The Literacy Review

An annual journal of writing by adult students in English for Speakers of Other Languages, Basic Education and General Development Programs in New York City.

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Introduction

Next year, for the 10th anniversary volume of the Literacy Review, we will ask teachers and site advisors to tell us “success stories” of adults who have studied at literacy and ESOL sites. This year, we feature stories of Gallatin students who have participated prominently in the Literacy Project, including the Literacy Review, the Literacy in Action course and the University Settlement Society advanced writing class. We begin with an update of the students’ paths—so far!—then their testimonies about the impact of the Literacy Project on their lives.

ISABELLA ALEXANDER, a photographer for the Literacy Review, Volume 5, moved to Rabat, Morocco, after graduation and spent a year as an English instructor at the university, as well as offering language classes to sub-Saharan migrants through a local community organization. The writing she collected from her students and the photographs she took of them were published in the Gallatin Writing Program’s book Where I’m From. Isabella went on to earn her M.A. in anthropology from the University of Chicago, and is now pursuing her Ph.D. in anthropology at Emory University in Atlanta.

“My work with the Literacy Review inspired me to postpone my graduate school plans and move to Morocco, where I worked as an English instructor and viewed firsthand the plight of sub-Saharan migrants living in limbo throughout the Maghreb. It is this experience that, in turn, shaped my desire to further examine international migrant communities. Like those writers who are selected for the Literacy Review every year, those published in Where I’m From discovered that they had voices, and that they were passionate about sharing them. I know two of the young Moroccan participants, Moulay El Maarouf (in Germany) and Abdesalam Badre (in the United States), are now pursuing graduate degrees in the field of English and plan to return to Morocco to become teachers. The Literacy Review has had a lasting effect on me as a photographer, writer and editor. Even more importantly, the Gallatin Writing Program has given me the opportunity to affect the lives of future writers, educators, and community activists on the other side of the ocean.”

MARA DAJEVSKIS, who was a Literacy in Action student and a Literacy Review, Volume 5, editor, went on to become an elementary school teacher of
English Language Learners in Elmhurst, Queens through the New York City Teaching Fellows program. In September 2010 she completed her M.A. in Education for TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) from City College.

“I am now in my fourth year as a full-time ESOL teacher, and I continue to be inspired by my dynamic, diverse, resilient, resourceful students, all of whom are either immigrants or children of immigrants. I have no doubt that the relationships I cultivated as an adult ESOL teacher in the Literacy in Action course, and the irony, bravery, heartbreak, hardship, triumph and resounding joy that I have experienced through the work of contributors to the Literacy Review have made me a better teacher and a more compassionate human being. Because of these experiences, I am able to approach my work not as an outsider, but as a member of a community, working side by side with my students and their families to make an American Dream something worth believing in.”

NIKKI D’ERRICO was an editor of the Literacy Review, Volumes 2 and 3; editor in chief of Volume 4; and a student-teacher in the University Settlement Society advanced writing class and the International Rescue Committee writing class. She went on to work with the Peace Corps in Moldova, and is now a doctoral student in medical anthropology at the University of Florida in Gainesville. Hired by the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative to do a population survey in Congo, she is writing her dissertation on intergenerational stress between mother-infant dyads when the pregnancy has resulted from rape. Her work will include an evaluation of USAID intervention in sexual and gender-based violence.

“Participating in Gallatin’s Literacy Project changed my career path and life trajectory in general. Teaching adult immigrants was a consciousness-raising experience, and provided me with the tools necessary to affect change on a community level with adults in Moldova, where I was a Peace Corps volunteer. Working in classrooms in New York City taught me the kind of cultural sensitivity necessary to move forward in a global world. Most importantly, it forced me to challenge the culturally-conditioned ethnocentrism I was subconsciously carrying around. As a doctoral student at the University of Florida, I am pursuing a degree in medical anthropology because I want to continue the kind of cross-cultural advocacy I learned at Gallatin.”
ABBY FENBERT was a student-teacher at University Settlement Society and an editor of the Literacy Review, Volume 6. For the last three years, she has worked in Ukraine with the Peace Corps. She has applied to graduate school for an MFA in fiction writing.

“Not only was the Literacy Project a gem of sheer delight in the commotion of college, but it also gave me a model for the kind of service I want to engage in throughout my life. Working with the Literacy Project helped me see the concrete, simple achievements of words. Writers who’d survived the Cultural Revolution, Stalin, prison and Hurricane Katrina used their stories to build a live community. When they read their pieces aloud at the Literacy Review celebration, their faces gave testament to the transformative power of language and storytelling. I’ve used texts from the Literacy Review and techniques from ESOL courses in my classroom in Ukraine. And I can thank the Literacy Project for teaching me about the potency of a non-native tongue. Telling a story in a second language is challenging, painful, unwieldy—yet full of stylistic and expressive possibilities. I’m now applying to graduate programs in fiction writing and have sought out schools that provide opportunities for literacy activism. It’s something I can do, something I’m committed to doing—and something I’ve seen done brilliantly in the Literacy Project.”

PHOEBE FOX was an editor of the Literacy Review, Volumes 3 and 4, and editor in chief of Volume 5. She was also a student-teacher in the University Settlement Society advanced writing class and the International Rescue Committee writing class. Phoebe went on to work as an in-class assistant to a 9th-grade writing teacher at Thurgood Marshall Academy in Harlem and later as a 10th-grade counselor for the Bronx School for Law, Government and Justice, both through the GEAR UP Program. She is now studying for an M.S.Ed. in counseling at Hunter College.

“Working with the Literacy Project gave me a jumping-off point for my work with high schoolers in the Bronx. As a GEAR UP counselor planning academic and college-centered workshops and activities, I was immediately struck by the need for strong writing skills and an ability to express oneself. I went on to create a compilation of student writing to enhance their college portfolios. The work was then bound and distributed as a learning tool, much in the same way the Literacy Review is used. This is a very direct way in which working on the Literacy Review has
affected my current career. On a more general note, working as an editor on the *Literacy Review* taught me empathy and respect for multiple perspectives. These lessons help me on a daily basis, as I navigate through the personalities, writing styles and manners of teenage expression that I encounter working in a New York City high school setting.”

**EMMA GILMORE**, a *Literacy Review*, Volume 4, photographer, spent four years in Bologna, Italy as a translator and interpreter. Her interviews with and photos of immigrants in Bologna became part of the Gallatin Writing Program book *Where I’m From*. She is now a pre-med student at NYU. In her medical practice, she plans to concentrate on women’s health.

“One of the founding ideas of the Literacy Project is that everyone has a voice worth hearing, even if they’re not speaking in their native language or don’t have a grammar handbook nearby. For a project that became part of *Where I’m From*, I interviewed seven women, all immigrants to Italy, who gave selflessly to my project and have enjoyed the results. But I believe that I was the luckiest of all, as their stories and willingness to share touched me deeply and continue to influence me today. I decided to enroll in pre-med classes because of the direct contact medicine provides with patients and people in need. The Literacy Project was one of the first platforms where I saw the enormous and positive impact that personal contact can have. I am truly grateful for the experiences that I had through the Literacy Project and I’m incredibly proud to say I took part in it.”

**RACHEL NUSBAUM** was a *Literacy Review*, Volume 7, photographer. After graduation, she moved to Seoul, Korea for a year to teach English at a public middle school. Awarded a Fulbright English Teaching Assistantship in 2009, she went to the Czech Republic to teach, and to make a documentary film.

“The *Literacy Review*’s quality reflects the love that everyone involved brings to this project. As an artist, it is thrilling to make work whose impact you can see and which brings joy to others. Photographing the published authors, as well as the hard-working literacy teachers and their equally dedicated students, provided just such an opportunity. Meeting and working with such a diverse group of people—many highly accomplished, many with incredible backgrounds, all brave enough to tackle the challenge of English literacy as adults—was at once
thrilling and incredibly humbling. I believe that my work with the *Literacy Review* helped to make me a better teacher of English as a Foreign Language. It has also convinced me of the value of what I am teaching my students, and this conviction motivates me to do my best every day and to demand the same of them."

**ALLYSON PATY** was an editor of the *Literacy Review*, Volumes 5 and 6, and editor in chief of Volume 7. She has been published in several venues, including the esteemed journal *Tin House*, which named her a New Voice in poetry in 2009. Now working at a New York City literary agency, she has applied to graduate schools for an M.F.A. in poetry.

“In our current historical moment when stories of fear and catastrophe seem to dominate the media, the *Literacy Review* is about courage. Each piece, harrowing as many of them are, is the result of each writer’s commitment to learning and willingness to assert his or her own voice. I’ve come to believe that central to being a writer is a certain boldness of conviction that our language and our stories are valuable. As I continue to pursue poetry, whenever I am haunted by the notion that what I am doing might not be terribly ‘useful,’ the *Literacy Review* is among the works of literature that remind me of the tremendous capacity of storytelling to reinforce our humanity in a world that too often feels callous and bleak.”

**BRAD POWELL** was a student-teacher in the University Settlement Society advanced writing class in spring 2008. Since graduation, he has been employed as an AmeriCorps member through Citizen Schools, a national education non-profit that focuses on out-of-school and extended learning for middle school students. He teaches English Language Arts as well as a college preparedness curriculum to 7th grade students at Lowe’s Grove Middle School in Durham, NC. He also recruits and trains professionals in the community to offer 10-week “apprenticeships” to the Citizen Schools students.

“Through Gallatin’s Literacy in Action and my placement with the Literacy Project at USS, I began my journey as a teacher. It was my second year of college, and I’d been studying democracy and education as a subset of my concentration in political theory. Very quickly, though, the significance of the storytelling, the writing process, and the conversations shared in class became more important to
me than the theories that brought me to the project in the first place. I was able to help Bi Ming Long convey her tale of the pine, bamboo, and plum blossom trees. I worked with Wah You Lee (“Uncle Lee”) to write love poems to his wife. I heard Cindy Lin detail her memories of growing up during the Cultural Revolution in rural China. I remember going home with my folder of student work and wrestling with the editing. The slightest word change or grammar correction could dissolve the distinct Chinese voice. It was a balancing act between English proficiency and cultural adaptation. The experience introduced me to the joy of teaching and developing shared literacy across communities. I intend to continue this work, to put myself in the intersections of schools, communities and professional organizations to improve education and strengthen literacy across communities.”

**BRIAN WANG** was the designer of the *Literacy Review*, Volumes 6 and 7, *Where I’m From*, and a book of writing by University Settlement Society students, *Writing What We Want*. After graduation, he moved to Taiwan, from which his parents originally immigrated. He is now working toward an M.A. at the National Cheung Kung University in the Institute of Creative Industries Design. He is also studying both Mandarin Chinese and Taiwanese.

“Working on the Literacy Project opened my eyes to the beautifully rich and diverse cultural backgrounds of the people that make up New York. After reading so many stories about many of the authors’ homelands, I was inspired to travel to Taiwan to get in touch with my own cultural roots. After living in Taiwan for a year now and experiencing the culture first-hand, I have fallen in love with this island. I could not have asked for a better influence on my work than the Literacy Project.”
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A Stranger’s Laugh

One day, I was going down the stairs to the subway platform. The train had just arrived at the station and a wave of passengers flowed out quickly, filling up the platform and the stairs. I was walking in the opposite direction. I found myself surrounded and unable to move at all.

Suddenly, I heard a voice from behind me. “Miss, can’t you go through? Follow me!” There was a strong black woman in an orange vest, an MTA employee. She stepped in front of me and shouted loudly, “Let’s go! Let’s go!” The crowd moved to the right, and a path opened up that was wide enough for one person. I followed her closely. We walked about 20 steps from the upper stairs to the platform. It only took a few seconds, but it felt like an hour.

When we finally stepped onto the platform, she took a deep breath, then looked at me and laughed heartily. It felt like we had just finished a dangerous mission. “Ha, Ha.” She looked so warm, so lovely, and I returned her hearty laugh.

A stranger’s laugh made me happy all day long.

Kee Fong Liu was born in China. A student at the New York Public Library’s Tompkins Square Center for Reading and Writing, she was also published in last year’s Literacy Review. She says, “I am thankful to my tutors, Rodger Larson and Shaun McCarthy, and to our site advisor, Terry Sheehan, and our literacy assistant, Hilary Schenker.” She adds, “My English is improving.”
Late one night after having dinner with my son, I took the subway home by myself. The train wasn’t crowded, so I was able to find a seat next to the window. I was getting tired and beginning to drift off.

The train stopped at West 4th Street. When the door opened, I smelled a very strong scent of alcohol. A young man who seemed very drunk got on the train. His body was unsteady, and he almost fell on top of me. I got up and tried to change my seat, but he called out to me, “Mama, don’t go. I want to talk to you.”

I looked at him; he was a good-looking guy, tall and gangly, with a boyish face. He had prominent teeth and a thick New York accent. He lay halfway on the chair and started talking to me.

“Don’t talk to me. I don’t understand what you are talking about,” I said, but he tried to continue his story. His speech was extremely vague, and he seemed to speak in a limited way, conversing in a dialect of his own. Communication was a challenge. The only thing I understood about his story was that it was about his girlfriend. I replied to him, “I had many boyfriends in my young age. I can’t remember how many times my heart was broken, but today I have a happy life.”

“Oh yeah?” he said with a vague voice.

I kept trying to keep him awake. I said to him, “You only need to stop for a minute and think; then when you look back, you will feel you were very stupid.” He shook his head. He still couldn’t stay awake, so he asked me to wake him up at his stop.

I woke him, and we got off at the same station.

“Goodbye,” I said.

He replied, “You’re a lifesaver.”
From the moment my English teacher, Mr. Beaird, told us about visiting the African Burial Ground in Lower Manhattan, I was excited about the place, and I could not wait to get there.

When we arrived at the African Burial Ground, I was astonished to see how large and attractive and well-organized the place is. The monument has many parts that make it very beautiful. I was impressed also by the visitors’ center and the libation chamber, where many of those brave ancestors’ skeletons were reburied.

We were led by one of the monument tour guides, who explained that “the site was first discovered by some construction workers who were building a government site.” She said that “when the community learned the facts about the site, they organized themselves and urged the government to stop the construction in order to honor those brave and courageous slaves who sacrificed their lives for the future of the United States.”

When I got inside the visitors’ center, I walked all around and saw many informative exhibits. While I was reading, I heard an announcement about a movie that was about to start. The teacher reminded us that the movie was about the history of the African Burial Ground. Watching that movie filled many gaps in my knowledge.

When the trip was over, I was not as angry as before. It relieved my pain to know this place was preserved for the world to see the struggles the slaves endured during their lifetime. It told their great-grandchildren that they did not give up but served their country, where they newly belonged, in the best way they could. Visiting the African Burial Ground made me feel a strong

VISITING THE AFRICAN BURIAL GROUND MADE ME FEEL A STRONG RELATIONSHIP TO THE BLACK SLAVES...
relationship to the black slaves who were buried there because I’m from West Africa and most of the black slaves who were transported were from West Africa.

Maybe one of my relatives was among them. Who knows? I do believe that anytime I think about the monument I will want to work harder than ever before. When I think of the slaves’ perseverance in the face of adversity, I feel more committed than ever to achieving something very important for the world. In pursuing my goal to become a medical doctor who helps people achieve a better life through better health, I know I must throw away my weaknesses and use my strengths to be ready for my future. I came to America to challenge myself. Visiting the African Burial Ground is part of a continuum that connects me with the slaves, and any success I achieve will in some way be a tribute to the suffering and sacrifices of distant relatives I never knew. Their challenges did not include any of the opportunities that I pretty much take for granted today in the land of opportunity.

Finally, I feel as never before that I am really a part of this great multicultural society that is New York City. Anytime I think about the African Burial Ground, I make myself work like a soldier in training to reach my goals.

Mohamed Jalloh, age 24, was born in Sierra Leone and raised in Conraky, Guinea. He has been in New York for two years, and this is his second consecutive year of publication in the Literacy Review. A CLIP student at CUNY’s New York City School of Technology, he gives “special thanks to my best English teachers, Mr. Joe Beaird and Mrs. Alexandra Hershberger.” He says, “Now I feel ready to start my medical studies.”
The Newspaper Woman

One building over from my building, you can usually find an older lady sitting in a wheelchair. She has gray, curly hair and pale white skin that is covered in brown freckles. Rain or shine, you can usually find her there. Her intertwined white and gray curly hair bounces up and down on a windy day and shines on a sunny day. She always wears her golden glasses.

My estimate is that she is in her early 90s. She is always reading the newspaper. It is impressive to see people reading with such passion around that age. I see how sometimes her white, frail hands shiver as she is holding the newspaper, yet that doesn’t stop her from reading and enjoying herself. The smirk or full-on smile that show up on her face are indicators of her pleasure in reading. Sometimes I wonder why she doesn’t read magazines or books instead of the newspaper, but I guess that is a mystery. If she only knew how much I admire her energy and motivation to read and how impressive it is to watch her, “The Newspaper Woman.”
Do I Fit the Profile?

When I am walking down the street
They look at me very strangely.
So I keep my head up high and keep thinking about God’s love.
We just need to move forward
because there are some very good people in the world.
Every time I go into the store
They look at me as if I am going to steal.
But now I’ve learned to accept things for what they are.
Don’t just look at another and judge him right away,
because you have to look at yourself first.
Things are only going to change
if we start to look at ourselves in the mirror.
That should tell you about you.

