

Community: Writers program flourishes at Our Sisters School

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By Shana Silva (*)

Being the daughter of Portuguese immigrants to New Bedford whose first language was Portuguese, I was naturally drawn to Our Sisters School, where I became an AmeriCorps teacher in fall 2012.

The school is a tuition-free, independent, secular, all girls' middle school in New Bedford, Massachusetts, that serves mostly Portuguese and Cape Verdean families who qualify as low-income. Many of the students are the children of first-generation immigrants and spoke a language other than English as their first language.



Knowing the struggles of so many Portuguese women in past generations, the school's mission to educate girls was of special interest to me. I have had a number of women mentors and role models along the way who inspired me to try to become a role model for these young women as well. As the first in my family to graduate from college, I also hoped to inspire these girls to demand an exceptional education and go on to college.

When I began at Our Sisters School, I had recently attended the "Writing the Luso Experience Workshop" led by the extraordinary Portuguese-American writer Frank X. Gaspar at the CNC/Dzanc Books DISQUIET International Literary Program in Lisbon in July 2012. This inspired me to start my own writers' workshop at Our Sisters' School my first semester there.

At DISQUIET I had connected with a burgeoning movement of Luso-American writers, and came up with an idea to bring the two groups together: underprivileged girls growing up in New Bedford, and writers at all stages of their careers who were interested in sharing their enthusiasm for reading and writing.

The result was an interesting twist between a visiting writers program and a weekly writers' workshop that served 16 girls over the course of the year, with occasional performances by writers for the entire school of 63 girls. Initially, my vision was to focus mainly on Luso-American women writers, but the writing workshop has blossomed into something wonderfully diverse, just like the school.

Some writers had ties to the Lusophone world or to New Bedford, but others did not. Eighteen writers spoke at Our Sisters School in 2012–13, with some traveling long distances to meet our girls.

It was amazing to see how eager so many writers were to participate in this new program at a tiny all girls' school in New Bedford. They included the following: Dr. Laurie Robertson-Lorant, Patricia (Pat) Gomes, Oona Patrick, Marybeth Rua-Larsen, Aaron Samuels, Anna Solomon, Dr. LaShonda K. Barnett, Dr. Everett Hoagland, Megan

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Fernandes, Dawn Lopes (AKA Nautical Dawn), Officer Charles Perry, Jr., Susan Grace, Dawn Blake Souza, Tem Blessed, Dr. James Bobrick, Tim Horvath, Dr. Paula Neves, and Dr. Frank Sousa.

I was humbled by the desire of so many to enthusiastically support this program and our young writers. Most of these writers I had never met prior to sending them an initial email inviting them to the workshop. The writers' community was passionate about getting low-income girls excited about writing, and they showed up at Our Sisters' School week after week.

We had writers come in from all over the East Coast; many traveled hours to lead a one-hour workshop. One quintessential example of this was when Dr. LaShonda K. Barnett, a novelist and visiting professor of African-American history and culture at Brown University with a strong interest in Cape Verdean maritime history, drove to New Bedford all the way from New York City just days after Hurricane Sandy had hit.

It was this type of unconditional support and dedication that I received from the writing community that kept me energized to organize the program all year long. I made an effort to connect with the local writers of New Bedford and got an overwhelming amount of support from them as well. I am also grateful for the wonderful professors at our local university, UMASS Dartmouth, who have been extremely supportive of this project: Dr. Frank Sousa, director for Portuguese studies and culture, and Dr. James Bobrick, whose specializations include modern poetry, Renaissance literature, and children's literature.

On a local level, I have worked particularly close with, and have gotten a tremendous amount of support from Pat Gomes, an award-winning poet, creator of the Octologue (an 8-line syllabic form of poetry), and president of Gallery X in New Bedford. Other local visitors included Dr. Laurie Robertson-Lorant, whose work has been published in countless literary magazines and anthologies and who is the author of *Melville: A Biography*, the only up-to-date, full-length, fully annotated, complete biography of Melville.

She has taught at many universities including MIT, and is now a visiting professor at UMASS Dartmouth. These two women have shown great support for the workshop and I am eternally grateful to them—when you have this kind of support, “you grow wings.” Dr. Robertson-Lorant was also recently published in *Ocean Voices*, an anthology of ocean poems that was edited by a former poet laureate of New Bedford—and another of our visiting writers—Everett Hoagland.

