

## The Write Way: new after-school program is hit at Our Sisters' School

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NEW BEDFORD --- In September 2012, AmeriCorps teacher Shana Silva started a new after-school writing program at Our Sisters' School.

Silva, in a news release, wrote that initially, she thought the main focus of the program would be to bring in Luso-American women writers to lead writing workshops.

"But the writing workshop has blossomed into something much more collaborative and diverse," she said.

What emerged, in the end, Silva said, "was the fascinating fusion of a visiting writers program and a weekly writers' workshop that served a total of 16 girls over the 2012-13 school year."

Silva went on to report that "there were visiting writers who spoke to the girls about topics such as: the life of a writer and how to pursue a career as a writer. There were visiting writers who led writing workshops, and talked to the girls about the various works that they have published.

"Many writers were generous enough to donate autographed copies of their published works to the writers' workshop," Silva said.

The writing program also produced Our Sisters' School's first published anthology of poetry and short stories, Silva wrote. It's called "Blue Skies Ahead." (Here's a sampling, a poem written by seventh-grader Meaghan Rose Grant.)

My Closet

My closet is filled with things I will never ever need  
Unused sleeping bags for non-existent sleepovers  
Over 300 books that have been read at least 7 times each  
An infinite amount of notebooks that are filled with unread, lonely poetry  
Poetry written by a girl with adjunctive peregrinity  
Fan letters to Morrissey that never get sent, because you need a British stamp  
And the other unimportant things I will never, ever need

The students in the writing program volunteered to participate and met every Wednesday from 4 to 5 p.m. The 18 visiting writers came from all over the East Coast, many of them traveling hours to get to Our Sisters' School, Silva said.

One of them, LaShonda K. Barnett, a novelist and visiting professor of African-American history and culture at Brown University, drove from New York City just days after Hurricane Sandy to put on a school wide assembly and lead a one-hour writing workshop for the students, Silva said.

The writers included Dr. Laurie Robertson-Lorant, Patricia (Pat) Gomes, Oona Patrick, Marybeth Rua-Larsen,

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Aaron Samuels, Anna Solomon, Dr. LaShonda K. Barnett, Dr. Everett Hoagland, Megan Fernandes, Dawn Lopes (AKA Nautical Dawn), Officer Charles Perry, Jr., Susan Grace, Dawn Blake Souza, Tem Blessed, Dr. James Borbrick, Tim Horvath, Dr. Paula Neves and Dr. Frank Sousa.

"It was amazing to see how eager so many writers were to participate and support this new after-school program," Silva wrote. "I was completely taken aback by the warmth, and unconditional love and support that I received from the writing community."

In fact, she said, several Luso-American visiting writers were so impressed with the program that they sponsored four girls to travel to the Student Day of Poetry of the Mass Poetry Festival in Salem.

Silva said she was inspired to create the program after attending the "Writing the Luso Experience Workshop" led by Portuguese-American writer Frank X. Gaspar at the CNC/Dzanc Books DISQUIET International Literary Program in Lisbon, Portugal in July 2012. There she networked with many Luso-American writers.

Knowing that she would be working at OSS, an all-girls school with a majority Portuguese/Cape Verdean student body in the fall of 2012, Silva said she was motivated to bring the two worlds together.

A driving force who worked with her was Oona Patrick, a Brooklyn-based, Portuguese-American writer and editor from Provincetown, and Luso-American liaison for the DISQUIET International Literary Program in Lisbon.

Patrick was the first writer to visit the workshop in September, and she was a huge supporter of the program from the very beginning, Silva said.

She said she also got major support from local writers, among them Robertson-Lorant, a college professor; Gomes, award-winning poet and president of Gallery X in New Bedford; and Everett Hoagland, emeritus English professor at UMass Dartmouth, published writer, and former poet laureate of New Bedford.

However, Silva stressed that "the entire writer community in New Bedford was extremely passionate and supportive of the program."

As Dawn Blake Souza, author of "In Search of Chestnuts" wrote, "I was so honored when asked to be a guest writer at Our Sisters' School Writers' Workshop last fall ... The comments and questions the young women asked me were serious and thoughtful and reflected their preparedness and interest in the subject matter.

"... When I left, I felt that I had been both inspiring and inspired by the experience, and I do hope that I will have an opportunity to participate in the Writers Workshop next year."

Silva said the program will definitely be back. Stay tuned.