Colin Triumph, age 45, was born in Guyana. He is a student at the New York Public Library’s St. George Center for Reading and Writing, where Geniene Monterrosa is his teacher. He would like to thank his tutor, Denis Kearney, for helping him the most with his writing. Colin Triumph says, “I love music. I am a big fan of Bob Marley. I love coming to the library.”
My eyes are closed.
I can hear the
moans from the hoes
on the stroll, the
smoking from the
fiends using the
glass pipe, police
flashing the siren
lights. My mom’s
yelling at my little
nephew for playing
with the mice in
the traps at night.
A Memorable Work Experience

Thirteen years ago, I started work as a babysitter for an American girl who was only five months old. After two weeks at my job, I took the girl in her stroller for a walk in the park at noon. I had left a note for her father on the counter in the kitchen that said I would be back at two p.m. Because it was a beautiful, sunny day, I spent more time with the girl in the park, and I returned at three p.m. When I came back, her father was very upset and told me that he had called the police, thinking that I had disappeared with his girl. I started to cry, being so afraid that I would lose my job, and because in Romania we were scared to encounter the police.

I didn’t know at that time how scared people in the United States are of the stealing of children. But time passed, and I am still with this wonderful family. They treat me like a member of their family.
I am a domestic worker. I have many duties. One of my duties is cleaning. I have to make sure that every room in the house is clean. That means that I must sweep and mop the floors. I also have to make sure that all of the furniture is dusted and wiped properly. This work requires a lot of time and energy, and is very tiring. Most of the time, there are clothes laying on the floor and on the bed. I have to make sure that all of the laundry is washed, including the clothes that I find laying around.
Years ago, I got lost on a bright day. I was new to New York then. I didn’t know my way around. I decided to buy a camera from a store at Fulton Street and Broadway in downtown Manhattan that a friend had told me about. At nine in the morning, I left home with a feeling of great joy and excitement. I boarded the 4 train at Kingsbridge Road in the second-to-last car.

I never knew that education would be so important to me. When I was in school, my mind was on sports and games. I didn’t know that because I couldn’t read and write, it would be so difficult for me to take a train and find the place I wanted to go to.

There were many other passengers in the subway car. All of them were strangers to me. I was afraid to ask anyone for directions. Most of them were talking in their own languages, which I did not know. Rather than asking, I decided to take a very big risk, and I got off at a subway stop with several other passengers. Because I saw so many people getting off, I thought, *This must be the right stop for me, too.*

I later realized that I was on 14th Street. As I came out of the station I looked for the store. After about 15 minutes walking from store to store, doing some window-shopping, I saw a police officer. I went up to him and I showed him the paper that had the name and address of the store where I wanted to purchase the camera. I was shocked when he told me that I had gotten off at the wrong subway stop. Then I panicked. However, the police officer calmed me down and told me to get back on the train and get off after the next two stops. I listened carefully and thanked him for his help.

I got on the subway, and I went to the correct stop. I got there around 11 a.m. and after a short walk I saw the store. I was happy that I finally got there. I made my
purchase and did a few other things before I got back on the subway and returned home. Because of this trip I realized that I have to know how to read and write and use my knowledge. I did not know how to take the train. It was scary. I felt helpless. Now I am much more comfortable taking the subway, because after getting lost once, I know how reading and writing can help me. That is why I keep coming to the Center for Reading and Writing. I do not want to get lost again.

Neela Arnold, age 38, was born in Guyana, and has been living in New York City for 11 years. She is a student at the New York Public Library’s Bronx Center for Reading and Writing, where Barbara Martinez is the site advisor and Christine DeBush is the literacy specialist. Neela Arnold would like to thank her tutor, Paul Herther, for his help. She has three children and says, “I am happy they do their homework and that they are doing well in school.”
New York in My Eyes

New York, being the sum of generations’ diligence and painstaking efforts, is famous not only for its wealth, skyscrapers and high standard of living, but also for its fusion of cultures, modernization and innovation. It had always been so far away from my life, but today, as I step on its land, I sense it, feel it and know it by my feet, my mouth, my eyes, my brain and my heart.

Before coming to this city, someone warned me, “Be careful, New York is a city of crime.” I had always been afraid of going out alone at night and had been concerned whenever someone approached me. However, what happened soon after I arrived changed my mind.

One day, my husband and I drove to visit a friend. On the way back home, we got totally lost in the spider net-like city transportation system. We were obviously confused and when we rolled down our window, we heard someone from the car next to ours ask, “Hey, are you lost? Where would you like to go?”

“We missed the highway entrance to Flushing, Queens,” my husband replied.
“Come with me; I will show you,” the stranger answered.

The man then guided us to the entrance and informed us which exit we should take. He was an ordinary New Yorker who changed my initial impression of this city. And thereafter, many other New Yorkers, such as the staff and volunteers of the Adult Learning Center, made me feel warm in the cold stone-forest city.

Another feature in New York that impresses me a lot is the delicious Chinese food. It is said that you can eat at a different Chinese restaurant in Flushing for at least 70 consecutive days. These foods undoubtedly satisfy the needs of my stomach, and more important, soothe my homesick heart.

Though it is cold in winter, New York in my eyes contains warm human relationships throughout the year; and though it is far from China, I can taste my hometown flavor here.

Yanming Wu, age 36, is a native of Guangdong Province, China. She has lived in the United States for four years, three of them in New York City. She currently studies in Ted Goldsmith’s writing class at the Adult Learning Center of the Queens Library in Flushing. Katherine Perry is the literacy specialist, Garry Behar the assistant center manager, and Alla Osokina the center manager.
Recollection of Twin Towers

We stood hand in hand.
Born in the financial capital of the world,
we were raised in New York City.
We lifted up many tourists to our top
to observe the colorful sights of the city.
Our mother embraced us with the freedom
of speech, religion and the press.
We faced the Statue of Liberty,
surrounded by the Hudson River,
in which boat, yacht and ship
sailed rapidly, crossing each other
and displaying magnificent fireworks in the sky
for our mother’s birthday every July 4th.
We welcomed sunrise from the bottom of our hearts,
said farewell to sunset with a smile.
We saw many shining stars twinkle with the moon,
and a network of roads, long rows of cars
creeping along them.
Skyscrapers dotting
the city appeared a most beautiful
scene in the moonlight.
How charming were we!
The hateful devil attacked us.
Without mother’s safeguard we fell.
We died in the company of countless innocent people.
New York City was torn apart.
Our spirit lives still.
The great sorrow of 9/11
we remember forever!

Haw King Cheng is a student at the New York Public Library’s Seward Park Center for Reading and Writing, where Terry Sheehan is the site advisor and Hilary Schenker is the literacy assistant. When he first moved to the United States from China, he had “no time to study English” because he had to “work hard for bread and butter.” But now, “I try to do my best.”
RONG LAN HUANG

Remembering 9/11

9/11 is one of the pages of my life. Whenever I turn to this page, two fiery buildings with dark smoke are gradually melting down in front of my eyes. I always feel so much grief when I remember this terrible day.

I was following people going downstairs as we heard a big sound and saw smoke in the hallway. At the beginning, I didn’t feel scared because I didn’t know what was happening. We helped each other slowly down from the 29th floor and it wasn’t until we were on the 14th floor that I felt something really serious was happening. As we continued down the stairs, a group of firemen was going up. Each one looked dignified with a heavy helmet and a fire axe in his hands. These heroes kept going up, but they never had any chance to go down. When I reached the fourth floor, the water was leaking and dropping down on us. We quickly ran to the lobby, and when we got there, we saw the large marble walls and ceilings that had fallen down. I walked past the water to get out of the building as fast as I could.

I stood across the street to see our building in flames, and I wondered when I could go back to work because many bundles of checks had piled up on my desk. The bank’s messenger had run away first. I left Manhattan without knowing that this was the last time I would gaze at the twin towers.

Rong Lan Huang, a native of China, is a tai chi enthusiast and used to practice with a group in the parks of New York. Currently, she studies English with Ted Goldsmith and Gary J. Beharry at the Queens Library’s Adult Learning Center in Flushing. The site’s literacy specialist is Katherine Perry, and the center manager is Alla Osokina.
On the first of June, 2005, I arrived in New York City. Wow! I was so happy! I felt that I was in a movie: the yellow taxis, the Manhattan skyline as you cross the Triborough Bridge, the brownstone buildings, wonderful New York City—the very tasty Big Apple!

I can’t believe it all started eight months before, when my (now) husband called me eight years after we had first met in Ilhéus, Brazil. We spoke for three hours that night, and there were many more phone calls after that. He came to see me in December of 2004, and we decided to start the visa process—which I got after four months—and then get married.

The first month after I arrived, we went to so many places. It was wonderful! I had never seen and learned so many things in such a short time.

After that, real life started, and Cinderella began to work in her castle. I was happy and sad at the same time. The language was my biggest challenge. I love English now, but I used to hate it. I had tried to learn English before in Brazil and I could never get it, but now I was living in the United States and I had no choice, though it was very frustrating at the beginning. I wanted—and I want—to learn it so badly. I worked very hard studying it, but results were slow to appear.

One day, a friend invited me to attend a book club. I read the book in English, with my dictionary close by. We then got together to discuss the book, and the discussion gave me a headache. I had so much to say, but I was not able to express myself. I felt so frustrated that I gave up attending the book club and many other things, all because of the language.

In spite of the difficulties, I learned how to make friends with just a few words or gestures, or even using a mix of Portuguese, Spanish, and English. I came to realize that language doesn’t matter when you have a connection with someone. Actually, a great part of my success in learning English is thanks to my friends. Every time I say something incorrectly, they kindly repeat it correctly.
Still, I had to adjust to a new culture that didn’t feel natural to me. I couldn’t do anything my own way. And I depended on my husband for everything. I had been very independent before, and I loved doing things by myself. Now, I was asking myself, *Who am I?* all the time. I didn’t feel smart or confident. I wasn’t the same person anymore.

Eventually, things started to go well. My English started to improve. I enjoyed getting together with friends. Discussions didn’t give me headaches anymore; on the contrary, I would come home worn out from talking so much!

I’m now taking English classes. As part of the class, I wrote a *haiku*, and it was published in New York University’s *Literacy Review*. This changed my life. It made me feel smart, confident and like myself once again. It helped my childhood dreams of becoming a poet come true.

All this experience has given me more empathy for others who are learning new things and even with my own family. I now know myself better, and my capacity to do and learn things has increased.

I love New York City. Even after five years, I say to myself how amazing it is to explore the city! I enjoy all the seasons, from the hot, humid summer to the icy, cold winter.

I feel that I have been born again.

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Rose Covington’s *haiku*, “Ballerina,” was published in last year’s *Literacy Review*. She writes, “This changed my life.” Born in Brazil, she has lived in New York for almost six years. She studies English with Maria Neuda at the New York Public Library’s ESOL Program at Riverside.
PASSING DOWN
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was born in a small village in the northern Ivory Coast. All my life I have admired my father. Although they were poor, my parents were highly respected by many in the community. Moreover, my parents loved and respected each other, and I was proud of them.

In the rainy season, we used to go to the farm. We grew yams, cassavas and many other tropical root vegetables. When the dry season came, the farm work was over; the men went hunting, while the women, like a never-drying spring, took care of the children, took water from the well or at the river, washed the dishes, and carried wood like donkeys to cook the food. When I was young, I was not allowed to go into the forest to hunt. My brothers would go into and come back from the forest with their hunt, and I was impatient to be on this dream team one day.

Then, the day after I turned 14, my father came to me and said, “You are now a young man and you need to know certain things. Today, you will take an important step toward adulthood. We will go hunting together, but just do what I tell you to do.” I was to be in charge of carrying animals that were killed. I was very happy to hear that and began to dream about my first day of hunting.

At dawn, we checked our guns, spears, knives, clubs, water bottles and traps. When all were ready, my father conducted a ceremony as head of the clan; he prayed to our ancestors to protect us against the bad spirits of the forest and from every kind of danger. After that, my father ordered us to move. We were 10 people and I was the youngest. We walked in single file for five hours through the forest. When we stopped talking, we could hear the birds’ and monkeys’ songs and other animals’ footsteps and cries.

Suddenly, my father ordered everybody to shut up. He told each person what to do. I was exhausted after several hours of walking, but now we had to run after the animals. The dogs barked and tracked down the animals. Sometimes, the men caught them by hand; sometimes, by guns or cudgels. It was hard work, and the sun beat down on us. Several hours later, I was carrying on my back 10 fresh
bodies of animals. The last animal we killed was a big snake. It was still moving, headless, in my bag. *I’ve got to be strong*, I said to myself. But I have to confess I was scared. It was in the middle of the night when father and his men decided to turn back home, wholly satisfied with the bounty. We were all tired, but happy with what we accomplished. My father thanked the ancestors for their protection. It was exactly 15 hours since we had departed from the village.

During the hunt, my father taught me some rules. “We don’t kill animals with babies. This is a rule handed down by our ancestors. Don’t eat this fruit; it is poison. If your water is finished, you can cut this tree that contains water. You see this grass. It stops bleeding. Look at this grass. It can protect you against dangerous animals like lions.”

After all, this was a day of initiation for me, and now I felt big and strong. I learned that the forest is important for human survival and that it can be dangerous.

Dear readers, I am not allowed to tell you everything my father taught me because some things are secret. Besides, hunters don’t reveal all they see in the forest. Just eat the meat; don’t ask a lot of questions.

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In New York City for six months when he wrote “The Hunt,” Yacouba Yeo studies at the New York Department of Education’s Mid-Manhattan Adult Learning Center. Tilla Alexander and Jung Sin Lee are his teachers, and Diana Raissis is the instructional facilitator. Born on the Ivory Coast, Yacouba Yeo graduated as a Doctor of Dentistry in 2007, then worked and lived in Equatorial Guinea. He writes, “Now I am living in the Bronx and working with the community as an educator.”
The Story of the Sign

In my earliest memory, a sign hangs in my praying room in China. Later, I was curious about it. I asked my grandmother, and she told me the story of the sign.

The sign had four words, which were Xiao Guang Dong Tian. She told me that the sign was from my grandfather’s father. About a hundred years ago, our village had a drought for about two months. Everyone had to find his or her own way to survive. Rich people could move to another town temporarily, but poor people could only stay in the village. Many people died because they couldn’t find any food or water in such hot and dry weather.

My great-grandfather’s mother didn’t eat or drink for about one week, and she was getting weaker and weaker every day. My great-grandfather knew that if she still had nothing to eat, she would die. Because he was so poor, he knew that he couldn’t find any food or water for his mom. So he made a cut on his arm and let her drink his blood. He knew that was the only way he could save her life.

After his mom drank his blood, the rain came immediately. It rained heavily for a whole day. A neighbor who saw this happen told another person, who told another person, and so on, until everyone in the village knew about it. The village leader awarded him a sign that said, “Your Filial Piety Has Touched the Sky.” This sign has hung in that house ever since.
Why do the people in the Dominican Republic like baseball so much? Because it is part of our culture. We live with it.

When I was a child, I learned about baseball from my mother. She watched the game on television all the time, when the electricity permitted, and I saw in other houses how the parents watched the game with the entire family.

In the stadium, the parents, grandparents and children cheered for their favorite teams. When the season was almost finished and the final series began, the whole country went crazy. Everybody was talking about “the game.”

At night, every business—from bodegas to bars and discotheques—had the game on television. It wasn’t only businesses that tried to attract people with the game; many people also went to watch the game in the park, where there was a big television screen. The politicians tried to sway the people with a lot of commercials and publicity because they wanted to be a senator, mayor or president.

I liked the final series so much, especially when Las Águilas Cibaeñas, the Eagles of the Cibao, were in the finals, because they were my favorite team. With 20 championships, they are one of the most popular teams in the Dominican Republic Winter League.

During the season, for those three or four hours of each game, the people forgot all the problems they had, like no permanent electricity, political corruption, crime, drugs and rising gas prices.

I have left the baseball-crazy Dominican Republic. I’m an American citizen now. But I am continuing the tradition. My son was born on November 17, 2010. I waited until November 30th to buy him his first Yankees baseball cap. I will teach him how to play, watch baseball games with him, and maybe he can become a...
professional baseball player on one of my favorite teams, the New York Yankees or Las Águilas Cibaeñas.

I can’t wait to see my son catch his first ball, or take his first turn at bat and hit the ball, running the bases and scoring his first run or his first Home Run. In that moment, I am going to be so happy and proud to be his father.

I dedicate this story to my son, Bryant E. Baret (B.B.). I love you, son.
When I went to Turkey last summer, my aunt visited me. All day we chatted about everything in our lives. She told me about my great-grandpa. He fought in World War I and became a prisoner of war in Yemen. He stayed in prison there for nine years.

When I heard this story, I was shocked. I said anxiously, “Please, Aunt, can you tell me more?” She told me that he ate only bread and drank only water every day. Only rarely were the prisoners given chickpeas or lentils.

After nine years, the commander asked them, “Do you want to be a Yemeni citizen or go back to the Ottoman Empire?” (After the war, my country’s name was changed. Now it is Turkey.) My great-grandpa and a few of his friends wanted to go back to their country. But the other soldiers wanted to be Yemeni citizens because they were scared to die. They thought that maybe if they stayed in Yemen, they could stay alive.

But the commander said, “Whoever wants to go to your country, you are free; you can go. Whoever wants to stay here, you will be killed.”

The prisoners protested, “Why do you want to kill us? We want to be your country’s citizens, and we will obey you!”

The commander replied, “You are useless to your country, and we cannot use fools in my country.” He killed a few hundred prisoners, but my grandfather and his friends returned on camels to their own country.

