

giving

Project WRITE

A community-funded program offers East Palo Alto teens a forum to express themselves creatively through writing.

On a Saturday morning at Stanford University's Writing Center, Victoria, a high school junior, stands up before a group of 30 peers from East Palo Alto to read a poem she's written about the program they've all been part of for the last 10 weeks. "... We're all just a big family, under one tree. Brown, light brown, mocha, tan, pink," she reads. "Doesn't matter what color we are, because we all do the same thing, meet every Saturday at Stanford to be at Project WRITE." The students clap as she finishes, then take their own turns reading creative writing they have worked on and will eventually publish in their own literary magazine, shedding light on their identities, hopes, and dreams.

This six-year-old Stanford student-run project (whose acronym WRITE stands for Writing and Reading as Integral Tools for Education) is a community and alumnus-funded program that brings creative writing into the lives of East Palo Alto high school students who often aren't exposed to it in their schools. The Saturdays that participants spend at the Writing Center are dedicated to a variety of artistic workshops put on by University professors or guest writers and artists. "We want to excite these students about writing and bring them into conversation with Stanford students and faculty," says Writing Center Director Kristi Wilson.

Emancipated from the five-paragraph essay, the high school students thrive in the open environment Project WRITE provides them with. "We write poems or whatever else we want to," Victoria says. "Project WRITE lets me write on my own terms." Fellow student José, who is finishing his third year in the program and heading to college next year, agrees. "You can write about what you really want to, about who you are," he says. "At school, you have to censor yourself all the time."

Project WRITE's directors seem to understand this well—that high school often stifles students' creativity. They credit it as the reason many of the program's participants opt to come to the free workshops each weekend. "Most don't have the opportunity to write like this in school," says Stanford senior and Project WRITE Co-Director Rudy Rubio. "We tap into their creative energy; we want them to learn about different ways to reinvent their own words."

In doing so, the directors also try to build a supportive community for the students. As fellow Co-Director Yuriy Mikhalevskiy explains, "Liking to write or being really ambitious isn't always cool in these students' lives or at school, and is even frowned upon by some of their peers." It's a theme, he says, that often comes up in their writing at the program. "Suddenly, when they're here, they're part of a scene where people understand and support that in them."

With statewide cuts in school funding, Wilson emphasizes the increased need for such programs that nourish young people's desire to be creative. "Based on the number of students who choose to come here each week, Project WRITE is something the students and the schools are really excited about," she says. But, perhaps the biggest testament to the importance of Project WRITE in its students' lives is José's own reflection on how the program has changed his perspective. "The whole world can seem boring, but then you bring writing to it, and it's suddenly a more interesting place," he says. "As soon as I see something now, I feel like I just want to write about it."

José's and Victoria's writing, as well as other students' work, can be viewed in their annual literary magazine online at <http://projectwrite.stanford.edu>. ■

—LINDSAY SCHAUER



Ways You Can Help

Visit the project's web page for information about donating writing supplies, cameras, or providing other support.

Bring your own artistic expertise to the program by volunteering to speak at or lead an activity at one of their Saturday workshops. Contact Andrea Lunsford at lunsford@stanford.edu.