School Mission and the “Girl Effect”

I have had the great honor of working with and learning from so many amazing and diverse writers and artists through this writers' workshop program, but the one thing that all of these writers undoubtedly had in common was the fact that they believed in our girls at Our Sisters' School, and in our mission. The mission of Our Sisters' School is to inspire and educate middle school girls from the Greater New Bedford area to reach their full potential in a safe, supportive, and challenging environment. We at Our Sisters' School believe in something called “The Girl Effect.” This is the idea that “when girls perform better in school—in the end we are all better off. For most girls will eventually have families of their own, and family experts have shown over and over that



Pat Gomes with a group of students. From left to right are: (back row) Trinity Monteiro, Meaghan Rose Grant, Kelimar Del Valle, Ava Faria, Savannah Leao, Danissa Molina, (front row) Mia Vaughn, Jayleana Borges, Kailani Hernderson, Eva Watts-Pine.



Author Everett Hoagland with Shana Silva.

the educational level attained by mothers often determines the overall success of entire families. In other words, when you educate a girl, you are also educating her future family.” (Our Sisters’ School website)

Bicultural Learning

Growing up as a Portuguese-American female living in the United States, whose first language was Portuguese, and whose home life and culture was almost identical to that of a child living in mainland Portugal, I faced many cultural and linguistic challenges throughout my educational journey. It is a daunting task for a child to have to try and figure out who they are when one is both bilingual and bicultural.

It is a challenge to figure out where and how you fit in, and most of all, how to balance the two worlds you live between. By now I had mastered these skills, and I felt that it was my personal duty and responsibility to guide other young bilingual and bicultural learners to do the same. The writers’ workshop is just one of the ways in which I plan to help my students better understand themselves and their role in this world as bilingual and bicultural learners.

Educating Women

As I previously mentioned, my parents are Portuguese immigrants: they are legal permanent residents of the United States. They came here from two quaint small towns outside of Lisbon in the early 1980s. My grandparents brought all of their children to the United States in search of a better life. Both of my grandfathers were fishermen, and it was precisely this harsh way of life that brought them both directly to New Bedford in search of work, hope, and prosperity.

As in most Portuguese families, my grandfathers were the sole providers for their families. My grandmothers were not allowed to work. The men considered it insulting to their manhood. Machismo dominated Portuguese culture during those days. Portuguese women were expected to stay home, cook, clean, and take care of the children. They were second-class citizens and often had no say. Men controlled their lives, and what their husbands said, went—definitively.

One of my grandmothers is still alive today and lives to tell the stories of those cruel times. For as long as I can remember, my grandmother has told her granddaughters stories of what she went through as a Portuguese woman in Portugal and in the United States. We, as her granddaughters, listened to our beloved grandmother with admiration and awe; her courage and strength is, and has always been, astounding.

Like my grandmother, so many admirable Portuguese women have had the perseverance and determination to survive and endure such deprivation. They lived in a world where their opinions didn’t matter, their wants were ignored, and their hopes and dreams were muffled by men’s loud thunder. This was something that I realized and internalized at a very young age. I believe that this, along with the consistent and never-ending encouragement of my adoring parents, was what inspired me to become a women’s rights and social activist. I realized from a young age that no woman, that no human being for that matter, deserved to be treated as second class citizens. I wanted everyone’s opinion to count. I wanted everyone’s voice to be heard, and I was willing to fight for what I believed in.

I was determined to be a strong, independent, successful Portuguese-American woman. I wanted to be a role model for other young Portuguese-American women. With the help and support of my remarkable and loving parents, I became the first in my family to graduate from college. I graduated with high honors and a burning desire to create social change.

The Immigrants’ Assistance Center and AMIGOS

I started my mission to help create social justice, and to help Portuguese immigrants help themselves by working at Immigrants’ Assistance Center in New Bedford. This was the beginning of a beautiful and unexpected journey. It was at Immigrants’ Assistance Center where I met one of the most influential women in my life, other than my mother and grandmother. She was another strong and successful (and extremely fashionable, I must add) Portuguese woman whom I could look up to, and who would inspire me, and serve as a mentor to me for

years to come. Her name is Helena DaSilva Hughes. Helena is the executive director of Immigrants' Assistance Center, and not surprisingly, also currently serves on the board of Our Sisters' School. During my time working at Immigrants' Assistance Center, Helena took me under her wing and encouraged me to fly with her.