I am so proud of him, but so sad about the other soldiers. I think too many innocent people die for stupid wars.

Born in Turkey, 38-year-old Elif Yigit has lived in New York for six years. She currently studies at CUNY’s Brooklyn College Adult Literacy Program, where assistant director Cheryl Georges is her teacher. “I like to watch movies and listen to music,” she writes. “I also like to spend time at home with my daughter.”
FAVIOLA MOLINERO

Sing a Song

When my first nephew was born, I was studying back in Mexico, so it took me some time to meet him here in the United States. I finally met him when he was one month old. He was the little baby boy in the house, and I didn’t want to be far away from him. When I first saw him, he was small, beautiful and fragile. He is very important to me. I’m going to tell you why.

When I visited my nephew for the first time, I stayed in my sister’s house for two weeks, and every day I sang the same song until the baby fell asleep in my arms. I felt sad when I left him to go back to school in Mexico, but I couldn’t stay for more days.

It turned out that singing every day created a big problem because when I was away, my sister called me every night to ask me to sing to my little nephew before sleep. He got so accustomed to my voice that when my sister tried to sing the same song, my nephew only cried and cried and couldn’t sleep.

For the next two months, when the baby couldn’t stop crying, my sister called me and begged me, “Please, can you sing to Christopher to calm him down?”

While for some people, like my brother, my singing voice is not agreeable, for the little baby in the house it was just perfect because it brought him peace and tranquility. But my poor sister, she couldn’t calm my nephew down and told him, “No more songs before sleep!”

Now my nephew is four years old, and he has a little sister. When she talks to me on the phone, my niece sings me different songs. I can’t really understand what my niece sings to me because she’s just a little baby, and she can’t speak very well yet. But it’s very nice for me because I remember how in other moments of life, I sang for my nephew, and now my niece sings for me.

Faviola Molinero, who is 26 years old, comes from Sinaloa, Mexico. She has lived in the United States for three years and in New York for six months. “I studied computer systems in my country. I like to draw and listen to music. Now I study English at Make the Road New York. I want to thank my teacher, Gabriela O’Leary, for teaching me and treating me like a friend. I also thank God, my family, and my friends for everything you give me in my life.”
In Panama in 2003, at the age of 26, I heard that my father had a terminal illness. It was disastrous for me, but I took the lead on the issue with the help of several of my brothers and my mom, even though she and my father already had separated.

The final day arrived: March 27th, 2004. When I came home and walked in the front door it seemed that he noticed the smell of my perfume because he said, “Geysha, baby, is that you?” I sat beside him on the bed, and then I started to change his clothes, but his look was so different from other days. He was happy. Maybe that was the reason for the urgency he felt to see me.

I started telling him, “You are the most important person in my life. I love you, and you love me, too. If you feel it is time to go because you are tired, you can go. I understand.” My little brother, Wendell, was behind me.

Then Daddy took his last breath.

Someone said that we should celebrate births and mourn when someone dies, but my opinion is the opposite. Why? Because we do not know what we will face in our lives.

I felt sad, but I did everything I had to do when he was in my life.

The most curious thing happened one year later, on December 18th, 2005, a week before Christmas, when my son was born in Bronx Lebanon Hospital. When the nurse put him in my arms, I was very surprised to see the number 50409 on his bracelet. He was the 50,409th baby. I said, “Wow! Those are the same numbers Daddy has on his gravestone in my country.”

Now 50409 is my special number. After I was in this country for three
months, I was dreaming about my daddy. I felt like it was real, not a dream. I talked with him, and he was in front of me. But when I woke up, I said, “It’s not real, it’s just a dream.” That morning, I bought a lottery ticket with his number: 50409. I won 600 dollars. I was very close with Daddy. Now he’s not here in the natural world, but maybe his spirit is close with me. Maybe he wanted to give me a present. God knows how, why and when things have to happen.
grew up with my grandparents in China. We lived in a typical old Chinese house. This house was passed down from generation to generation, so it had a long history and was very old. It was a two-story house with a big garden. Actually, it looked like a normal house, but it wasn’t because there were many paths under it. We called them the “secret paths.”

The “secret paths” were a really complicated construction. They looked like the innumerable branches of a tree, but on the other hand, they were organized. The entrance to the underpass was in the kitchen. It was not easy to find because the door was hidden behind the cabinet. When you went through the “fake door,” you would see there was a long staircase leading underground. It was dark in there, so when you went in, you had to bring a flashlight. Down the staircase, you would see a big basement room with a lot of old stuff, such as chairs, broken desks and abundant farm tools. It seemed like nothing special, but when you looked carefully, you would find a small wooden door on the right side of the room. Behind the door, there were many paths pointing in different directions. You could go to your neighbor’s home and other villagers’ homes by using the “secret paths.” However, these paths were only used when our village was in danger, or if there was an emergency.

When I was a child, I liked to play hide-and-seek in there with my friends because it was difficult to be found, and the funny thing was that sometimes I also got lost in there. But my grandparents always told me, “Don’t play in there.” That was the secret of our village. If we played in there, the paths could easily be discovered by another person who lived outside of our village. But you know that children always do something that their parents don’t like, and we still loved to play in there.
Unfortunately, the house and the “secret paths” were destroyed by an earthquake on May 12, 2008, in the southwestern part of China. Even though the earthquake destroyed the “secret paths” and some of the houses in the village, I will never forget the experiences that I had there. Luckily, there are still some “secret paths” in another village, and after the earthquake, they became a tourist attraction and brought in a lot of money, which is going to be used to rebuild my grandparents’ village.

Qian (Michelle) Yang is 21 years old and has lived in New York for two years. She writes, “I was born in Sichuan Province, China. I belong to the Qiang ethnic minority. Now I’m a student at the Borough of Manhattan Community College.” Qian (Michelle) Yang thanks her English teacher, Heidi Fischer, at the Adult and Continuing Education Program, for being most helpful to her. She adds, “I like singing, dancing, and yoga.”
The villages of the Potava region always had glorious harvests because of their fertile soil and generous people. June 1937 was warm in Ukraine. The apple, cherry and pear trees were flowering, and the aroma of the blossoms filled everyone with beautiful health. Kyrylo and Tetiana Barabash liked to sleep in their garden at night. A full moon sent silver rays, and nightingales sang a miraculous melody about love. Kyrylo loved his charming wife. As they kissed they looked like doves. They felt the pulsating energy for generating new life. The miraculous moment came! “My honey . . . my beloved . . . we will have our son! God has listened to our prayers.” They rejoiced. They kissed. Love struck, and they were blessed.

Afterward, the nightingales went silent. A dark cloud closed over the moon. A mood of anxiety came over the land. Ukraine was in danger. The Soviet Communists had occupied the land. Between 1932 and 1933, under Joseph Stalin, many millions of Ukrainian people were killed by famine. The peasantry was opposed to this regime-genocide. Stalin’s troops arrested many thousands of Ukrainian people. Some were sent to labor camps in Siberia, and some were killed.

On the night of September 7th, 1937, Communist soldiers suddenly burst into the home of the family Barabash. They ransacked the premises. Tetiana sat on a chair, her hands protecting her unborn child. Kyrylo stood ready to protect his family. One soldier saw Tetiana’s sewing machine. “Look! Here is a sewing machine, a Singer! He is a foreign diversionist!” The intruders pointed their weapons at Kyrylo. “You are under arrest. Come outside! Out!” The young mother and her daughter embraced our father. He tenderly caressed the pregnant belly.
of his beautiful wife. I felt the warm energy of my father. “My loves, do not cry. I’m not guilty. I will return.”

“No!” shouted the soldier. “You will be sent to Siberia, where you might be killed. You are an enemy of the Soviet people. You will go to Siberia. Out!”

Kyrylo was sentenced as an “antisocial agitator” to 10 years imprisonment at a hard labor camp.

On September 7, 1937 my father, Kyrylo Barabash, was arrested by the NKVD. On February 2, 1938 he was executed in the Lokshim Camp Gulag (Komi, ASSR, and Russia SSR). On March 8, 1938 I was born. In the autumn of 1941 my mother, Tetiana Barabash, died.

Tetiana did not want to die. She was only 38. The evil occupiers had forced my delicate mother to wash linen in the cold, autumn waters of the river. After several days she caught a deadly cold. She lay on her bed. She was as slim as a girl and as beautiful as an angel. We listened to her intermittent speech: “My beloved children, stay together. Our family dream was to live happily, but the regime of Stalin has destroyed our Ukraine. My beloved daughter, farewell. My beloved son, farewell.” Her energy petered out. We were sobbing. Suddenly she sat up and smiled. “My beloved husband, I will soon be with you.”

Born in Ukraine, Vasyl Barabash studies at the New York Public Library’s Seward Park Center for Reading and Writing. Terry Sheehan is the site advisor, and Hilary Schenker is the literacy assistant. He gives special thanks to Ruth Meehan, his tutor. He writes, “My art can be found in collections in Ukraine, Finland, Poland, Mexico and the United States. I enjoy writing about my paintings, about the history of Ukraine, and about my 15 years in the United States, this beautiful country.”
I Am an Islander

I am from the beautiful Quisqueya.
I am from the land of waves of white and blue water moving free and shining.
I am from the land where there is crystal sand, spectacular, delightful and peaceful.
I am from the land of birds singing loudly in the early morning.
I am from the land of the strong and sunny Caribbean Sea.
I am from the wonderful and small Dominican island where the people are dancing, excited with the rhythms of happy merengue.
I am from where the sun is brighter and inspires dreamers.
I am from the place where everybody celebrates our lives with great pleasure around palm trees.
I am from a green and brown ground with flavorful sugar cane.
I am an islander.

Cecilia Richetti originally comes from the Dominican Republic, where she earned a B.A. in education. Formerly a volunteer at New York City’s Museo del Barrio, she now studies English at the New York Public Library’s St. Agnes Center for Reading and Writing. She would like to thank the site advisor, Steven Mahoney; her tutor, Maida Schwab; and the literacy assistant, Sisnur Aranjoo.
When I was a three-year-old girl, I preferred to play on the roof of our apartment building rather than stay in the living room to play games. That was a beautiful heaven for me when I was a child. There were many plants and birds there. I remember clearly, my grandpa loved his *bonsais* very much. The *bonsai* needs horticultural work; it needs to be pruned, shaped and trained into the desired shape. As time goes on, it will become more beautiful.

“You’re giving them a haircut. But why don’t you do that for me?” I stood in front of my grandpa and asked.

Then he smiled when he answered me. “Oh, really? Which hairstyle do you like?” He guessed I was joking with him.

But after I begged him, he did what I wanted. And my grandma laughed at my free haircut when she saw me. Although it didn’t look nice, I felt like “rock and roll.”

There were so many things I could do on the roof. I could see the different colors of clouds in the sky on a sunny day. I still remember what I said when I saw the airplane fly low over our building. I was shouting: “Take me away. You forget there is a passenger here.” I could teach the birds to sing songs that I liked. I can’t forget when I said, “Stupid,” and there was a crow that repeated my word. What a funny bird! It made me angry and happy at the same moment. I loved to play hide-and-seek with my neighbors. I could draw with them, too. We didn’t go home until the sky turned dark. During the night, I was afraid to go there by myself. My grandma told me that children would be abducted by a UFO. What I usually did at night was count stars with my sister. “Look! The moon is following me when I’m walking.” I looked up at the
sky and said that to my grandma. For most of my childhood, I lived with my grandparents. Sometimes to this day, I still think about the good times I had with them on the roof.

I cherish every moment. How could I forget the things that happened there? They controlled my emotions. They made me feel happy, excited, scared and more.

Just now, I felt I came back to my heaven. I hear the birds singing and I can smell the perfume from the flowers . . .

Can you?

Born in China, 21-year-old Lihua (Shirley) Liang has lived in New York for two years. She is a CLIP student of Jay Klokker at the New York City College of Technology. She studied art in China but now studies nursing because her friends told her “most artists are only famous after they die.” She says, “My English is improving day by day. If we never give up studying, I think every dream will come true.”
Like all sisters, my older sister and I fought a lot during our childhood. Yes, I loved her, but there were times when we both just wanted to hurt each other.

I remember one day, we were fighting over whether I should give her my extra piece of candy. I didn’t want to share it with her, and she kept asking for it because she’d lost hers. My mom was cleaning the house and heard us screaming, so she came into our room. We both tried to blame each other. My mom stayed quiet until we finally stopped talking. When we stopped, she signaled for us to sit on her lap. I sat on one side, and my sister on the other. Then she began:

“Once, there were two sisters. One of the sisters was really sick. She had a serious sickness and needed a blood transfer to survive. The only blood type that matched hers was her younger sister’s. The doctor asked the little girl, ‘Would you want to give your blood for your sister?’ The girl thought about it for a second and said, ‘Okay. Why not, if my sister is going to live?’

“So the doctors started transferring the little sister’s blood to the older one. As the blood transferred, the older sister looked better, while the younger one’s face was pale. Even though the younger sister’s face was pale and sad, she was smiling into her sister’s eyes to make her feel happy. Then she asked the doctor, ‘Am I going to die right away?’

My mother explained, “She thought she was going to give all of her blood to her sister and then die.”

This story made both my sister and me cry. The little sister thought she was going to die after that blood transfer. But even if she was to die, she accepted dying if her sister could live.

After that day, anytime my sister and I were about to start arguing, we remembered my mom’s story and smiled.
An Angel Without Wings

Having my abuela raise my brother and me felt just like having a mom and dad around. We were no different from any other kids. She always provided for us and gave us the love a parent would give a child. Abuela’s love was more special, though. Grandparents tend to have a different kind of love that’s more unique and strong.

With the little bit of money she earned from babysitting, all of the bills were always paid on time. She always lectured us on how we should act in life. Abuela often spoke of how to save money and how going to school was important. Looking back now, she was giving us secrets to success.

We often went shopping on Saturday mornings. Before that could take place, though, the house had to be spanking clean. From just one look at the apartment, anyone would be able to tell that we were Puerto Rican. We had plastic covers on our sofas; when it was summer, anyone who sat on the sofa with shorts or a t-shirt would get stuck to the cover from how hot it was outside. There were also figurines on the wall, such as small porcelain elephants, and wedding, sweet sixteen and baby shower souvenirs. Three things that could always be found in the house were Bustelo coffee, Goya food products and Vicks VapoRub.

When it was time to clean, Abuela would wake us up early. She always wore her typical Puerto Rican uniform when cleaning. This outfit consisted of a bata (night gown), chancletas (flip flops) and rollers in her hair. She would blast Spanish music as she shimmied her way around the house, cleaning. My brother, Jonathan, and I hated this; all we wanted to do was be lazy and watch television in our pajamas. Some of our favorite television shows were Recess, Courage the Cowardly Dog, Pinky and the Brain and Animaniacs.

After the morning madness of cleaning was over, Jonathan would usually complain to Abuela and say he didn’t want to go out. “Avanas que tenemos que ir de compras,” she would say, which meant, “Hurry up, we need to go..."
shopping.” As our day continued, we dragged along a shopping cart that I hated. I never wanted to be seen with in public because of how embarrassing it was. The wheels on it were nearly broken and would wobble as it was pushed. The more weight that was in the shopping cart, the louder it would squeak. Everyone on the block knew we were coming because they would hear us from practically a mile away.

Then we would usually go to her doctor’s appointment, which took forever. Once that was over, Titi (our aunt) would take us shopping. We would shop on the two major avenues, which are Myrtle and Knickerbocker. As we strolled down the street, I would often see kids like me being dragged to go shopping. We would then go food shopping, but we always went to two supermarkets. If one place didn’t have a sale, then the other one did. We would finally go home to put everything away, and my brother and I would wait for dinner to be served. As day turned into night, we would shower and then put on our Puerto Rican uniforms, except Jonathan, who wore regular pajamas. We would lie in bed and patiently wait to watch Don Francisco on Sabado Gigante, a show on the Spanish channel.

As the years went by, Saturdays would come and go, and this was always our Saturday routine. As we grew older, Abuela grew sicker. Saturdays became shorter because we were not able to go out. It just wasn’t the same anymore. Abuela then passed away and earned her wings in heaven. She was truly an angel at heart. Once she was gone, I finally realized why she nagged us so much about being successful. The truth is, you can never depend on anyone. Within a blink of an eye, anything can happen. The morals Abuela taught my brother and me will forever live in us. Now I just wish I could hear her voice one more time and spend Saturdays like we once did.

Born and raised in Queens, Amanda Rodriguez, 21, is currently a student at the Borough of Manhattan Community College’s Adult Literacy Program. She cites her teacher, Lester Lambert, as her most helpful mentor. “I put all my faith and trust in God,” she writes. “I’m a person who sees everything in a positive point of view.”
My mother was not afraid of anyone when she was at school. She misbehaved and had many problems with students and teachers, but her biggest problems were with the principal.

My mother used to live in the village. There, the women and girls would take a kind of powder from the trees, mix it with water and use it like a mask to cover their faces and shield them from the sun. But girls weren’t allowed to do this in school.

One day my mother put this stuff on her face and went to school. When the principal saw her face, and the other students who were wearing it, too, he sent them back to their homes. They said that they wouldn’t do it again, but he did not listen.

As they left, they saw the principal’s donkey, on which he rode to and from school every day. So my mom said to the girls, “Let’s take the donkey.” They took it with them far away from school, around 30 or 35 blocks. Then they left it there and walked home.

