



# word of mouth

NEWS FROM PEOPLE &amp; STORIES / GENTE Y CUENTOS

"If there's a book that you want to read, but it hasn't been written yet, then you must write it."

—Toni Morrison, 1981  
speech to the Ohio  
Arts Council

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## California Prisons Embrace People & Stories DOC librarians join spring 2018 training session

Several weeks after a People & Stories session at a new re-entry facility in Watsonville, California, the men were still talking about "Stuff." The story, by JT LeRoy (a literary persona created by American writer Laura Albert), concerns a group of teenagers who are homeless, struggle with substance addictions and have pooled their money to get a hotel room for the night.

"The story talks about addiction, heroin use, abuse, selling your body—all this from the point of view of a teenager," says Jesse Silva, coordinator of that program and others in Santa Cruz-area jails. "The men said they'd been through a lot of what the character described."

That experience—at the year-old Rountree Rehabilitation and Re-Entry Facility—underscored the power of a program that first caught Silva's attention three years ago, when she was a chronically shy assistant librarian who helped coordinate People & Stories sessions in area prisons by taking attendance and notes.

When the librarian running those programs resigned, Silva stepped forward. By then, she'd taken part in a People & Stories train-the-trainer workshop in Princeton and had witnessed the program's impact in the main Santa Cruz county jail, a men's medium-security facility and a women's prison. Silva and the participants found their voices together. Her reading style, initially shaky, became more expressive and confident. "We help draw each other out a little bit," she says. "I've had a number of people, after class or in the moment, say, 'Wow, I can't believe I just said that.'"

In 2018, Silva gave a presentation about People & Stories at a California Library Association adult programming symposium. That caught the attention of Brandy Buenafe, library services administrator for the state's Department of Corrections. Buenafe supervises 172 librarians who work in the DOC's 35 adult institutions. She had seen, through a book club launched by a colleague in a high-security prison, how literature could be a conduit for deep, respectful conversation. "I thought People & Stories would be another way of doing that."

This spring, Buenafe, four DOC librarians and two others from the Santa Cruz public library system took part in a two-day training with P&S executive director Cheyenne Wolf. One of the DOC librarians launched a pilot series at High Desert State Prison, a high-security men's facility, and others are on board to expand the program.

"At first, there was some [institutional] skepticism that our population would respond well to some of the stories," Buenafe says. Staff feared that topics such as substance use and sexual violence "could be triggering for people. But the population is actually able to deal with those emotions. We learned in the training how to facilitate the conversation."

For Buenafe, People & Stories aligns with her ethics as a librarian—"that literature is not just for the elite, that it's accessible to everyone"—and the goal of helping prepare prison inmates for life outside those walls. "Today's inmate is tomorrow's neighbor," she says. "That population needs to learn...how to have a conversation where you disagree with someone, how to express yourself, how to handle something that brings up a strong emotion."

Silva thinks about the inmate who's been an enthusiastic participant for two-and-a-half years, and about the one who called his mother after each session to read the story aloud.

"One of the things that still surprises me is that, even though a lot of these people haven't been in a class setting, it comes so naturally. It's that tradition of sitting in a circle and sharing stories. I think it's in our nature."

*"It's that tradition of sitting in a circle and sharing stories. I think it's in our nature."*

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## From the Director...

### P&S/GyC programs foster authentic, intimate exchange



The power of words and our shared ownership of literature was in strong evidence in recent months in a variety of facilities throughout the tri-state area, thanks to People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos. I am pleased to report on some highlights:

- Our **NEA-funded program, "Reading Literature, Writing Our Stories,"** enabled visiting artists to share their own stories and encourage over 262 participants—including inmates, new immigrants, at-risk youth and women in recovery—to create their own narratives in New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. P&S coordinator and writer Anndee Hochman recalled a particularly powerful moment during her series at Interim House: "Connie Garcia-Barrio spoke frankly to the women about her own son's addiction and periods of homelessness, about how helpless and sometimes hopeless she feels, and they offered her advice, speaking from their perspectives as daughters, as mothers and as people who had struggled with addiction." At **Libertae**, another rehabilitation facility serving Philadelphia women, a participant expressed appreciation for the times "when everyone encouraged me to read what I wrote."
- A P&S/GyC program helped to create a supportive environment for **Latino immigrants** at the **New Americans Welcome Center on Staten Island**. "I realized that I can express myself in public," said one; another reported that they "felt more alive expressing how I feel." Visiting artists benefitted, too; author Claudio Mir said that his GyC visits "motivate [him] to continue working and to teach others to continue or start to tell their own stories."