It was during my second year working at Immigrants' Assistance Center when Helena asked me if I wanted to work on a project to help recent immigrant children at the local middle school in New Bedford. It was where all of the recent immigrant children are sent, most just a few days after their arrival to New Bedford. I was of course honored and eager to begin working on this project. The project is now called AMIGOS, and it was implemented that year as an in-school, volunteer-based, translation services program. I volunteered at AMIGOS for two years, providing translation services to teachers, staff, students, and parents. It is an amazing program that has created some very positive change in our school system. Today, the AMIGOS program is thriving; it has just recently been introduced at New Bedford High School. Helena and I now work together to give the girls at Our Sisters' School the exceptional education they deserve. We are still working on creating social justice one student at a time.

DISQUIET and Presence/Presença

The list of influential Portuguese and Portuguese-American women in my life does not end there. I have been lucky enough to have had one other inspirational Portuguese-American woman in my life who has encouraged me to make my dreams become a reality. Her name is Oona Patrick, and I met her through the DISQUIET Program, for which I received a scholarship to attend in July 2012. Oona is a Brooklyn-based writer and editor of Portuguese descent from Provincetown, Massachusetts, and the granddaughter of a Provincetown teacher herself. She began working for the new DISQUIET International Literary Program in Lisbon in 2011, serving as its Luso-American Liaison. She now also runs the online group for Presence/Presença, a growing community for North American writers of the Portuguese and Lusophone diaspora that emerged out of the first DISQUIET. When I mentioned my idea to Oona at a program reception in Lisbon last summer, she was automatically on board and ready to help in whatever way she could, as members of Presence/Presença had been seeking an opportunity to work with Luso-American students interested in writing. Since that evening, Oona has become a mentor and dear friend to me. Without Oona's continuous and persistent support I would never have been able to have had such a successful and dynamic writers' workshop. She was the first writer to visit the workshop in September, brought in several members of Presence/Presença, and emailed contacts in the literary world in New York and Massachusetts to help find other visiting writers.

Future of the Program

I hope that the Visiting Writers Workshop at Our Sisters' School will continue to grow and flourish in years to come. This year has been an incredible journey. Along with the workshops, talks, and performances, some of the girls were able to travel to the Student Day of Poetry of the Mass Poetry Festival in Salem thanks to donations crowd sourced from generous Luso-American writers who had visited the school. The girls also took advantage of three opportunities to give public readings in New Bedford, honing their public speaking skills. I continue to seek the means to publish a collection of the girls' writings as well.

I hope to get even more writers involved in the program next year. It has been my experience that the literary world is quite tight-knit; therefore, I am confident that I will have friends of friends and beyond visiting next year. I am looking forward to September, meeting new writers, and seeing the writers who have come back to visit for the second year in a row. I am excited and honored to be part of such a vibrant and welcoming writing community, and to be making connections with people who are just as inspired as I am to get low-income, inner-city girls excited about writing.

Lastly, I look forward to watching as my young writers inspire mature, successful, and accomplished writers. I had the pleasure of watching my students do this time and time again this year. One our visiting writers this spring, DISQUIET alum Paula Neves, perfectly captured this experience: "After a long, hard spring semester of teaching writing to 'jaded' college students, and a four-hour drive from Jersey, I arrived at Our Sisters' School somewhat jaded myself. But the sensitivity, genuine interest in, and love of writing and literature that the Our Sisters' workshop participants showed so surprised me that for a moment I myself became again that girl their age who first discovered Emily Dickinson and began a lifelong love affair with the written word.

Working with the girls helped me hit the 'reset' button and remember just why it is I do this 'soul making' (as Keats called it) work. It also reassured me that literature will continue to have future, and a bright one indeed." Ultimately, I hope that through this unique writing program many young women will develop a lifelong love affair of their own with the written word.

(*) Shana Silva graduated from UMASS Dartmouth as a Commonwealth Scholar with a B.A. in Spanish and a minor in Portuguese. She is currently working on her Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) degree at UMASS Dartmouth. Shana is a licensed English, Spanish, and Portuguese teacher. Shana is tri-lingual (English, Spanish, and Portuguese). She has been an Ameri Corps teacher at Our Sisters' school in New Bedford this year, where she started the after school visiting writers' workshop. She will be a lead teacher at Our Sisters' School this upcoming fall, where she will be teaching fifth and sixth English Language Arts and Social Studies, as well as continuing the development of the visiting writers' workshop program. Previous to working at Our Sisters' School, Shana worked at the Immigrants' Assistance Center, where she ran her own citizenship program. She also helped to implement the AMIGOS program—a translation services program for immigrant families at Roosevelt Middle School, and then volunteered at the AMIGOS program for two years. Although she has resided in New Bedford for the last several years, Shana has lived in the Greater New Bedford area for most of her life. Both her parents are immigrants from mainland Portugal – her father is from Ericeira and her mother from Figueira da Foz.