

## The I's have it

Writers learn how to create social change with personal memoirs in launch of month long Herstory workshops

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“What is your ‘page one’ moment?”

It's the question Erika Duncan asks all participants in Herstory, a group writing endeavor that encourages individuals to tell their stories to help bring about social change.

If a stranger were to read the book of your life, what would you want to be on the first page? Duncan asks. “How do you shape your story so that someone else will care?”

Duncan is bringing free month-long Herstory workshops to Wyandanch and Huntington Station this winter, launching them with an event Saturday in Patchogue.

### FIRST-PERSON SINGULAR

Saturday's free Herstory event at the Patchogue Freedom Forum:

**WHEN** 9:30 a.m. to 4 p.m.

**WHERE** Patchogue-Medford Library, 54-60 E. Main St., Patchogue

**FEATURING** Keynote speech by poet Kathy Engel, chair of NYU/Tisch Department of Art & Public Policy; memoir readings by Herstory writers; town-hall style workshop for participants.

**INFO** And to find additional workshops on Long Island: call 631-676-7395 or visit [herstorywriters.org](http://herstorywriters.org).

Novelist and essayist Duncan, 70, originally posed her first page question to a handful of women in a 1996 workshop in Southampton. It became the birth of Herstory, and it's a challenge she still throws out to workshop participants.

Herstory, based in Centereach, has a hefty mission that Duncan lays out in a simple phrase: to change hearts and minds through first-person narrative. Her memoir workshops, which are open to men as well as women at all writing levels, have taken place in venues ranging from senior centers to schools and jails.

At a recent Herstory workshop at Hofstra University's Center for Civic Engagement, the more than half-dozen women and one man in attendance represented a variety of ages, races, ethnicities and economic backgrounds. Their story subjects included a visit to a parent's homeland, gang violence and rage over the federal government's response to Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico.

As participants read rough drafts of defining moments, Duncan and the others offered storytelling advice. The collaborative effort creates a support system, she said.

Hofstra student Paula Chirinos, 19, said she's always been passionate about writing but wouldn't have been comfortable sharing her story about her grandmother and early memories of living in her native



Founder Erika Duncan, fourth from left, leads a recent Herstory writing workshop at Hofstra. The workshops are also open to men.

Peru. Herstory changed that.

“The first time I read it I got very emotional and I just knew it was a safe environment to talk about something so personal and get feedback to make my story even stronger,” she said.

Chirinos said she now realizes her writing is “something bigger than me.” Sharing her experiences as a DACA child — part of the Obama-era Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program that protected young immigrants from deportation and is being phased out under President Donald Trump — “could bring about change for an issue that's also personal for me,” she said.

Participants are encouraged to delve deep into traumatic events that shaped their lives. Victims of domestic violence and sexual abuse, war

survivors and immigrants are among those who have shared their stories. Works produced through Herstory have become instruments for policy reform, Duncan said. They also have been turned into books used in schools and in training correctional officers.

“Teaching writing around the notion of what creates reader empathy, it becomes a great human rights tool,” she said. “You can argue with a political position, but you can't argue with a story.”

Duncan said she hopes the workshops in Wyandanch and Huntington Station will survive beyond their four-week time frame.

“I think these stories can really help wake up hearts and minds,” she said, and shine a light on “all the things in the world that need to be changed.”