When the school day was finished, the principal wanted to go home, but he could not find his donkey. He looked for it, and the students looked for it, but they didn’t find it. While they were still looking, a man told him that he saw girls from Falsan, the village where my mother lived, take the donkey with them. The principal sent some students to look for his donkey, and they found it where the girls had left it.

The next day, the principal didn’t say anything to the girls. He just looked at them and laughed.

After years passed, my mom got married and had a daughter, who grew up and went to school. And the principal looked at my sister and said, “Don’t do what your mom did!”
TELLING TALES

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Dear Mr. van Gogh,

Wow, I don’t even know where to begin.
Let me start by saying that I find your paintings to be beautiful and sad at the same time. I’m sorry that while you were alive no one saw what I saw the first time I looked at one of your paintings. I saw passion, love, hate and sadness all in one.

I truly believe that the cruel world to which you were born was not ready for you. I think you were definitely before your time. Those people in the nineteenth century weren’t ready for Vincent van Gogh or your paintings.

Even though your life may not have been a good one, I think your paintings were, and are, a gift to this world. I wish that you could have had the chance to see how much your work has contributed to the art world.

I also want to say that I wish you could have had someone in your life other than your brother Theo to love you, talk to you, and tell you that your paintings were beautiful, and that you were special—not troubled or weird. You are one of God’s children even though you didn’t receive proper love from your mother and father. That’s why you turned out the way you did.

If I could ask you one question, it would be, “What was the real reason you cut your ear off?”

Your life story, Mr. van Gogh, has affected me in the worst way. I feel your pain when you were a child, a young man, and an adult. You were never made to feel special or wanted.

For that reason, I am truly, truly sorry that you never knew your true worth, and that no one said, “I love you, Vincent.”

Thanks for the beautiful art,
Nakeva Cook
False Teeth

His name is Hamidou. He lives in Dakar, Senegal. He has a canoe. Sometimes, he goes fishing with a net, but he also carries people and goods across the river. He likes his job, and he always has a happy smile on his face. One day, his friend Saliou and I came to see him. Saliou has a big shop in Dakar and a small shop on his side of the river. We need to cross the river all the time. He is the richest man in the village. He has false teeth with gold in them, so he smiles all the time.

“I need to go to Sandiniery,” he said. “Can you take me now?”

“Yes,” Hamidou said. “Get in.”

In the middle of the river, Saliou became sick. He opened his big mouth. “Oooooh,” he said. And his teeth fell out of his mouth into the river. He looked very funny. Hamidou and I started to laugh. His teeth!

He shouted, “Get my teeth. I need to have them.”

We tried to see his teeth in the water, but the water was too brown. “Use your net,” he said. “Try to catch my teeth in your net.” Hamidou and I kept trying to throw our net in the water. Then we pulled it in. Nothing. I tried again. At last, I caught something. But it wasn’t Saliou’s teeth. It was a big fish with a big mouth.

When we got to Sandiniery, Saliou didn’t want to go to his shop. So we made a fire, and we cooked the fish. When I cut the fish with my knife, we saw something shiny. It was Saliou’s false teeth! He put them in his mouth.

“Do you want some fish?” I asked.

He said nothing, so I ate the fish. I had a big smile on my face, but Saliou didn’t open his mouth.

A native of Senegal, 22-year-old Modou Samb has lived in New York for a year and a half. Tilla Alexander is his ESOL teacher at the New York City Department of Education’s Mid-Manhattan Adult Learning Center. Diana Raissis is the instructional facilitator. “After I get my GED,” Modou Samb says, “I would like to go to college to study science and mathematics. I would like to go back to my country to be a doctor.”
HERBERT PETTIGREW

Basketball

Went to the gym to play some ball
My team was winning throughout it all
I scored almost every basket
But basketball’s a team game
I couldn’t take up all the fame
Subbed out after getting tired
Down two points I knew I couldn’t retire
Tied up, the game got raw
Ronnie’s elbow hit my jaw
Called my girl at the phone booth
Ended up with a chipped tooth

Herbert Pettigrew was born and raised in New York City. Now 31 years old, he came to the Brooklyn Library’s Bedford Learning Center a year and a half ago. Working with tutor Gaynel Mascoll, he has steadily made progress, increasing his reading and writing levels. Haniff Toussaint is the site advisor, and Edith Lewis is the site supervisor. He really does play basketball, the topic of his poem.
He Was a Stone Man

He was a stone man. He lived on the pebble coast. He liked to sit on the beach and watch the sunset. He read the letters of the waves on the old rocks. He was very wise because he had lived a long time and was very lonely. He was a stone man.

One evening when he was admiring the sunset, something happened. A woman descended from the sky. She was so young and gorgeous; she was all gold and like a fire. She lived on the sun. She wanted to see the earth.

The stone man looked at her without stopping. She was love itself. She ran through the shallow water and laughed, and gold splashes flew out from under her feet. But the stone man thought about his ancient stone body and his ancient stone heart, and he was afraid that the heat of passion would destroy both of them. So the stone man didn’t move and didn’t say anything.

When the sun was almost hidden behind the sea, the golden woman rose into the air, flew over the sea, and dissolved in its last rays.

The stone man sat on the shore all night. He was old and wise. And he was really lonely. He never felt love in his stone heart; he never had tears in his stone eyes. But that night he did.

When the first rays of the sun appeared, the stone man tried to scream and call the golden woman, but instead of shouting, stones fell from his throat. Then the stone man crumbled, became a pile of pebbles, and only his face retained its features. He was old. His stone heart could not endure such grief.

Olga Tseytлина, age 38, immigrated from Russia ten months ago. “I used to write poems and fairy tales in Russian. I have experience in publishing and representing on the stage,” she says. “This text was supposed to be ‘just homework,’ but I got inspired.” A student at the International Center New York, she thanks Elaine Roberts, the Immigrant Support Program Manager, and volunteer Anne Gorrissen.
The Rose That Grew from Concrete

It was planted in the rubble
And left there to die.
It fed off the mistreatment
And the lack of interest it endured.
The loss of love gave it the strength to grow
And the sunlight made it a beautiful color.
And the rain, the rain gave it integrity
And that is the reason that it is
The rose that grew from concrete.

Born and raised in New York, Asia Reape studies at the New York Department of Education’s Mid-Manhattan Adult Learning Center. Her teacher is Corinne O’Shaughnessy, and the instructional facilitator is Diana Raissis. Asia Reape identifies herself as “a 27-year-old single mom who does not let my struggles stop me from rising to the top and achieving all my goals.”
LINA WU DE CHECO

The Ugly Pencil

One sunny day, a lonely little boy was walking in the streets. He was sad because his best friend had moved to another city far away. While he was walking, he began to imagine how much fun he could be having with his friend at the beach. They could swim in the salty water or draw pictures in the wet sand. “Oh, how wonderful it is!” the little boy said. Suddenly, his imaginary moment was interrupted by a slip. He slipped on a pencil. He was so angry because first, the slip disturbed his dream; and second, he slipped on a pencil. “Can you imagine? I slipped on a pencil!” the bothered boy said.

He took the pencil in his hand, looking at it for a while. “Oh, this pencil is so ugly!” the boy said. The poor pencil felt so bad because it was scratched, almost with no color, its head was broken, and it had listened to the discontent from the child. The little boy was ready to throw it into the garbage, when the pencil said, “Oh no! Don’t throw me away. I don’t want to share with smelly stuff, and I don’t want to spend the rest of my life in a trash can. I am not pretty, but I can be useful.”

The little boy asked, “Oh yes? Really?”

“Yes!” the pencil said. “With me, lovers have written the most romantic letters in the world, doctors have made prescriptions for curing sick people, a student wrote a speech on graduation day, a daughter abroad wrote her feeling of happiness to her parent, a neighbor . . .” The pencil seemed to give a lecture of its wonderful uses, but the boy became impatient.

“Stop!” the boy yelled. “You don’t even have a point. Your end is dull. I
cannot use you!"

The worried pencil argued, “Yes, you can. Put me in a sharpener and I’ll have a sharp point.”

That gave the boy an idea, and he said, “I’m going to write a letter to my friend; maybe he can visit me, and we can go to the beach together.”

The boy was happy, thinking what to write to his friend. Then he put the pencil into his pocket, and the pencil was so relieved it lay comfortably in the boy’s soft pocket.

Born in the Dominican Republic 27 years ago, Lina Wu De Checo had lived in New York for only five months when she wrote “The Ugly Pencil.” A civil engineer in her native country, she is now a student of Wendy Wen at the New York City Department of Education’s School 2 of OACE. Lina Wu De Checo says, “I think life without struggle is not worthwhile.”
When I hold
My pen in my
Hand my pen
Dances for me.
I sing and
Laugh.
I hold my pen
Like I am dancing
But my pen stands up
And looks up at me.
“I am not a fool.”
But I tell my pen, “Keep
Moving, stop jumping
Like a fool.
You move when I say move!”

Sybil Scott was born in Jamaica. She is a student at the New York Public Library’s Harlem Center for Reading and Writing, where Steven Mahoney is the site advisor. She gives special thanks to her tutors, Frank Wilson and Virginia Carry, adding, “There are many great tutors here and I love them all.” Sybil Scott works as a home health aide and says, “I care about people.”
“I Killed Him!”

I can’t be! It can’t be! I killed him!” Ivan cried.

With this loud cry, Ivan woke up. His breathing was hard. His face was covered in sweat and tears. His heart was beating like an alarm clock. Ivan knew that it was only a dream. He was lying on his back and looking up toward the ceiling. Since the time he had returned from the two Chechnya wars, this dream had come to him every night.

He recalled the day they had met for the first time. Ivan was from Tashkent, Uzbekistan, and Buzav from Kizilyurt, of the Republic of Dagestan. They met in Turkmenistan’s mountains in one troop’s camp, where the young soldiers trained for military service in the Republic of Afghanistan. It was the fifth year of an undeclared war between the Soviet Union and the Republic of Afghanistan.

The next time Ivan and Buzav met was in Afghanistan’s mountains. After a hard fight, there were only 11 soldiers waiting in the mountain pass when the helicopter arrived in the evening. The soldiers loaded the badly wounded into the helicopter. The helicopter flew up and then slapped back down hard against the rock. The soldiers fixed their eyes on the pilot. The pilot didn’t address anyone directly. He said, “I am sorry, guys. I can’t take off with 11 men. I can take off with only 10. One of you must get off.”

The helicopter became quiet. Every one of the soldiers looked down, like they wanted to ask, *Why should I . . . ?* Then one of the soldiers stood up slowly. He picked up his submachine gun, left and jumped on the rock. All the soldiers understood he was going to die. Ivan saw that this was his old friend Bazav. Ivan thought that they
would not meet again. But they met.

They met again in the Chechnya Mountains. The soldiers were returning to camp, going down the slope of the mountain, when suddenly there was firing. The strongest was the machine-gun fire. The machine gunner knew his business. Some of the soldiers were wounded. The platoon commander told Ivan to destroy the machine gun. Ivan went to the machine gunner from behind. Suddenly he saw the machine gunner, standing in a trench and hurriedly charging his gun.

Ivan threw two grenades. When the smoke dissipated, he came up to the trenches. He saw the machine gunner, who lay on his back and looked wide-eyed into the blue sky. Ivan was looking at him for some time. Then he looked longer, and he recognized him. This was his old friend Bazav.

When the soldiers came up to Ivan, he was standing above the machine gunner, repeating, “I killed him. It can’t be true. It can’t be true . . .”

Nikolay Malevanay was born in Ukraine. He graduated from Higher Engineering Marine School, in Russia, and lived in Tashket, Uzbekistan. Since 2004 he has lived in New York. He studies English at the Peninsula Adult Learning Center of the Queens Library, where Ebru Mestizo Yenal is the literacy specialist, and Barbara Miller is the center manager. He writes, “I recently became a citizen of the United States. I am very proud.”
You are so fine
Everything about you is fine
You must know that you are one of a kind
From the top of your head, Ethiopia
To the brightness of your eyes, Botswana
To the shape of your nose, Kenya
To your beautiful smile, Ghana
To the length of your neck, Rwanda
To the broadness of your shoulders, Uganda
From the toned muscle on your arms, Liberia
To your chiseled chest, Zambia
To your massive hands, Nigeria
To the strength in your thighs, Tanzania
To the speed of your legs, Somalia
Straight down to the tip of your toes, Namibia
Yes, you are so fine
One of a kind
Cloud in the sky, 
with gold edge, like an angel. 
I say, stay a moment.

Efim Krishtal, originally from Moscow, Russia, has been in the United States for two and a half years. He says, “I am 73. I never wrote verses, even to my favorite wife, and here I have suddenly published a Japanese poem, written by a Russian writer, in English. It is a fantasy. Most helpful for me are the teachers from the Riverside Language Program—Lindsay Pearson and Maria Neuda.” The Riverside Language Program is part of the New York Public Library.
One Day Inside the Embassy

Who put this thing here?” asked a security guard, patrolling the waiting room in the American embassy in Bangladesh.

Nobody responded.

There were about 50 people sitting on benches near the front, in the big waiting room, in the process of getting their visas. The security guard pointed to the empty bench in the last row, near the west corner wall, and repeated her question. Everyone in the room stopped talking and looked in her direction with curious eyes, but they were unable to see what was underneath the bench. Again, nobody answered. It was so quiet that you could hear a pin drop in the room. Then the guard talked to someone on her walkie-talkie.

“This is Jue. There is a suspicious object in the waiting room. I cannot see what is inside. Send someone here to check it. Over.”

“Nobody comes to this side,” she announced. “And nobody touches it.”

Then she left the room.

Meanwhile, since the waiting room had no doors, people were allowed to freely enter and leave, but no one dared to get close to the bench.

After a few minutes, Jue returned with another female guard. She asked Jue, “Where is the thing?” Jue showed her where it was. From a couple of feet away, the second guard looked it over for some time. Then she stretched out her right hand and circled a metal detector over the object a few times, until the detector started to beep. She turned and asked the people, “Who is the owner of this thing?”

People just looked at her; no one said anything. Not a single person made any sound. She left the room, leaving Jue there. Every five minutes, another guard would come to keep an eye on the suspicious object. Half an hour later, the female guard who left earlier returned with an embassy officer. The officer angrily said, “What nonsensical behavior!” Some of the people were there to apply for a visa and others were there with interview appointments. He went straight to the
point. “We will find out who did it. Whoever did it will not get a visa!” He did not approach the bench but took out his walkie-talkie and asked someone to send in an expert who specialized in handling suspicious objects.

People in the room became tense and nervous, as if they were waiting for an impending storm. There were a lot of enemies of the United States, so some people were starting to think that it might be a bomb. Some were thinking of leaving the embassy. Some started praying, and some felt annoyed with the situation, but everyone was eager to find out exactly what the object was. What was going to happen? was the question in everyone’s mind.

Fifteen minutes later, the expert arrived. Wearing a pair of thin, off-white latex gloves, he pulled the suspicious object out from under the bench. It was a medium-sized paper shopping bag. He looked inside the bag, and then reached his hand in to take the contents out.

“Oh, my God,” someone gasped. Most of the people just burst into laughter. The expert was holding banana peels, bread crumbs, paper napkins and an empty soda can in his hand.

It was lunchtime and the owner of the bag might have finished eating lunch, put the garbage into the bag and shoved it under the bench. It had taken an hour for the guards and an expert to find out what was in the bag, but everyone felt as if they had survived a tornado inside the embassy.

“I’ll check the security camera to find out who left the garbage in the room,” the angry officer said to himself.

Abdullah Jubaer came to New York from Bangladesh in June, 2009. For the past year and a half, he has been studying in the literacy program of the Queens Library’s Steinway Adult Learning Center. Tsansiu Chow is the literacy center manager, and Jessica Loor is the literacy center assistant manager. Abdullah Jubaer likes to travel and maintains a blog, www.jubaer.wordpress.com, to share his personal interests in English.
BEING TOGETHER

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The Speaker

Being a mom is not easy, especially when you are the mother of 15 children. I have always admired my grandmother. She has been my role model since my childhood; she always had a good sense of humor and a positive attitude. Here are some anecdotes about Carmelita Fuentez Tapia.

Living in a country like México and not having someone like a parent to support you can be difficult. Carmelita Fuentez got married at the age of 12, which is the age at which you’re supposed to be playing with dolls. She was very impressed with my grandfather, Ernesto.

When my parents decided to travel to New York to find work, they left my older brother and me in the care of my abuelitos, or grandparents, Carmelita and Ernesto. It’s incredible that I still remember being in their care. They gave us so much love. I remember my grandmother taking my older brother, Juanito, and me to my other grandparents, from my father’s side, to visit on the weekends. I love them too, especially my grandfather, Emilio. I got my middle name from him. My grandmother used to pick us up on Mondays. When we got home, I used to tell her to take me back to my grandfather’s house. She would make fun of me because I would say to myself that I missed my Abuelito Emilio, but she knew that I loved her, as well.

My parents spent two and a half years in New York, and when they returned to México, they brought us a lot of toys. I was five and a half years old, and my grandmother, with a sad face, told me that the woman with the toys was my mother. In great disbelief, I said, “No, this is not my mom; you are my mom.” I thought my mother was just a lady.

My grandmother loved all of her grandchildren. I have over 40 cousins, and a few of us were lucky enough to live in her house for a few years. My uncles used to leave their children...
with my grandmother because they traveled to the city to work. She never said no. It was a joy to have her grandchildren with her. My uncles used to call her La Vocina, The Speaker. Why “The Speaker?” Because every time she would visit them, she would always talk and laugh loudly.

