

Young Poets

by Christopher Miller

The students were boisterous, dashing up the stairs after recess. In the yard, Jimmy had taken the ball for the whole class and run away with it. All of the class had chased him and jumped on top of him to get the ball. There had been a food fight in the lunchroom. They ran into the classroom and sat down, out of breath. The teacher told the class to put their heads down. Then, as the sounds of classical music drifted through the classroom the students remarked, "Aw man! Classical! What is this?"

The place was a 6th grade classroom in P.S. 16 in southside Williamsburg. The time was right after lunch. Teacher Jeffrey Pflaum recalls how hard it was to get the students in the mood for learning.

Getting In The Mood

"Coming in after lunch, the kids were restless, misbehaving...they did not want to resume work," said Pflaum, 47, a veteran teacher and photographer. He developed meditative exercises to calm down the students as well as himself. The idea is to introduce them to inner experience and to get them into the state that comes before writing poetry. Contemplation writing, he calls it. "I just put on some music and they put their heads down and relax for ten or fifteen minutes, listen to the music, and they write..." he said.

Pflaum has been teaching for 28 years. He first began post-lunch relaxation exercises in 1980. For the sixth graders in his class, it has meant getting in touch with their creative essence.



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Young poets find inspiration. Pictured from left to right are Juan Serrano, Ismael Torres, teacher Jeffrey Pflaum and Glennie Llano.

Why Poetry?

"Most teachers will not touch poetry with a ten foot pole," Pflaum said adding, "I didn't even like poetry at first." But, he said and many student poets agree, that it gets them in touch with themselves and others.

Other educators agree with Pflaum. "Anything that will motivate students to think carefully about their thoughts, feelings, and expressions is a good thing," said Jane Gardner, Director of Communication and Arts for the Board of Education. Poetry, fairy tales, short stories, and prose are effective for educating students about language and themselves, she said.

Pflaum feels that poetry makes the students better readers. He views the teaching process as an art. "Change the words into pictures," he says, encouraging them to use their imaginations.

Their Words Are Eloquent

Juan Serrano, 13, a former student of Pflaum's who is in the eighth grade, feels that the poetry has helped him immensely. "I have the highest reading average in the eighth grade," said Juan. His mother passed away when he was six years old. He is not as close to his father as he would like to be. He has had three of his closest friends shot to death. Juan feels that the poetry releases his pain and anger. "Sometimes I look at my poetry and say 'I wrote that!'" Juan said.

Death In Itself

As I feel pain
in my heart
I see the shadows
rising and falling off the wall
as life contracts
I sit silently
waiting for the
frigid hand of
death to knock
on my door

Juan Serrano (*Sow's Ear Press*)

"Poetry, I wasn't into it at first," was Glennie Llano's reaction. Glennie Llano, a 14-year-old young lady, related how it is when she writes. "When I see things and when they happen... When I write poems, I look up in the dictionary, the thesaurus, and I change the words around," she said.

Once Glennie started poetry writing with Pflaum, it did not seem like work. "I found it a privilege to learn how to express myself," she said.

Escape

Running, running.
Slamming the door behind.
Away, away,
from grief,
the sorrow,
the hate,
the embarrassment,
Away from everything,
locking the door
To hide,
To hide my shallow instincts,
but everything comes back,
Quicker,
faster,
I hear it knocking
at the locked door,
Harder, harder, and harder.
A quick flash of a black world.
A never ending world.
One that I can't escape.

Glennie Llano

Poetry has made Ismael Torres, 13, more open to understanding his own and other people's feelings, expressions and moods. "I can't really express my feelings in talking. I have to write my feelings down. I understand certain things better by the way they express it to you. Nobody takes me seriously. When I say something and it means nothing to no one else... but me," said Ismael.

The Rebel

Think beyond,
The borders of reality.
Look to him, yes him.
The Rebel of Truth
An Outcast to all.
See him weep,
See him sob.
This is the man of Truth.

Ismael Torres



"When I am bored I just take all my anger out and I just write it down," said poet Nicole Hernandez.

Nicole Hernandez, 12, in the seventh grade, from southside Williamsburg, shared her secret to writing poetry. "When I am bored I just take all my anger out and I just write it down."

Rays of Life

Rays hit my eyes
and I see the conflicts
of a haunted mind.

Nicole Hernandez

Many Students Are Getting Published

It was hard at first for Pflaum to work with the students' different personalities, ranging from cooperative to rebellious, and to overcome certain attitudes. Over time, he developed good working relationships with many of them. The poems attest to the success of the venture. Pflaum still keeps in touch with several of his students today.

These students lead complex lives. Some have experienced the loss of loved ones, family separations or identity problems. One of them has even contemplated suicide. Like other kids, they also enjoy sports and music. They want to be teachers, playwrights and other things when they grow up. Many of their experiences are hidden deep within them. It is not easy to convey these feelings to people. For Pflaum's students, the process of relaxing, reflecting and writing helped tap what was inside. "Before you can communicate with somebody else you have to communicate inside," said Pflaum.

Joy Street Books in Boston is going to publish an anthology of these students' poetry in 1994. Ismael has won an award in an essay contest in a Minority Literary Expo and Glennie's

poems have been published in various magazines and newspapers all over the country.

By supporting and encouraging his students' creativity through poetry, Pflaum has helped his students to handle subjects in school as well as life. With their works being published, the students and their experiences can be appreciated by many people. The words of Longfellow will ring true. "For next to being a great poet is the power of understanding one."