



Herstory Writers Workshop – Overview

If it were easy to walk in another person’s shoes, the world would be a very different place. Twenty-five years ago, 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 five colleges and six 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. When COVID 19 put an end to in-school programs, online workshops replaced them and Herstory continued to flourish, bringing forth the voices of students, migrant workers, Head Start parents, formerly incarcerated people, recent immigrants and differently abled people, in English and Spanish, in a sophisticated online model that had already been under development for the purpose of geographic expansion – with support from the National Endowment for the Arts.

Moving forward in uncertain times, Herstory anticipates using 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 statistic at changing hearts and minds.