She was Catholic and always attended church. She would tell us that life without God is useless. She also said that the best inheritance from parents to their kids is not money, houses, cars, clothes or gold, but the advice you give them, and the morals and respect you teach them. Her love for others and her advice had a healthy effect on her kids. They became very professional and hard-working people who always enjoyed having her in their home.

This is only a short story about my grandmother. I could write a whole book on her life, from the time she got married until the time she died. She passed away one year ago, and we all miss her. We miss the person who talked and laughed loudly all the time. We miss “The Speaker,” the person who gave us love and encouraged the pursuit of happiness for her children and grandchildren. R.I.P., Carmelita Fuentez Tapia.

Alejandro E. Sanchez was born in Atlixco Puebla, Mexico. He writes, “I came to New York when I was 13 and started to work at that age, in the restaurant business, to help my parents. I have been happily married for 16 years, with three daughters. My goal is to get my GED, to obtain better employment opportunities.” He is a student of Avril DeJesus in the Brooklyn Public Library Pre-GED Program at the Kings Highway Library. Eva Raison is the program coordinator.
I have many happy memories throughout my life, from my childhood to motherhood; however, my happiest memory is of the last day I spent with my mother when she was alive.

The last day I saw my mother alive was the night before I returned to the United States. I was visiting my family in my native country. After spending two weeks with my family, enjoying the Caribbean culture, the food and the drinks, it was time for me to return to my home that I have built here.

The night before I left, my mother and most of my siblings were all together, just enjoying the last night of my visit. My mother was cooking, and my siblings were telling jokes about our childhood and what we used to be like before we all became adults and parents.

I stood there looking at my mother, taking the last picture of her before I got ready to leave. She looked like the happiest person in the world. She was smiling all night, so I asked, “Why are you smiling so much when I am about to leave you again?” She replied that she had almost all her children in her home all together at the same time. It was like we were all little children again.

My mother told each and every one of us for the first time how much she loved us and what set us apart from one another. The last thing my mother said to me was that one day all of her children will come visit again, all together in the same house, drinking chocolate tea, her favorite tea.

Happy memories can be built throughout the years, but cherish the one you hold dear to your heart because tomorrow belongs to no one. You can lose the one you have not expected to lose.
To See My Father Again

Dreams are definitely a part of our lives, the same as happiness and sadness. We need to understand that these kinds of feelings are the essence of our lives. Some days, I just feel how beautiful life can be because I have the fortune of sharing a new day with my loved ones, and I have the opportunity of showing the people I take care of that I can count on them, too.

It is wonderful how you can fill your soul, your heart, your life itself, with simple things. Every time I go to the park with my family for a walk, we do not need words to communicate because I can feel their souls, and they can feel mine. It is because I can understand the desires, hopes and dreams for the future of my wife and my two daughters, and they can also guess my dreams.

I still remember that beautiful time, my childhood. Since I grew up with only the affection and kindness of my father, we came to be not only father and son; we came to be great friends. We used to take long walks, just my father and I. We talked about everything, and most of the time we talked without words, exactly the same way I do now with my daughters. We talked and thought about everything, but we never talked about a separation—living far away from each other, in different countries.

Unfortunately, life wanted me to be separated from my father. Twelve years have passed. My father is 75 years old. Sometimes I think that the characters in this story have been changed. My father has become my son, and I have become the father. My father often does not understand reasons; he is sometimes just like a child. He wants me to come back home, come back close to him, and take those long walks again, just he and I, as in the old times.

I still remember the day he told me, “Son, I am waiting for you. I just hope that when you decide to come back, it will not be too late.” It was
the moment when I felt the deepest sadness in my heart. How could he have said such a thing? My father has definitely become a child, and I have to take care of him.

Unfortunately, I cannot go back to my country because, as with millions of immigrants, I am still waiting for my American dream of getting a Green Card. Then I will be able to realize my dream for the future—and have one more opportunity to see my father again and have a long walk with him, talking in the language of our hearts.

Diego Lasluisa was born in Ecuador and has lived in New York for 10 years. He studies at Hunter College’s SPELL Program, where Ruby Taylor MacBride is his teacher. He says, “When I decided to come to New York I knew that things could be a little tough at the beginning. . . . I have been studying English for the last two years, and believe me, this is the key to opening the door to a new and promising future in this wonderful country.”
As a family, we always celebrated Thanksgiving together. We may not have eaten turkey on that day, but we were always together—my husband, my children, parents, brothers, sisters, nephews, nieces and me. This year was quite different.

I am separated from my husband of 18 years. We have been separated for four months now because of domestic violence over a period of 17 years. I am in a shelter with my teenage children. We cannot leave overnight without getting approval from the director.

Last Thanksgiving, all morning, my parents and sisters were calling, texting and e-mailing me to find out if we had been approved for an overnight stay. They had prepared the meal and were just waiting for us to be approved. My kids were corresponding with their cousins as they anxiously waited for the phone to ring, hoping the answer would be a positive one.

Around noon, the phone rang. Everyone rushed to get it. I managed to get hold of it first.

“You’re approved,” the voice on the phone said.

I did not have to tell my children. They knew from my reaction that we were. I called my parents and other family members to let them know we were coming. The screams were so loud I had to move the phone away from my ears. My children and I took the train, and two and a half hours later we were there.

When the door opened, one of my sisters screamed, “Surprise!” She had not broken the news to my nieces and nephews, who were indeed surprised to see we were there. Everyone rushed to the door to greet us. My children were so happy we were able to stay overnight. There was lots of eating and drinking and watching football games and videos of the children growing up not so long ago. Being together always brings comfort to my heart. We are looking forward to the next holiday.

N.S. is a native of Guyana and the mother of “two wonderful, well-mannered teenagers.” She received her GED in December 2010, after spending three months studying at the FEGS BEGIN Program with teacher Reginald Thomas. In order to protect herself, she is not using her name or including a photo.
Being Together

remember my best friend, Lupe. I met her when we started junior high school in Mexico. On that day, we were in gym class. The class was almost over when something bit my leg. I didn’t know what kind of bug it was or if it was poisonous. It might have been a spider or a poisonous *alacran* (scorpion). I felt dizzy and my vision blurred. I remember many children came to the nurse’s office to see what was going on. The nurse asked my name, but it was hard to speak because the poison affected my whole body. I felt numb and very dizzy. I remember the nurse asking how they were going to bring me to the hospital because almost all the teachers had left.

I had almost lost consciousness when I heard a kind, lovely voice offer to pay for a taxi to take me to the hospital. My vision was very blurry, and it was difficult for me to see the charitable soul who saved my life. One year passed before I found out who she was.

The day that we met again was the day we started the second year of junior high school. We were with other children playing outside the classroom, and the dean of teachers came and tried to chase us. All the students screamed and said, “Run, the dean is coming!” The dean of teachers caught almost all the students except Lupe and me. We ran and hid behind the door, and nobody saw us. When we came out from the door, we were face to face and we started laughing. Then she stared at me and said, “Oh my God, you are the little girl who was in the nurse’s office!” I said I was, and we hugged. After that, we were inseparable best friends. I remember those two years as the happiest, most beautiful years of my life.

When junior high school ended, she was very sad because she had to move to another town and we might never see each other again. It was a very sad day, and I never did see her again, but I still remember her with gratitude. She was like my sister, and she still occupies a special place in my heart.

Friends

Rosa Corales, age 37, was born in Mexico and has lived in New York City for 20 years. A married mother of three, she studies at the Workers United Education Program, where Jackie Bain is her teacher, and Nancy Lorence is the site director. She describes herself as “very interested in learning and improving my English.”
For the Japanese, *sakura*, or cherry blossoms in English, have special meaning. They are the symbol of spring and have been loved for ages. They were used in the traditional Japanese poems, *waka* and *haiku* in the Heian era (794-1185). If a traditional poem just says “flower,” we think of cherry blossoms. Even nowadays, we hear about cherry blossoms in pop songs during springtime, and they always top our hits chart.

In addition, our new school term starts in April, which is springtime, and cherry blossoms are usually planted in the schools. Therefore, it is the flower that paints March graduation and the first day of school. Cherry blossoms are the color of our lives. When we see cherry blossom trees, they trigger memories of our country’s past.

In my memory, too, cherry blossoms are special flowers. I lived with my parents and grandparents in Japan. My grandfather had a cerebral infarction, and he gradually lost his ability to walk. First, he used a cane and then became wheelchair-bound. Finally, he had a compression fracture and couldn’t get up from his bed. He was in the hospital for quite a long time, and he had always said that he wanted to go back home. But every time we planned to go back, he got a fever or caught pneumonia, so we couldn’t get permission from the doctor.

I usually visited him in the hospital on the weekend. I talked with him and made him food to eat. He was hard of hearing and had difficulty speaking clearly, but he could understand when I spoke near his ear. He stared at me and tried to say something. He opened his eyes wide, smiled, and sometimes grimaced. So we didn’t talk much and just stared at each other. One time, I made him yogurt for dessert. He looked happy because he liked sweets. I said, “See you,” as I usually did. And he said, “Thank you,” again and again. I could hear those words very clearly. They were the last words I heard from him. Five days later, he passed away.

Unfortunately, he couldn’t go back home. We had plans to go back, just two days later, but we didn’t tell that to him because he was always disappointed when he couldn’t leave. My mother often tells this story to the family and cries.
She blames herself that she couldn’t take him back home and regrets that she didn’t tell him.

At my grandfather’s funeral, after having sutras chanted by a Buddhist monk, we moved to the crematory in a small bus. There were lines of big cherry trees on both sides of the road, making it look as if the bus was going through a tunnel made of cherry blossoms. It was a warm sunny day, and I suddenly felt really sad to see such beautiful cherry blossoms. I thought back to my childhood, of a happy time when we had played in the park with my grandfather. There were so many cherry blossom trees. We spread mats on the ground under the trees and had a party.

Cherry blossoms are a metaphor for life and death. After they bloom, they will soon fall. They are connected to our lives. Recently, in a dream, I saw my grandfather in my house in New York. I told him where we were. He was surprised; he laughed and said, “That’s a good idea!” In the dream it was a warm sunny day, like the day of his funeral. When I woke up, I felt him very near. And I smiled because my bed sheets had a cherry blossom pattern. Maybe they brought the dream to me. I believe now he can fly everywhere, even to New York.

I always remember my grandfather when I see cherry blossoms.
Pops

I remember a distinguished salt-and-pepper-haired man, who was cool calm and collected

His heart, big as the third rock With him he brings value ethics and wisdom

He was my friend confidante and mentor

I remember him coming home exhausted and reeking of work He still had time to converse

With me, his son his friend his protégé I will always remember and cherish the fond memories Until we meet again

Born in New Jersey, 44-year-old Victor DeSantiago has lived in New York for 43 years. A student at the Brooklyn Public Library’s Coney Island Pre-GED Program, he would like to thank his teacher, Karen Hanna, for her “unusual way of teaching.” Victor DeSantiago would like to “attend Touro College to get a degree in music.”
The Treasure I Seek

The treasure I seek
Can’t be found in the largest pyramid,
Deep in the Sahara desert
Or in the dark of the forest.

My treasure can be found on 15th Street,
His name is Justin Jr.
My grandson.
His blond hair glows
In the light, like the sun hitting the ocean.
His eyes sparkle like marbles
When he smiles at me,
You can see his pretty white teeth.

He is truly my treasure, my hero, my superstar.
He makes me feel like a kid again,
filling my life with happiness and joy.

I love the way he greets me at the door,
Smiling ear to ear, with a high-pitched “Hi!”
The time we spend together means the world to me.
We always seem to have fun,
Even on the rainy, gloomy days.
I love to take him to the park and
See him grow right before my eyes,
Enjoying the swings and sliding on the slide.
Everything is new to him.
I want to show him every beautiful thing that the world will soon offer him.

One of my favorite memories with Justin
Is from this summer at the beach
Making sand castles,
Even if he thought throwing sand would help.
The way sand covered his toes
They felt like cornmeal and smelled like ocean air.
He was happy and so was I.

As he gets older it is crazy to see what he learns
Even if it was not taught to him.
He loves football but I’m not too sure
How, at 15 months, he gets it.
He loves to yell touchdown with his little arms above his head
He amazes me every day.

I love my grandson
He means everything to me,
Helping and reminding me about
The important things in life.
He has turned babysitting into a joy.
Justin Jr.
My amazing grandson
Is my true treasure.

Jesus Gonzalez, age 48, was born in Puerto Rico but has lived nearly his entire life in New York City. A student at the Brooklyn Public Library’s Coney Island Pre-GED Program, he would like to thank his teacher, Karen Hanna. Jesus Gonzalez says, “I love to read, do crossword puzzles, go to the movies and watch television.” He also enjoys babysitting his grandson and volunteering at Coney Island Hospital.
When my mom realized I was on the way, it wasn’t good news for her. I felt it and it hurt; I was sad and angry all at once, but at the same time it gave me the strength to keep going, the same strength that I didn’t know I would desperately need in the near future.

Everything seemed to be going well in the first trimester: The warmth of her womb made a wonderful home, while nature kept giving form to my existence. Mom was taking care of herself for me, but most importantly, she was getting used to having me with her all the time. How can I possibly put into words all the love she gave me? I felt the care, love and warmth with each stroke of her hand over her belly, every time she told me how much she adored me and that she was patiently waiting for my arrival to hug, kiss, and finally meet me. Oh, Mommy, you don’t know how happy you make me! I have loved you since the first day, without ever having seen your face; I know you, the most beautiful and sweetest mother of all.

One day, while we were at the doctor’s office for a regular check-up and an amniotic exam, I felt really nervous and uneasy. Suddenly, faster than I could realize, something touched me. I felt a quick, sharp pain running through my body, pain so intense it made me feel like I couldn’t breathe. I felt my heartbeat slowing down, and everything turning dark, almost like I was drowning in darkness. I heard voices, screams and crying from very far away; it was Mom begging me to fight to stay with her. But I felt myself getting weaker. For a few minutes, I couldn’t feel anything. I only knew my mom was trying with all her might to hold onto me, telling me she loved me and all that I meant...
to her, saying she knew I was small and fragile, but that I had the strength of the greatest fighter in history, that I couldn’t leave her alone. Hearing those heartfelt words, my heartbeat slowly started coming back with my desire to live and my great desire to meet Mom. I feel happy now while I’m still inside, and I know I will be even happier when I get to see her.

Lorena Rivero was born 43 years ago in Chile, where she worked as an interior decorator. She has lived in New York for three years and is married with “two beautiful babies.” A student at the Queens Library in Sunnyside, she says, “I want to thank my teacher, Fran Schnall, for being very patient and dedicated to her students. She is a very good teacher.”
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FINDING ENCOURAGEMENT
I am a married woman. It is immoral to fall in love with someone else, but something happened that I couldn’t control.

Two years ago, I was asked to join the Friday writing class at the Family Literacy Program, but I gave an excuse that my English was too low-level to write something. No matter how my classmates tried to talk me into attending the class, I always turned them down by saying that I wasn’t as smart as they in writing anything I wanted. In fact, I didn’t want to have the responsibility of writing; I thought I should be relaxing at home or going shopping with my friends for my entertainment when weekends came, since life is short.

Time can change everything, but my mind was still the same until I was “ordered” by my employer to join the writing class a few months ago. On the first day of school, I was a bit reluctant to walk into the classroom because I thought it would be stressful to write an article each week, and I would be bored during class. Who would know I would get a lot of pleasure from the way my teacher taught us, from the students’ interesting essays, and from the way we felt free to talk? I was impressed by the enthusiastic atmosphere from my first time in the writing class.

Week after week, I discovered that I had become absorbed in my writing. I always think about what kind of topic I am going to write on, how to start the first paragraph and conclude the essay, and a lot of things I need to brainstorm. No matter where I am, what I am doing, my mind is writing. Once I finish my essay and read it again and again, I feel like a mother who finally gives birth to a baby after experiencing nine hard months of carrying. I am so relieved and content. I can’t express how much satisfaction I get from it; my love for writing has grown even without my knowing it. My poor husband, he is no longer the one I always think about anymore.
Last Friday, my husband came back home from his work at night while I was still writing. He wanted to chat with me, since we don’t meet very often at home because of his work schedule. I paid attention to what he said at the beginning, but somehow his voice gradually faded in my mind a few minutes later. I got excited when I had the inspiration to write the conclusion of my love story. I ignored how he felt and wrote down immediately what I thought. My husband stopped talking and gave me a smile to cover his true feeling that he was being neglected. I felt a bit guilty because I thought about my writing too much, so I said “Sorry!” to him for not being respectful as a listener, especially since I am his wife.

A woman usually is lovesick when she is madly in love with her man. I was lovesick when I met my husband 18 years ago. I am still lovesick today, but not for any man, only for my writing. I don’t know when it totally occupied my mind and kicked my husband out. The Friday writing class, you are my lover now.

Lilyan Mei comes from China. “I have been living in New York for more than 20 years.” Now studying in the University Settlement Society’s advanced writing class, she says, “I like to study English and read books. I know that writing is one of the good ways to improve my English.” Michael Hunter is the director of the University Settlement Society’s Family Literacy Program.
A girl with an open book on her knees is sitting on the sofa at a window. The room is full of magic sounds of music that she loves so much. Whether she is reading or studying, the music is always with her.

