolk County Office of Film and Cultural Affairs, deserve a Humanity Oscar.