

Newsday

LONG ISLAND

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GARDENS

Irene Virag
watches the
glass glow

G12

LILife

OYSTER BAY EDITION

A photograph of a woman with dark hair, wearing a blue jacket, smiling and hugging a child from behind. The child is also wearing a blue jacket. The woman is holding a stack of books. The background is a light-colored wall with some faint markings.

Words from the heart

Local Latina writers share
their life stories with readers
of a new literary magazine

G4



Clockwise from lower left, Mariel Burns; Lucky and Karla Alvizures; Yolanda Gress; Sandra Dunn; the Rev. Jeanne Baum; Vivian Viloria-Fisher; Erika Duncan.

Sharing Their Stories

Bilingual magazine gives a voice to Latinas

By Rhoda Amon
STAFF WRITER

Until recently, the most writing Yolanda Gress did was in letters to her family back in Mexico. But blessed with a natural gift for writing from the heart, she's crafted a work of art that moves many to tears.

She writes of seeing a man covering himself with cardboard on a bitter cold snowy day, and she promises her young son that she will stop to help the poor man.

After giving him blankets, "I offered to take him to his house," she writes. "In English he said 'You're going to take me to my

house?' I understand very little English, but in that moment it was as if we had spoken the same language. 'Yes,' I answered, smiling at him. 'OK,' he said and got into the car.

"After a moment of silence, he said, 'In this city nobody gives rides.' And he continued talking throughout the ride, but I couldn't understand anything else. I remembered that he spoke slowly and in a soft voice. I asked him, 'Where is your house?' To my surprise he said, 'Here's fine,' pointing to a parking lot. I stopped, he took his blankets [that she had given him], and as he got out of the car, he thanked me. I never saw his face again. I remained parked, looking at the cars covered in snow, with nobody else around. I wondered, 'Where does he live? What is he going to do?' And then I headed for home."

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Gress is a member of a Latina Writers workshop, the newly formed bilingual extension of Herstory, a nonprofit group founded 10 years ago to give voice to Long Island women whose lives are anonymous and unsung. The idea of Herstory, to write one's own story as a woman, caught on quickly with Latinas who have filled two workshops, reading their memoirs at weekly sessions. An all-Spanish workshop is given space in the Town of East Hampton's Senior Center. A bilingual program called "Building Bridges" brings together Latina and Anglo women in Farmingville, where tensions between the two cultures have flared.

Their memoirs also have filled a magazine called *Latinas Escriben* (Latin-American Women Write). Another bilingual issue is due in the fall, said Erika Duncan, the Sag Harbor novelist who founded Herstory. The mini-anthology of Latina writing was published with a grant from the JP Morgan Chase Foundation through the Huntington Arts Council. The Town of East Hampton, which sponsors the East End Workshop, also came through for the magazine, which will be published twice a year. (It can be ordered for \$10, including postage and handling, at www.herstorywriters.org.)

"Most important, it gives a voice to immigrant women," said the magazine's editor, Sandra Dunn. Women's voices are often silenced, and immigrant women are "doubly silence," said Dunn, a former Spanish Literature professor who leads the East Hampton workshop and translates for the Farmingville group. Dunn said she refrained from editing that would interfere with the voice of the writer.

Their writings touch upon political upheaval at home and the immigrant experience. A Guatemalan native has a haunting memory of a government death squad rubbing out a family friend. An Argentine writer tells a familiar tale of arriving in the land of her dreams, only to find that, due to the language barrier, "all you can do is clean other people's houses." But mostly they write about their lives, passions, fears and dreams, universal to all women: childhood traumas, marriage, divorce, abandonment, birth of a child, death of a parent.

They learn a set of tools developed by Duncan to enable writers, whether college professors or women with limited schooling, to reach unknown readers and make them care. More than 1,000 women have honed their writing skills in Herstory workshops around Long Island; 20 have completed book-length memoirs and the first has been published. Duncan is completing a manual for workshop leaders called "Paper Stranger."

Although not intended as therapy, the workshops lift the spirit, the Latina women say. "They tell me their lives are nothing but work, work, work," said Nadia Marin-Molina, director of the Workplace Project, an advocacy group that hosts the Farmingville workshop. "This is a chance for them to participate in something and to share experiences."

The Rev. Jeanne Baum of East Patchogue, a retired Presbyterian minister and member of the Farmingville workshop, recently used fellow writer Gress' story about helping a homeless American for a sermon at a neighboring church whose members differ on the issue of immigration.



Erika Duncan, a Sag Harbor novelist and founder of Herstory, leads a group of Latina and Anglo writers in Farmingville.



Yolanda Gress and her daughter, Diana, at a Latina Writers Workshop meeting; she wrote stories about her childhood in Mexico and a recent encounter with a homeless man.

Appealing to the emotions

"You can argue with a political position, but not with a story," Baum said.