The girl’s heart is full of joy; her eyes are shining. The next day she is leaving her little provincial Georgian town, but she is not thinking now about those who will be left behind. She is looking forward and sees the huge, splendid, white building of the State University—the first and highest-level school in her motherland—where she is going to take the entrance exams.

Her soul is already fluttering into the corridors and rooms of the building of her imagination. The girl is so deeply sunk into her dreams that she cannot notice the branches of her favorite mulberry tree through the wide-open window. The emerald leaves are trembling as if they are saying farewell to their friend who is going to an unknown future.

At this time, the girl doesn’t know that her great dream will come true and that the University will become the alma mater, not only for her, but for her children, as well. Now, her heart and eyes are full of dreams... dreams... dreams.
On December 10th, 1964, my father died in Buenos Aires, Argentina. For that reason, all of my family, four sisters and brothers, had to return to Bolivia, where we were born. After 46 years, I still recall the day we arrived in the city of La Paz. I saw people who were selling things on the sidewalk. It was so impressive, and I was so affected. I couldn’t understand why they were selling things on the street. I said to myself, I will educate them so they will work differently.

I studied for two years at a public college and received a certificate to teach adult literacy. Although I was just 19 years old, I wanted to teach adults. However, I was asked to work with children very far from the city of La Paz. I was sent to two small towns, Rosario del Tapado and El Triunfo, in Beni, a very hot, jungle-like state, where the population was just a few families. This assignment was a big change in my life, one that only God could help me with and give me the wisdom for. I never imagined that I was going to work for so long and so far from my family. I had to take a small airplane after riding a horse for 10 to 12 hours for the first time in my life. Afterward, I couldn’t laugh, sit or lie down. My whole body ached for many days.

The people in the towns were very nice. I didn’t have to pay for anything; they gave me housing and food. Each family took a turn. The first year I started to work with 19 students from ages seven to 14. I divided them into groups. I worked with teenagers in mathematics and grammar and with the parents three times a week. We had meetings on how they could improve their lives. On weekends, we played sports and organized teams to play soccer against other towns.

The head of each family had to work once a week on the land. They had to plant rice and beans, and pick and sell them. With that money, we bought school supplies and sold them to students at a very low price. We also planted vegetables with the students, which was my first experience with planting crops. Afterwards, everyone took them home. For me it was like a dream because everybody had to
work to benefit the community.

During the four years that I worked there, the people were very grateful, and the community grew. During the school season people came from other towns to register at our school. I started with 19 students and four years later ended with more than 80 students.

As you can imagine, I faced different challenges. For example, some powerful guys wanted to date me, but I refused because I didn’t want to be a bad example. Unfortunately, their reactions weren’t always nice. Once, at a party, a man asked me out. When I said no because I was a teacher, he became furious, took out his gun, put it to my head and said, “You have to say yes.” My answer was no. I told him to kill me if he wanted to, that I wasn’t afraid, but he would make my family cry. Luckily, he just shot into the air. I was able to overcome challenges because the mothers of the students took care of me and supported me like I was their daughter.

I learned a lot in my first job. One of the most important lessons was if we do something with love, it is not only personally satisfying, it is also an example for others and motivates them to grow, too. Years later, I still think of how I might return to Rosario del Tapado and El Triunfo and work there once again.

Born in La Paz, Bolivia, Ana Rios has lived in New York for 20 years. She studies at La Guardia Community College’s Adult Learning Center, where her teacher is Ellen Quish. “I’m always doing something for the people around me,” Ana Rios writes. “I put them first, and if I have a little time once in a while, I read and practice English. Little by little my life is improving.”
FINDING ENCOURAGEMENT

MARIO PEREZ

“Take the Test in Spanish!”

I was studying English at the Aguilar Library Center for two years. I learned to speak, read and write in English, a little bit every day. At the same time, I was working in a restaurant as a salad man.

One day, my boss asked me about the Food Protection course. I did not answer. He told me that I had to pass that test if I wanted to keep my job. For one week, I was so scared that I did not know what to do.

I searched on the Internet and found many practice tests. I studied very hard. I took 15 practice quizzes over many weeks and months at the library. I worked by myself. Sometimes my tutor helped me understand the questions. Sometimes I figured it out by myself. Finally, I decided that I was ready for the real test.

The day arrived. When I was in the testing room, I saw people from many countries. The proctor was standing in front of the room talking about the test. He asked everyone to decide which language they wanted to take the test in, English or Spanish. Most people said English.

He handed me the examination in Spanish. I told him I wanted to take the test in English because I had been practicing in English for many months. He suggested that I take the test in Spanish.

I said again, “Please give me the test in English.”

The man shouted at me. “You are Hispanic, aren’t you? Take the test in Spanish!”

I was so scared and nervous because the man shouted at me and everyone was looking at me. He looked very angry. “Okay,” he said, “I am going to give you the test in English, but you have to move to another place in the room.”

I looked around me. I was surrounded by American people. I thought,
Maybe the man thinks that I am going to cheat.

I took the test, and when I finished it I was very nervous. I did not want to give the test back to the proctor. He was still very angry and unfriendly to me. When he took the test from my hand, he was talking nonsense. Suddenly his face changed and he said, “Congratulations! You did a good job.”

I do not know how I got out. I only wanted to get home fast. When I think about that day, I remember first the face of that angry man; and second, my success in passing the test in English.

At the library, they hung up a copy of my certificate. It says, “Qualifying Certificate in Food Protection to Mario Perez.” Every time I pass it, I smile.
The Best Job I Have Ever Had

I work at the Pierre Hotel Taj. It’s called Taj now because Taj Mahal, an Indian company, manages the Hotel Pierre. I’ve been working at the hotel since August 24th, 1990. I was a young lady when I started. Before I got this job I worked at the Helmsley Palace on Madison Avenue and 51st Street. I worked there for six years. My manager, Mrs. Santo, left the Palace and got a management job at the Pierre. One day she called me and said, “Khady, I think I found a better place for you to work.” She told me to call her the next day. When I called her the next day, she told me my attitude would fit well with the Pierre.

I always like to joke and make people feel good and feel comfortable. She said, “Khady, ask your new boss to give you your vacation, and take your sick days. After you finish, call me so that you can come to my office.”

So I took all my time, one month and two weeks, and went back to my country, Senegal. When I came back to New York, I went to see Mrs. Santo. As soon as I met her, she told me to say hello to the general manager, Mr. Culveze. I had overheard in the café that Mr. Culveze is French, so as soon as I met him I said, “Bonjour, Mr. Culveze,” and he was so delighted. I told him I really wanted a job. First he said, “I’ll see what I can do.” By the time I got home, I had a message on my answering machine: “Congratulations, you have the job!”

They put me in housekeeping. I worked from 8:30 a.m. to 3:15 p.m. I had to make 15 rooms a day. Room 3901 is a VIP suite with 17 rooms. It’s a marvelous place, on the 39th floor with a view of Central Park, facing west. We used to have a very special lady stay with her beautiful daughter. Her daughter was about four or five years old. This little girl really liked me. We used to sing and dance. She would say, “Let’s go, Khady,” and dance. I couldn’t play with her because I had so much work to do. She asked her mother,
“Can we ask the manager if Khady can have a different job, so that she has time to play with me?” Her mother said, “Why not?” and she wrote a letter to the manager.

She told the manager, “I don’t mind spending the money to stay at the hotel. My daughter and I like this hotel. My daughter likes to play with Khady, but Khady doesn’t have time because she has 15 rooms to clean. We are asking you if there is an opportunity for Khady to go to a different department, so she will have time for my daughter. They enjoy each other’s company.” She and her daughter went downstairs to Mr. Culveze’s office. They handed him the letter. The mother said, “I would be delighted if you open this now, and let me know what you think about what I wrote.”

After Mr. Culveze read the letter, he smiled and giggled. “I know where I can put Khady. There is someone retiring from the elevator next week. How about I give Khady that job, then you can sing, you can dance, and she can take you up and down all the time,” he said. The little girl was so excited. “I can see Khady every morning!”

Now I’ve been an elevator operator for 19 years and two months.

Khady Gueye, age 53, was born in Dakar, Senegal. She studies English at the New York Public Library’s St. Agnes Center for Reading and Writing. Her tutors are Annette M. Brown and Harriet Grossman; the site advisor is Steven Mahoney. “I have been blessed in so many experiences since I have been in the United States,” says Khady Gueye. “Above all, I love interacting with people, especially older people and children.” She hopes to one day write her own book.
Helping People Vote

On September 24th, 2010, I worked at a public school as a Chinese interpreter. My responsibilities consisted of helping non-English-speaking voters by translating information provided by the other poll workers, translating the ballot, accompanying the voter while he or she used the private booth, BMD, scanner, and so on.

At 4 p.m., a woman who is an inspector and sat at a table called me and pointed in my direction. “Hi. Can you help this old man?” she asked me.

“What kind of language does he speak?” I asked, and she did not answer me. Then my sight transferred to that man. He must have been in his 80s. He was of medium height, but thin; he had thin hair and a little hunchback. I walked to him and asked, “Do you need any help? I am a Chinese interpreter. I can speak Chinese and English.”

He looked at me in confusion and did not answer my questions, so I raised my voice a little, but he made no reply. Then he caught my voice a little as I raised my voice from time to time, and he nodded slowly and pointed to his ears. He was wearing audiphones in both ears.

“Oh yes, I see,” I answered him. He had a problem hearing, so I talked close to his ears. I accompanied him to a private booth and gave him a pen and a magnifying glass. Then I taught him how to vote. First, I made a sample of the scannable paper ballot. “Fill this out. Please do it according to this method,” I said.

“Yes, I understand. Thank you,” he said.

Afterward, I accompanied him to a scanner and handed his voter card to an inspector at the scanner. Then I held his hands steady, and he handed me his marked ballot to insert into the scanner to cast his vote.

“I did it. I did it. Thank you very much, young lady! Can I talk to you?” He held my hand and waited for my answer.
“Yes, you can,” I said to him.

“You are a very nice, patient and warm person. I hope next time I will meet you again. I was born in the U.S.A. and my parents were born in the U.S.A., too. But I went to China during World War II. I am a veteran, 89 years old. I have two children. My son lives in Manhattan, and my daughter lives upstate. I can speak a little Chinese, but it’s difficult for me. You can speak English and can help Americans. Thank you again; I am very happy today.”

“Is she your girlfriend?” The inspector inserted these words.

I ignored her interruption.

The man told her, “I have gotten very good service, and she speaks English very well, and she can help our Americans.”

I blushed with embarrassment because of his compliment.
My First Gift

Today’s date is July 5th, 1988. My family and I are surprised by my father, who will take us on vacation to Michoacán, the state where my parents were born and grew up. They got married and came to live in Mexico City. Now, we are going to visit my grandparents, for whom I feel affection and respect. At present they look old and lonely. Although my six uncles and my two aunts live far from them, they are watchful and support their parents in whatever they need.

The most exciting thing is that this time the trip is by train, not by bus as we normally travel. It is not an ordinary train; it’s one of the oldest trains still working. I have heard that this line of railroads will be closed because the government has some renovation plans.

“All aboard,” I hear someone saying.

At last! We are here in the train, and we take our seats. My sister and I are permitted to go to take a look around. We go out to the end of the car, where there is a platform between the two cars and two benches so people can sit. We stay there to watch the panorama. After a while we see two girls come out. They greet us and we start a nice conversation. They are 15 and 18 years old. They live in Michoacán and now they are coming back from Mexico City, where they were visiting their relatives. While we are talking, I am thinking that they look even prettier with the accessories and clothes they are wearing. One of them has a beautiful bracelet that catches my attention. I really wish to have one like that, although I know that it wouldn’t look the same on me. I am not as pretty as they are, and my clothes are not as nice as their clothes. They are also blonde, have blue eyes and make up their faces.

“You are pretty,” I say.
“You two are pretty, as well,” they say.
“But you are lucky; your parents must be rich.”
They laugh and answer, “Well, we are not rich but our parents work hard
to give us all that we need.”

“My parents work hard as well, but we don’t have different things to wear, like you have,” I say.

“When you grow up, I’m sure you will have a lot of things. Maybe your parents don’t buy things like this because you are little, and they think it is not necessary now. But tell me, which of the accessories I am wearing is the one you like most?” she asks.

I know what she means, but I get shy. I can’t answer, and I stay quiet while my sister looks at me as if she is thinking, What is she going to answer?

The girl says, “You don’t need to answer; I know it already.” She takes off her bracelet and gives it to me.

“But you can’t do that. Maybe it is your favorite, and I don’t want you to feel bad about it. Also, your parents might not like what you are doing, and…”

She interrupts me. “Take it, and don’t worry. It is a gift from me to you, to remember me and this trip forever.”

Maybe she has forgotten me now, but I will never forget her. Something she didn’t know was that nobody had ever given me a gift before, not even on my birthday. I think it was because my relatives didn’t have that custom or maybe because they didn’t have enough money.

My father told me once, “If you have the opportunity to make someone happy, do it, without a doubt. It will make you a better person, and you will feel good.”

The girl did it, and she looked happy.

Born in Mexico, Gabriela Flores came to the United States in 2005 with her family. She studies at the Bronx Community College CLIP (CUNY Language Immersion Program), with teachers Ellen Balleisen, Miguel Gil, TK Bowers and Oliver Mann. She says, “I am a strong believer that obstacles have to be faced without fear, especially in this very competitive world.”
Encourage Yourself

Encourage yourself to rise
Above it all
Make sure you stand up tall
Look at the color of your skin,
Oh, yes, yes, you are a beautiful black queen.
The next time he puts his hands on you
Stand up tall and look him in the face
And say oh no,
I was not born with this birthmark on my face
I was not born with one finger.
He tried to make me over in his own image
I lost myself, my pride
But I did not lose my mind
I know God made me
I’m one of his children
And still I rise.
My father, thank you for making me this beautiful black queen
I will not let him put his hands back on me.
The Sound of Music

When I was 14 years old, I played flute in a group in Peru. I loved to play flute. But my family was poor, and I didn’t have my own flute. I found a stick as long as the flute and practiced my finger movement with it. I imagined that I had one in my hand. When the group had a show, I had to use my friend’s flute. When I was playing, I felt the music; my heart was dancing with each tone. I listened to all the instruments around me as if I talked with my best friends. My blood ran faster with each note; my body floated with each song. It was a beautiful and heavenly experience. After we finished the show, my reward was what I saw and heard: faces with big smiles; faces with teary eyes; the applause like drum beats. I felt proud to give people a happy moment. But I needed to have my own flute! I started to work overtime. Little by little, I saved money, and finally I bought one. My flute wasn’t a new one, but for me it was my treasure.

When I came to New York, the flute traveled with me. I dreamed of continuing my playing, but here in New York all I could do was survive. I had to put my flute away. For a long, long time, my flute stayed silently inside the back corner of a drawer.

Years passed, and I started to study English with Ms. Wen. She introduced me to her husband, Mr. Baker, a very kind man and an excellent musician, who invited me to play with him at our class Thanksgiving party. I felt very emotional just thinking about my flute. I went back home planning to practice. When I opened the drawer... Oh God, my flute looked so bad! Its body had lost its shine; its pads looked stiff; and its sound was like a last breath. “Oh!” I said. “How can I play with it? How? How?”

I told my teacher about my flute. Mr. Baker took me with my flute to a music store in Manhattan. A guy checked and blew my flute and said, “I can fix your flute, and the cost will be 300 dollars.” “Three hundred dollars?!” I couldn’t believe it. Where could I get that money? My husband was the only one to have a job in my family. Now, like many working families, we were in a bad economic
situation. I felt sad.

Mr. Baker noticed my preoccupation and said, “Don’t worry, Sandra. Do you want to have a second opinion?” “Yes!” I said. In the second place, the repairman checked my flute. I started to pray. Finally he said, “Okay,” and the charge would be 100 dollars. One hundred dollars was still big money for me. But I wanted to get it.

When I got home, I opened my closet quickly. Inside a drawer, I had a plastic bottle with coins (pennies, nickels, dimes and some quarters). Each day, I put some coins there. I started to count, coin by coin, and the total amount was . . . 110 dollars! I started laughing and crying. “I have enough money for it!”

During the Thanksgiving show, at first I felt very nervous to play. When the music came out, my flute started to have life. I played with Mr. Baker and his band members. I played “Do-Re-Mi,” “Cielito Lindo,” and “Besame Mucho.” Beautiful music filled our classroom. My heart was dancing like a kid’s. My flute had been waiting for this moment for a long time—15 years, in America.

Born in Peru, Sandra Guzman has lived in New York for nine years. She identifies herself as “the mother of two beautiful children.” She is a student of Wendy Wen at the New York Department of Education’s School 2, OACE. “I’m a little shy,” Sandra Guzman says, “but through writing I can express my feelings. Now that I’m improving more in my English class, I’ll continue learning.”
GAINING PERSPECTIVE
A Day Outside

It was a beautiful afternoon on Monday, March 19th, 2010. As I looked out the window, I said to myself, *It sure looks like spring outside.* As class began, the first thing our teacher said to us was, “Have you ever heard the expression ‘Stop and smell the roses?’”

Everyone in the classroom had their own opinions and ideas of what it means, but I had no idea. After she had finished explaining to us what it means, she said, “Today, we all are going outside to visit the Brooklyn College pond. We are going to walk around and quickly observe the surroundings.”

As I sit on the bench, I look around. I see so many different trees with different blossoms and different colors. The trees are very green and look very healthy. As I take a deep breath, I smell a beautiful scent. It smells like lavender.

I observe a huge tree with its branches hanging over the pond, full of pink blossoms. I can hear the waterfall and the birds singing. The birds are flying everywhere. It sounds like they are singing a song. I guess they like spring, too. I can see all different kinds of trees and plants. I love springtime. For me, it’s the best season of the year.

Sitting next to the waterfall makes me think about life, about how fast it goes by, like springtime. Before you know it, it’s gone.

As the wind blows, the blossoms from the tree fall on top of the water. It’s a beautiful thing for me to see. I can feel the wind blowing softly against my face. Being outside also helps me to concentrate and meditate. Students are passing by, the clock is chiming, the birds are singing, the wind is blowing. I like being outside. I love nature.

As I look to the left, I notice how beautifully the rocks are
lined up. Behind me are beautiful daffodils, all different colors. It looks like the Botanical Garden.

As the sun is about to set, I look up at the top of the building. I see the sun shining lightly. I love spring. Sometimes we need to take time to stop and smell the roses.

Life is too short. Before you know it, it’s over. Like springtime.

Ezekiel Williams, age 23, was born in Grenada, in the West Indies. He has been living in New York for 15 years, and is a student of Louise Mancuso at CUNY’s Brooklyn College Adult Literacy Program. He writes, “I want to improve my reading and writing skills so I can get a better job in the future and reach my goals.”
Bernice Reynolds was born in Jamaica and has lived the last seven years in New York. She would like to thank her tutor, Mateusz Buras, and the literacy advisor, Stephanie Bouffard, at the Brooklyn Public Library’s Coney Island Learning Center. Bernice Reynolds writes, “When I first came to New York, I was surprised by how fast people walk on the street, going about their business. I was surprised by how complicated the subway was.” Her story reflects on an unusual aspect of her first job in the United States.
Children Today

To be a child today is a “piece of cake.”

You start to work as soon as your mom delivers you, not because you are busy discovering the new world around you, but because you have to follow a very busy schedule.

So, if you are the first child to be born, you can consider yourself a little luckier, because you don’t have to follow your older brothers and sisters in all the activities they do. You wouldn’t have a choice!

You are forced to spend all of your young life in the car, ever since you said, “thank you” and “goodbye” to the nursery. When you grow up a little bit more, the situation becomes more complicated.

Mom gives you a very crazy schedule. Even if she tries to make everything fun and not too heavy for an innocent creature like you, you still don’t have enough time to sleep and savor the heat of the nest. Why should we be surprised if today’s kids speak like adults when they still haven’t learned to count from one to 10?

When you are still an infant, the first thing they teach you in school is “Call 911.” This explains why you receive your first toy phone when you are six months old. Even though you understand immediately that mom’s real phone is more interesting, for yours you need to wait until your sixth birthday.

But if today’s kids know how to make a phone call, send an SMS, and prepare food to eat; if they have a computer for their best friend and an iPod for their shadow; if they learn to swim, to sing and play an instrument before school age, it’s because progress gives everyone more than before. At the same time, the possibility of staying home more often has been removed.
Home means time, means people, means atmosphere, means games, means kitchen and means a scent: the scent of memories. Childhood is the time to build the values of life, and it is the time to build memories.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Giovanni Verga, an Italian writer, wrote in the romance *I Malavoglia* that the flood of progress would sweep up all. Unfortunately, progress has meant space for indulgence, and the indulgence has caused apathy to permeate the children and has almost forever deleted the taste of anticipation and surprise.

Now I’m an “older child” and I’m a mom, too. I work a lot to give to my kids more than a little, but only enough to understand the importance of little things, such as the quiet moment at the beginning of a good melody.

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Caterina Gambino came to New York City in 1998, just after she was married. She studies at the College of Staten Island with her teacher, Judy Falci, and Ellen Navarro, the ESOL coordinator. Born in Italy, she says, “I try to keep everything I know from my culture and mix it with my new one, and the result is double pride.”
Reflections on the Present and the Past

When I work in clubs, I look around. I walk through the crowd, back and forth, confused from the music ringing in my ears. People are clinging and embracing. I note the power of the music. I see the bodies in the shadows, some swaying to the drums, to the rhythm. I feel like a sentinel among them, from another time and place, lost in the sound, the noise and the smell.

But, in my mind, I am in the old world. They turn around the campfire with its amber sparks, in the dark, dark jungle, surrounded by the trees. The people dance in rhythm, drinking, taking drugs under the rising moon, trying to free their minds and bodies, dancing under the moonlight, but with a religious purpose and ceremony.

But now, we are here in present times, surrounded by steel and iron in a modern jungle. The drugs, the drink, mangle people. They hope in the music they will find truth and freedom. But they are hopeless in the search.

I contrast the new world with the old; now people are searching, but finding nothing. Everyone is impressed by how modern they are, but they have no direction, no consciousness of the meaning of many things in life. They are pulled in different directions. They have no ideas. They are lost in a world of light and sound.

Kenneth Pauljajoute is 30 years old and was born and raised in New York. He studies at the Adult Learning Center of LaGuardia Community College. Miriam Fisher is his teacher. “I have had many jobs. I love the ocean. I love science,” Kenneth Pauljajoute writes. He adds, “I find people very interesting to observe.”
One day, when I was a little girl back in Grenada, my parents sent my sister Janet and me to the shop. It was seven in the evening and it had started to get dark outside. The shop was about 15 minutes away from where we lived. On the way to the shop was a family cemetery.

As my sister and I neared the cemetery on our way back home, we heard a boom and something started rolling behind us. It was dark and we could not see what it was, so we started running.

Where we were living we didn’t have streetlights. My sister and I bumped into each other in the dark and both of us fell in a drain. We got up as fast as we could, and we started running again. We ran until we got home and were out of breath. Our parents asked us what happened. When we told them, they started laughing. Our parents said it was a coconut that fell from the tree and started rolling behind us.

After that evening, our parents never again sent my sister and me to the shop in the dark.

Back in Grenada
A 54-year-old Grenada native, Velma Noel has lived in New York for 17 years. She is a student at the Brooklyn Public Library’s Central Learning Center, where Winsome Pryce-Cortes is the site manager, and Susan Knott is the literacy advisor. She would like to thank her volunteer tutor, Rochelle McNeeley. This is Velma Noel’s third publication in the Literacy Review, and she says, “I am developing confidence in myself, and I am happy as a result.”
The Sniffer

My mother told everyone that, when I was a child in Poland, I was like a dog because I smelled everything: new toys, new clothes, crayons, food and people. I think my mother liked to make fun of me; I don’t remember these situations, but I remember some smells very well.

My mother often baked cheesecakes. The smell of the vanilla and the sweetness filled the air. Now I’m addicted to cheesecakes; I bake them myself every week.

I remember the terrible smell of fish when my proud mother fried it in oil. That is why I don’t like fish anymore.

When I was seven years old, I was sick and I had to go for the first time to the hospital. I remember the nasty smell of medicine, used gauze bandages and the sick. I feel sick when I walk near a hospital and I think about that smell.

Now, my sense of smell doesn’t work well, and I don’t have to smell everything. Maybe I’m not a dog anymore—or maybe I’m just an old dog.
My name is Maylo. I live in a nice apartment with my owners, Edmundo and Carmelita. They are a nice young couple. They love me very much, and I love them, too.

Recently, I heard a conversation between Carmelita and Edmundo. Carmelita was saying to Edmundo, “Look, your dog chewed on my new shoes. I can’t wear them anymore.”

Edmundo said, “My dog? I don’t believe it. Maybe your shoes asked Maylo, ‘Please, Maylo, come and chew us.’” Edmundo likes to joke a lot.

Then Carmelita said, “You have to buy me a new pair of shoes.”

Edmundo asked, “Why me? I didn’t chew your shoes; Maylo did. Ask Maylo to get you a new pair of shoes.” Then they started laughing.

I felt very sad. I knew that I had done something wrong, but I didn’t know what to do. A day ago, when I had seen those soft and appetizing shoes, I couldn’t help myself from chewing on them. Now I realize that I did a terrible thing. But what can I do? I am only a little dog who doesn’t have a job and cannot buy shoes for Carmelita. Do other dogs work?

With these thoughts, I went to a corner of the apartment where nobody could see me and fell asleep.

It was evening when I heard Edmundo opening the door. He called, “Carmelita, come here, please. There’s a box here, waiting for you.” Then Edmundo called me, and I came out from my corner. He said, “Here, Carmelita, this is from Maylo and me.” Carmelita opened the box and saw a pair of very nice shoes.

She got happy and said, “Oh, thanks to you and Maylo for the wonderful shoes. But Maylo, please don’t chew them, okay?”

I was very happy. I was happy for Carmelita, and I was happy for the wonderful people I was living with.
Once pretty and new, black and white, they’re in my closet still. I loved those shoes—black, shiny patent leather; white, clunky rubber soles and heels. Comfy, they were. Show off I did, with my head held high and pep in my step.

I adore those shoes.

As the weeks passed, the leather, once pristine, became dull and no longer shone. The bright white heels and soles are soiled and stained, dingy and old. Oh, my pretty shoes are shades of gray; gone forever is the bright in the white of their heels and soles.

The perfect heels, once level and straight, show evidence of my lopsided gait. Their outer edges, now worn, rock from side to side as I stroll along. I keep the shoes, with all their imperfections, unwilling to toss them aside because

I love my marshmallow shoes.

Florence Choice was born and raised on the Lower East Side. She is a student at the New York Public Library’s Tompkins Square Center for Reading and Writing. She says, “I want to express my gratitude to the team, Terry Sheehan and Hilary Schenker, and give special thanks to Rodger Larson and Shaun McCarthy, my tutors, for their contributions of time and talent.” Florence Choice is the mother of three children and is working to build her own clothing line, “Choice Woman.”
Blackie the Dog

My name is Blackie. I am a female dog. Today, I stayed in the house and sat down in a nice place. I am curious, and I like to relax in my big living room. The kids are always playing with me; they give me a lot of love all day. Today, I went into the bathroom and had a bath and a nice haircut. Then I sat at the table and had lunch with my caretaker and his family. I felt so good in the house, like I was a human being. I was dressed in my beautiful blue dress and blue and white dog slippers. I went around the house, walking from the living room to the bedroom, and all over. Then I watched what was on the television. Later on, a visitor came to the house and saw me and said, “What a beautiful dog!” I felt so good, and the visitor gave me a big hug and kiss. I will always remember today as a very good day to be a dog.
Occasionally you waited, but I never arrived.
Occasionally you called, but I never answered.
Occasionally you thought I was faithful.
Occasionally I made promises that I forgot and never kept.
These are the things that happen in life. I feel like I abandoned you.
I don’t know when or how I broke down.
I’m missing you, occasionally.
More than before, interest in myself is growing in my mind. I still do not know the real me. I am thinking about who I am. I am a mother of two human beings, raised them the old-fashioned way and think of them proudly. However, I do not think I have fulfilled my responsibilities until they get married.

Who am I? I am the wife of a man who is getting old and wants anxiously to keep his home with me. Now, in a lonely country, we are becoming friends, instead of husband and wife, and we often miss each other due to his long business trips. So I often discuss my new issues with my son.

Who am I? I am an older daughter in a family of four children and have a great mother who knows how to smile my tears away. She thinks she can still help her children and wanders around even if it bothers us. I am influenced by her, the most sacrificial daughter for her family when she was very young, so I feel like taking good care of her while she is staying with me.

Who am I? I am a citizen who wants to try to do even small things right here because I do not want to break American rules. Also, I am a Korean woman who still cannot speak English fluently, even though I have lived longer in New York than other friends have. I often make long distance calls so as not to be alone. I speak more Korean than English and eat Korean food every day, so as not to be alone in this country. I have memories of childhood and want to be within the memory of the living, just like seeing my old pictures. Already, I know my mother will no longer be with me someday.
Who am I? Who is the real me? I have not had one answer yet; nevertheless, I want to belong to everyone I am related to. The answer might come to me when I am walking down the street very fast without reason, which is my habit. Or maybe I need more time to slow down to become “one with myself”?

Byoung Rye Lee was born in South Korea, has lived in the United States for 13 years and in New York for 10 years. She studies at Hunter College’s SPELL Program. Her ESOL instructor is Ruby Taylor MacBride, and Lauretta Goforth is the director. Byoung Rye Lee says, “Now that I have been living in New York with my loved ones, I like to walk in the park and meditate to find myself.”
Who am I?
I am a son,
a brother,
an uncle,
a cousin,
a friend to all,
who gets misunderstood.

Who am I?
I am the brain,
the soul,
the feet that walk,
the heart that hurts,
the voice of the unspoken,
the eyes that will fade with time.

Who am I?
I am the truth,
the lies,
the love,
the hate,
the peace amongst others.

Who am I?
The quality to be perfect,
the disappointments,
the failure,
the key to success,
the mistakes.

Who am I?
Whoever you want me to be:
a lawyer with no degree,
a follower with no leader,
a leader with no instruction,
a husband with no wife,
a father with no father figure (go figure).

Who am I?
The question of the topic,
the answer of the question.
Just a man who bleeds
the same blood through the same veins.

Who am I?
I’m just a human being.

Luis Dominguez studies at the College of Staten Island’s Adult Learning Center, with the site director, Donna Grant. His teacher, Arlene Collins-Day, once told him that education is the key to success and he says, “That prompted me to commit myself to investing in my future.” Born in the Dominican Republic, he moved to New York City 13 years ago. “I love poetry,” he says, “and I love people. I am committed to accomplishing and achieving my educational goals.”
Lifewise

In this story, Elizabeth Hicken tells how she struggled to get a literacy class. She tells how she found the courage to ask herself truly that she could not and how she stood up to her husband and to the teachers. It is a personal story that many people will understand.

Elizabeth Hicken is a domestic worker in Johannesburg, South Africa. She wrote this story after attending literacy classes with the English Language Project (ELP).
PERSEVERING

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On the evening of the seventh day, we were on a mountaintop looking at the southern sky. Amazed, we saw an enormous radiance over the horizon—that glow had to be from the island of Hong Kong! Behind us lay the darkened mainland. On the 10th night, we arrived at the shore of the Shenzhen River. We stood on the edge of a cliff looking out over the endless inky-black water. Again, we saw the huge brightness in the sky; from now on, that radiance would be the only compass we needed. However, for the moment, we were stranded above the river; it was too risky to jump.

The cliff was our last barrier. If we could get to the water quickly, we would have a fighting chance to reach Hong Kong before sunrise. We tied all our clothes together to make a line just long enough to reach the Shenzhen River 35 feet below. Tom held onto the line so that Ming and I could climb down safely. But with no one to hold the line for him, Tom had no choice but to leap after us.

When he hit the ground, Tom cried out in pain. His back was injured, and he could barely move. Tom told us to go on without him. He knew he could not swim. But of course Ming and I would never abandon him. We lifted Tom up from under his arms and dragged him to the river. We took turns blowing into the nozzle of the inner tube to make a life raft for Tom; then we inflated the last two plastic bags.

As luck would have it, the current was in our favor, which made it a little easier to swim away. Stroke by stroke, Ming and I pulled and pushed Tom forward on his inner tube. I tried not to think about the dark, shark-infested waters all around us; instead, I focused on the coastline out there somewhere. We lost track of time; a couple of hours must have passed. It seemed as if we were just treading
water. The ring of light over Hong Kong did not look brighter or nearer. Not only were we losing our strength and determination, but the current was also weakening. Sooner or later it would turn against us. Tom’s pain was growing worse.

In the distance, slowly but surely, we saw dots of light—still too far away to know if they were from a passing ship or from a house on shore. Nevertheless, the sighting energized us, and we swam with renewed vigor. Tom joined in to paddle with his hands. Yes! Those lights were, in fact, from the windows of not one, but two houses. Beyond exhaustion, we had reached a shore surrounded by oyster beds.

Holding Tom between us, we staggered toward the lighted window of the nearer house. The oyster shells cut into our legs, but we did not notice until we entered the house and saw the blood. We had arrived at a safe house, one with a glow in the window, which signaled a welcome and safe passage for runaways.

We knew that some residents along the shore made it a business to take in runaways. While our hosts provided shelter, food, and water, they were sizing us up: Just how much were we worth? Soon they would call our families to negotiate the fees; for the right price, they would hide us from the authorities. Depending on how much the smugglers thought a family could afford, the going rate was between 5,000 Hong Kong dollars and 10,000 Hong Kong dollars each. There was a silent agreement between the Hong Kong government and the refugees. If we could make it into the city and disappear into the population, we could apply for legal status. Otherwise, we would be sent back to China.

Against the odds, we made our escape 35 years ago. Countless others tried to run away, but not everyone succeeded; many were imprisoned or killed. I stayed in Hong Kong for several years before coming to the United States. I became a naturalized citizen in 1985. I now have two grown sons in their 20s. They had never heard this story until I finished writing this essay and shared it with them.
Curiosity

Some might say it was scary, others might say terrifying. I say it was the curiosity of a six-year-old not knowing what he is doing and having God on his side. I believe a strong power was looking over me on the day of this incident in Fier, a little town in Albania.

One rainy day in 1997, I went to the nearby army base with my friends. It was a time when the army bases were abandoned, so we went there to see if anything was left behind. We walked in and saw only a lot of broken guns and a bunch of bullets everywhere. I walked around to see if I could find anything; and—just my luck—I found a grenade. I had no clue what it was, so I took it and put it in my pocket. After a while, it was getting dark and starting to rain, so we all left and went home.