Gress, 37, who was trained as a nurse in Mexico, came here to join her husband six years ago. He works in construction and she cooks for the day laborers. Although the couple and their three children have not found the Farmingville area always hospitable — once a rock was thrown through their window — Gress says it's better to be here as a family than alone in Mexico. But she doesn't write about that. She writes about her beloved grandfather, who danced with her, and about visiting her father in prison.

"She writes so beautifully," Duncan said. "So many Spanish-speaking women have this wonderful rhythm. And metaphors come naturally to them."

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Herstory has grown to 14 workshops that meet weekly, drawing women from all socio-economic strata – including housewives, professors, community activists; gay, straight, incarcerated and free. (Three Herstory workshops are in Suffolk County's Riverhead Correctional Facility.) The Latina workshops are free; the community-based sessions have a fee, but scholarships are available for those who can't afford it.

The Latina workshop brings together women who probably would never otherwise meet. At a recent session in Farmingville, Beatrice Gravino of Port Jefferson brings a cake. Lucky Alvizures from Guatemala, who lives on the East End, comes with her daughter, Karla, 12, the youngest workshop writer, and two younger siblings. As the women scurry around, seeking toys and coloring books for the younger children, Suffolk County legis. Vivian Viloría-Fisher arrives and there are hugs all around. Then the women settle down to reading chapters from their lives. There is a lot of laughter and a few tears.

Long-ago memories

Viloría-Fisher writes about her father, Angel Viloría, a well-known Dominican musician who died at age 41 in 1954. Writing from the perspective of the 6-year-old she was then, she tells how she and her younger sister blame themselves for his death.

"Poppa would still be alive if we did



At the Farmingville meeting, Mariel Burns, who is from Argentina, reads her story about coming to America and finding work cleaning houses in the Hamptons.

what we were supposed to," which was to pray to the Virgin Mary. "If we had faith in her, she would have interceded with her son ... Maybe the man on the phone made a mistake. Poppa isn't the man in the funeral. We must find him."

"You can't find him," their mother tells them.

Although the father's death while on tour in Puerto Rico was officially labeled a heart attack, the family suspected the hand of Rafael Trujillo, the Dominican dictator who came to power with U.S. support in 1930 and eliminated many well-to-do families that did not back him. "I write about things that all Latin American women can identify with," Viloría-Fisher said.

Death is a constant companion. Mayra

Martinez learns that her brother-in-law has been killed in New York. His wife, sisters and sisters-in-law left behind in Mexico must prepare for the funeral. "They put him in the house where he and [his wife] Aydee had lived, and Aydee screamed, 'Cachorro, stand up. We're home! Stand up!'"

In a lighter vein, Chini Alarco of East Hampton draws sympathetic laughter with her tale of giving birth in Peru. Her husband, away on a business trip, tells her by phone, "Don't even think of having the baby before I return." She reminds him that a baby takes nine months, not 10. The baby doesn't wait. Chini awakens her parents to take her to the hospital, but there is a curfew to curb political unrest and violence. No one is allowed on the street at night unless it's an emergency.

She hastily rigs a white flag – a pillowcase attached to a broomstick – to hang out the car window. They barely make it through the checkpoints – her father is not the fastest driver. Later her husband berates her for delivering his son before his return.

Lucky Alvizures had "good and not so good things to tell" about her Guatemalan childhood. "It's as if you were on a cloud and from above you look down below at a small girl with really long jet-black hair," she begins. A close family friend is murdered ... "and the car was full of bullet holes from an AK47 rifle. The powerlessness that one feels at not being able to do anything overcame the family for a long



Women listened to stories in Spanish at a reading by fellow writers recently in the basement of the Church of the Resurrection in Farmingville.

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time. And without a doubt even now there are those of us who haven't gotten over it."

Her daughter, Karla, also digs into her past to describe her first day at kindergarten, "a total and utter disaster." She writes, "I was so excited; little did I know that I was the only kid in my class who spoke Spanish."

Cleaning mansions

Like many immigrants, Mariel Burns arrived from Argentina only to find herself living among Hamptons mansions with no alternative but to clean them. She learns the names of dozens of cleaning products and damages her hands and endangers her health by misusing one of them. "And how could I forget that time that I was supposed to clean a shower in a bathroom so dirty that I couldn't recognize the color of the tiles."

Although the pressures of life in a different culture destroyed her marriage, Burns, 48, has made a life for herself in East Hampton. She writes a column for a bilingual paper, *La Voz Latina* (Latin Voice). About Argentina, she said, "You carry your country in your heart."

Once the writing group had decided to do the mini-anthology, Duncan went to banks and agencies in search of sponsors. The Bridgehampton National Bank contributed, and the Citibank Community Relations Group paid for the printing.

Duncan found that fundraising can net more than money. When she called on Viloría-Fisher for support, she discovered that the legislator was already at work on a biography of her father. As a result of their talks, Duncan got a convert.

"I went to a Herstory reading at Stony Brook University and liked what I heard," Viloría-Fisher said. When Herstory has its 10th anniversary celebration Oct. 15 at Stony Brook, Viloría-Fisher will be a participant, a workshop member reading her memoir.