I always hid my toys under our staircase so my little brother wouldn’t find my things. I took the grenade out of my pocket, but little did I know that as soon as I threw it into my pile of toys under the stairs and it touched the floor, it would explode.

Thank God I wasn’t near it. I was about eight feet away. I curled up into a ball and froze from the tremendous force. It mostly impacted my lower body and feet. Minutes later, after looking through the smoke my mother found me, picked me up and rushed me outside. When she put me on the ground to check on me, I was still in shock and curled up in a ball. I couldn’t move, couldn’t talk, nothing. Seconds later, my feet started gushing blood from everywhere and half of my face was also bloody. My mother fainted as soon as she saw the blood on my face.

My uncle was our neighbor. He ran to our house as soon as he heard the big boom. He saw me on the ground, picked me up without asking any questions and threw me in the car, as I bled everywhere. I was worried about
my mother. I told him, “Leave me. I’m okay; check on Mom.” He told me to stop talking and not to worry about anything. By the time we got to the hospital, I had passed out in his car because I was losing too much blood.

I woke up two days later, and I was all stitched up. I couldn’t look at my feet. They didn’t feel like I could control them or even like they were part of my body anymore. They were all swollen and hurt badly from each side. The doctors didn’t have much hope in my using my feet or walking again.

A year and two months later, I had progressed with help from my whole family and friends. I walked out of the hospital with a big smile on my face.

I believe that God is always watching over us in one way or another. On that day, and after, he happened to guide me through my process along with my family.

Armand Preci studies at the College of Staten Island’s CUNY Language Immersion Program (CLIP). His teacher is Caryn Davis. After immigrating from Albania, he has lived in New York for six years. He says, “Writing is a way people express their feelings in a courageous way.”
DIOMARIS SIERRA

A Time I Was Frightened

I read *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* in my English class. It’s a story about ghosts, fear, deception and running away. It made me remember something that happened to me when I was a young girl. I was frightened, and it has followed me all my life.

When I was 12 years old, my sister Silfa and I visited our half sisters in Najayo. When we went back home, a man followed us. We were very afraid. We walked quickly. The man walked quickly, too. He went ahead of us. Then he stopped in a place. After we passed him, he walked behind us. We walked for a long time, and he did, too. We were crossing a bridge to arrive home, and he caught me. He put his arm between my legs. He lifted me and put me on the wall of the bridge. We were crying and hit him.

My mother heard us crying and calling her. She ran, looking for us. The man left, running. My mother hugged my sister and me, and we all went home. Then my mother asked who he was. I didn’t know where he came from.

My sister answered, “He lives near my godfather. He is the son of Fidel, my father’s friend.”

Then my mother, my sister and I visited Fidel. My mother explained the situation to him. He said, “This is a big problem and a very delicate situation. But the girls are fine. It is better for them that it stays a secret between our two families. If other people know, they will gossip about them. But I will punish him.”

My mother understood and left him. We went home, and she told us to take it easy and everything would be all right. She never spoke about that again. Then my mother moved our family to San Cristobal, a big city.

This story was a terrible experience for me. The man had planned to violate me. He went unpunished. In that time, the crime stayed secret, and my family left the
town. Perhaps my mother left the town to protect me and for love of her family. The same thing happened in Sleepy Hollow: the main character, Ichabod, left the town because he was frightened.

I learned from *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* that all crimes have to be punished, and the people affected can continue a normal life in their hometown. I never told my story before, but in this class I had the opportunity to liberate myself from that secret. Now I feel fine, free of the problem that has affected me throughout my life.

Born in the Dominican Republic, Diomaris Sierra has lived in New York for two and a half years. Describing herself as “an enterprising woman” who “does not surrender before adversity,” she studies in the Bronx Community College CLIP (CUNY Language Immersion Program). Her teacher is Kristin Winkler.
Finding Safety

My husband called me over the phone several times to threaten that if I got an Order of Protection against him he would hurt our 18-year-old daughter. I went back home to get my personal belongings after I had gone to stay at The Safe Place, where women go for protection. He threatened to kill me. He locked me inside the apartment for about two hours with him inside. He came after me with a baseball bat, attempting to hit my head. He came close to my face and raised his fist as if to punch me. Again, he threatened that if I called the police, he would kill me. Our 18-year-old daughter was present and prevented him from hitting me. I was able to run away from the apartment when he wasn’t looking and go back to The Safe Place.

I have been at The Safe Place or a secret place ever since. For about two months, his threats to kill me were escalating. In January 2007, he saw me in the house trying to get more of my things. He threw keys at me, hitting my leg, and I screamed. He said, “Get the hell out of here.” I ran into the bedroom and hid in the closet. My son came in the room and called me, “Mom, are you okay? You can leave the house now. For your safety, don’t come back.” I had black and blue bruises on my leg.

Sometime that summer, when I was in the neighborhood, he saw me and he hit me in the face with an open fist, leaving bruises. He often threatened to kill my dog. He often hit me with a closed fist, leaving black and blue bruises. He has thrown screwdrivers at me. He has pushed me down the stairs and threatened me with a shotgun. He tried to rape me at knifepoint. He has often called me, “Stupid bitch, fat bitch.”

Sometime last year, my sister got an Order of Protection against him. I suspected that he might be mentally ill. I wanted him to stay away from me
and not harm my pets. I didn’t want to go back to the house. I was still staying someplace safe.

Now, one year later, I have moved into a one-bedroom apartment. I am happy to be alive today. My mother died in 2007, and now I’m by myself. My children are afraid to talk to me. My daughter is 22 years old and my son is 25 now. They are afraid of their father. He controls my children and tells them if they talk to me he’ll give them no money and take away the cars he gave them. I have not seen my son for 11 months now. I hope and pray my children will talk to me and see me.

Born and raised in New York, Maria Rivera is 46 years old. “I like all kinds of music,” she says. “I like to talk to people.” She studies at the Adult Learning Center of LaGuardia Community College, where her teacher is Miriam Fisher. To guard her safety, she has chosen not to be photographed for the Literacy Review.
On August 14th, 2003, the lights went out in the Manhattan factory where I worked. We expected them to come right back on, but that was not the case. We waited for an hour before we were sent home. While most people might be happy about the early release, I was scared because I had absolutely no idea how to get home. I used the subway to travel between my job and my home, but that day the subway was not running. I was faced with the challenge of walking the three miles between Manhattan and Brooklyn. I had never walked three miles in my life, and I did not know how long it would take me to walk home. The distance seemed so scary to me that I thought about sleeping on the steps outside the post office until the next morning. The weather was very hot, but this seemed like my only option.

I was not able to contact my daughters without phone service, so I decided to walk the long distance to Brooklyn. I stopped in a nearby store and bought a bottle of water for the trip. In that heat, I was sure I might get dehydrated. As I started my journey, I was surprised to see so many people walking. I decided to ask if anyone knew how to get to Brooklyn. I got some helpful directions, but most of the time I just followed other people.

Looking back, the walk from Manhattan to Brooklyn was actually a great experience, because I saw so many people. It took me three hours to walk home. When I got home, my daughters were alone. Their mom arrived home before me, but left to buy emergency items from the store, like candles, matches and batteries, in order to get through the night. I remember that we placed candles all around the house, told stories.
and listened to the radio all night long.

That night, I told the story about my three-mile walk to my girls. This experience reminded me of my childhood because I grew up without electricity. I told my daughters to be grateful that they lived in a time with so much technology!
I Said I Wouldn’t...

Once again I continue to do what I say I won’t do. The only thing I seem to be doing that’s beneficial right now is going to school. I gave up on myself a long time ago. I think that’s why nothing seems to be going right. I’m working on a strategy to put a plan in motion; I just haven’t quite figured it out yet. I’m still in the thinking phase. Let’s do a list of everything I wouldn’t do:

- I wouldn’t sell my phone
- I wouldn’t sell my jewelry
- I wouldn’t ever be without a shower
- I wouldn’t ever be without food
- I wouldn’t ever be mean to my pets
- I wouldn’t let anyone know how messed up I was. That would never be me.
  I would never do that.
- I would never sell my body
- I would never let myself be used
- I wouldn’t lie, cheat or be deceitful

You can never hurt me because I’m doing it all to myself. Oh no, I am not like that. I say, Come over. I got a big fish tank, a big flat screen TV, a futon bed and a deep freezer. You name it. I just may have it. I am being good. Surface talk and appearance of suave tone in my game. Don’t pity me. Feel sorry because I’m doing well. You don’t understand and are not willing to guide me. I may seem like a lost cause but I am not.

Confidence is my front, but humility lies within. Today is not a very good day. It’s rainy. I’ve got dirty clothes on, uncombed hair and hygiene at a
minimum. Slightly embarrassed. Still high. I can feel it flowing through my body. Feeling good. So what? Who cares? I’m fine because I would never do that if I were sober. I think. I hope.

Never been sober long enough to know if they aren’t street drugs that come from a doc. My doc. Sometimes I fear what I will achieve. My GED and sobriety, and then what?

What will I not do?

Born in St. Croix, 28-year-old Daniel “Dilo” Cintron has lived in New York for 10 years. He writes, “I am a young man who is still striving for success. With all the obstacles that present themselves, despite a challenging lifestyle, mental health issues, and drugs, I continue to try.” A student of John Kefalas at Fortune Society, Dilo Cintron declares, “Life’s a challenge, and I am going to win.”
MARGARITA SHNEERSON

Paddling and Life

My favorite vacation was my trip to North Karelia. This is a part of my country. My husband and I went there in early June. We paddled a canoe the whole time. The weather was cool, and nobody else was paddling a canoe because most people like to paddle and swim during July or August. I was afraid of the journey because I had never canoed before, and I cannot swim well. I was afraid of drowning.

We started our trip from Top Lake and went down the Porbgoma River. On the first day, there was a powerful wind and big waves. We began paddling quickly. We made for the shore of a little island and, with difficulty, managed to get onto dry land. We waited the whole day, but the wind did not stop blowing. After 24 hours, we paddled only at night when the wind calmed down. We finally reached the shore of the lake. We were happy! We survived!

Later we paddled with more prudence. I have a lot of wonderful memories of the trip. I saw beautiful scenery—the clear, smooth surface of the lake, and pine trees growing out from the rocks. I also remember the scent of bears, the elegant, graceful deer and many other things. Once, it poured all day and we had to stay in our tent all day and all night. Every night we slept in our tent, and sometimes it was very cold.

Because of this trip, I became bolder and tougher, and learned to be calm and courageous in difficult situations. Even after many years, when I close my eyes, I can see moving pictures of my vacation in North Karelia. I am so glad that I saw the beautiful scenery, and that I learned to swim and paddle. I am also grateful for the lessons that my trip taught me about life.

Margarita Shneerson, age 73, was born in St. Petersburg, Russia. In 1941, her mother, “knowing that the German army was advancing on Leningrad,” took the young Margarita and “fled the city in the last train before it was cut off.” As an adult, Margarita Shneerson worked for 46 years as an engineer designer. A New Yorker for three years, she studies at the New York Public Library’s Fort Washington ESOL Center for Reading and Writing, with teacher Ross Burningham.
Miguel, I Want to Thank You

I used to be very caught up with labels—Calvin Klein, Coach, Guess, etc. I thought labels made you the person you are. Boy, was I wrong. I was 25 years old and new to motherhood, when I quickly learned that labels are not so pleasant.

This time the labels were different and much more important: ASD (autism spectrum disorder) and PDD-NOS (pervasive development disorder—not otherwise specified). These words buzzed around my son. I didn’t understand. I did not use drugs when I was pregnant. Why would this happen to my baby boy?

Even after several doctor visits, therapists and re-evaluations, I still didn’t understand why they labeled my son autistic.

After days of crying and stressing out, I woke up and decided that I wasn’t going to be a mother who didn’t do anything. Miguel is now in a program called Early Intervention. This program helps my son talk and play. He receives speech therapy, occupational therapy and special instructions.

Miguel has been through a lot in three years. Kids treat him differently and don’t want to play with him because he is a little different. But Miguel still wakes up with a smile on his face. He loves to play with everyone all the time.

Miguel has taught me that labels don’t define you. They explain the gift you have and that you may need special help. The world will always label my son, but to me he is just Miguel, the little man who taught his mother a new way of living. And for that I thank you, Miguel.

Cynthia Soto, age 26, was born and raised in New York. A student at the Phipps Community Development Corporation, she says that her teacher, Gale Shangold, has inspired her to become a better writer. Cynthia Soto plans on “continuing my education by getting my GED, and one day becoming a special education teaching assistant.”
still remember that day like it was yesterday! It was a beautiful, sunny day. After a hard day at the National Credit Bank, where I worked as an analyst in telecommunications, I decided to go home at 4:30 p.m. to join my young son. At 4:53 p.m. I arrived at the entrance to the dead-end street where I lived. I was waiting for two cars to move so I could turn, when there was a deafening noise. At first I thought it was a large truck whose brakes had failed. Then I realized it was an earthquake, the worst thing that Haitians feared!

I was next to a brand-new hospital at least six floors high, and before my eyes it collapsed on—I do not know how many—patients, visitors, staff and passersby in the street. I moved the car two or three meters, and a wall fell on the car behind me, exactly where I had been. I quickly got out of the car and stayed in the middle of the street while the earth continued to shake under my feet. After a few seconds, the shaking stopped. Two minutes after the first shock, another was felt, then every three to five minutes during the next two hours, and every 15 to 20 minutes throughout the night.

I was a minute’s walk from my house, but it took me over an hour to get there. I had to pass through the rubble, walk on roofs, defy death, and hear the cries of pain and despair of those who had lost their entire families, the grief of those who had seen the fruits of a lifetime destroyed in a few seconds, and the sighs and groans of those trapped beneath the rubble. The most painful was to be forced to leave them to fly in search of my own family. When I arrived at what should have been called my home, I ceased to exist. It too had collapsed with my wife and my 13-month-old son inside.

At that time, I experienced the death of the soul and death in the soul. I am told that I squatted on the ground, hitting it with a stick. I do not know how long I stayed in this state. Finally, I heard a small voice calling from afar, like an echo from the other end of the world. A young cousin of my wife told me that
he had pulled my wife and son from the rubble and that they had nothing, not a scratch, on them. When he tried to reassure me, I jumped on him to strangle him. Luckily he understood that I was not in a normal state and fled. It took me about an hour to find my wife and son, kiss them, hold them tight against me and thank God for this miracle that I did not deserve any more than those who died or lost their loved ones.

Approximately one week before the earthquake, I had awakened in the night and switched on my television. My wife had joined me. A documentary showed how to behave in case of an earthquake, and when the first tremors were felt, my wife remembered this. She took refuge with my son under a large, solid wooden table in the dining room. The house collapsed, but the table was able to resist.

I am one of the few survivors in this drama who has lost neither his immediate family nor extended family. But I lost friends of long standing, people who were dear to me, with whom I shared so much and with whom I had so many things in common. I am not cured yet, and perhaps I will not heal. But the earthquake has completely changed my life: This tragedy has brought me closer to God.

Today, my family and I have moved to Brooklyn with the goal of rebuilding our lives.

Réginald Louis-Jacques, age 37, has lived in New York for 10 months. “I’m married to Regine Coppee, and we have a son, Mathys Réginald. Back in Haiti I was an electronic and network computer engineer.” Betsy Kissam is his ESOL teacher at the College of Mount St. Vincent’s Institute for Immigrant Concerns, where Donna Kelsh is the director and Mark Brik is the education director. Réginald Louis-Jacques aims “to go to school to get a Master’s degree in telecommunications.”
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The Gallatin School of Individualized Study, a small innovative school within New York University, began in 1970 and grew out of the educational reform movements of the late 1960s. As a small college within a highly regarded research institution, Gallatin provides the best of both worlds for its 1,350 undergraduates and 200 graduate students. In close consultation with faculty academic advisors, students create their own curriculum and unique plan for learning, combining Gallatin’s own interdisciplinary courses with more traditional courses in various schools of NYU; self-directed education through independent studies; and experiential learning through internships at New York City’s numerous institutions, businesses and arts organizations.

The Writing Program includes a curriculum of more than 30 courses each semester; a Writing Center staffed by undergraduate Peer Writing Assistants; the electronic Writing Program News; a Guest Lecture Series; Writers in Progress and Gallatin Teachers Reading events, at which members of the Gallatin community read from their own works; the Gallatin Review, an annual student literary and visual arts magazine; and two Community Engagement Projects: the Literacy Project and Great World Texts.

The Literacy Project dates from 2001 and is comprised of a Literacy in Action course (co-sponsored by the Community Learning Initiative) that combines the study of the adult literacy/ESOL field with volunteer work at four partner organizations (University Settlement Society, Fortune Society, International Rescue Committee, and Turning Point Educational Center); a weekly writing class at University Settlement Society; publications of writing by adults, including the Literacy Review, Refugee Writing, Writing What We Want, and Where I’m From, and the annual all-day Literacy Review Workshops in Teaching Writing to Adults.

Great World Texts, which began in fall 2008, consists of a collaboration between Gallatin Writing Program faculty and undergraduate mentors with teachers and students at several New York City public high schools, including Fannie Lou Hamer Freedom High School, in the Bronx, New Design High School and the Henry Street School for International Studies, in downtown Manhattan. Together, faculty and students study a canonical or “contemporary classic” work and create and present writing projects—including essays, stories and poems—related to it.

For further information, and/or a free copy of the Literacy Review, email the Writing Program Director, June Foley: jaf3@nyu.edu

Look for the Literacy Review, Volume 9 online at the Gallatin website this summer!