- Young adults** at **New Jersey Youth Corps of Trenton (NJYC)** cultivated deeper connections by reflecting on their own and others' circumstances. One participant, who typically did not speak much, disclosed that he was living in a hotel with his mom as she earned her GED. Students expressed their appreciation for the opportunity "to learn about my classmates' feelings" and encouragement "to get out of my shell."

- Conversations generated by story sessions at the **Bo Robinson Assessment and Treatment Center** also eased relationships among residents at this Trenton-based facility. "[I appreciated] connecting with people I see every day but usually don't talk to," noted one participant. Another reported that "I was having issues with one of the inmates outside this group and sharing and discussing stories brought us a lot closer as friends and we squashed our differences."

- Teenagers** found themselves speaking up—often for the first time—at **Manos House** in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Although several participants "were determined not to share," according to coordinator Scott Feifer, "it seemed each one who read offered a kind of permission for others to step up and trust the group."

As P&S/GyC founder Sarah Hirschman wisely observed, "The usual simplistic categories which too often are used to pigeonhole people by their nationality, religion, gender, and social status are exploded as participants exchange more intimate, more specifically individual opinions and preferences." This message is truer now than ever before.

# Reading Body Language, Texts in a Puerto Rico Prison

## Second Gente y Cuentos series inspires inmates

by Alma Concepción

At the end of a recent Gente y Cuentos session at a maximum-security prison in Guayama, Puerto Rico, the librarian offered participants her congratulations. “She had never seen the prisoners so invested in a reading,” recalled facilitator Sylvia Casillas.

In this second GyC series at Correctional Institution Guayama 1000, a 300-bed prison for adult offenders, participants found a new meaning in words. Some were so moved by the stories—tales by Horacio Quiroga, Isabel Allende and others—that they asked if the Ana G. Méndez University in Gurabo, whose School of Arts and Education sponsored this year’s program, could create an online course for them. They even wrote to legislators seeking support.

Here are excerpts from Casillas’s reflections:

The word *selva* (jungle) in Horacio Quiroga’s story, “Juan Darién,” evoked other words such as “wild, danger, nature, violence.” For one [participant], though, it meant “sanctuary.” One of the major issues in the story is vengeance. Most expressed their rejection of violence. One shared that he was in prison because of a vengeful act. Others were in favor. They said that if the [character] in the story hadn’t put an end to abuse, it would have continued, and added, “the many achievements of marginalized communities would not have been possible if those communities had not fought back against their oppressors.” Participants compared the story’s central theme of difference to how society marginalizes ex-convicts. “Stereotyping makes it impossible to find work, housing or the possibility of inserting you back into society,” they said.

“Dos palabras” (“Two Words”), by Isabel Allende, ignited an emotional dialogue about the different instances in

their lives when words had had an impact. One participant remembered when he met one of his daughters after eighteen years of absence: “She said she wanted to meet the person who had given her her last name, but whom it was not possible to name “papá.”

Another shared how he had been able to find his daughter through Facebook and learned that he [would soon] become a grandfather of twins. Someone burst into tears while recalling he had been a “problematic” son, and how much he regretted not being able to tell his father how he felt because he had died. Finally, another participant expressed how grateful he was that some in the group shared such intimate experiences about the importance of words in their lives. He said no one would mock them, but rather [would] respect how they felt. Words may confuse, hurt, and provoke violence, or they may support and create ties of solidarity. But above all, they said, they must be authentic.

“La conciencia,” by Ana María Matute, is about truth, lies and secrets. Participants observed that Mariana’s guilty conscience and her fear of being discovered by her husband is key. But her fear, they observed, can be interpreted by the way she squeezes her hands or the fringes of her shawl. Participants shared how, in prison, they have attained a deeper knowledge of corporal language. They said they know the intentions of someone who approaches them by the way they look at them, the way they walk or how they move their hands. Their survival depended on being able to read corporal codes.

The first series at the prison, in 2018, was sponsored by the Fundación Puertorriqueña de las Humanidades. Both times, participants were inspired by our literature program and we were inspired by them, their intelligence and creativity.



## Talking with...new members of the P&S/GYC board

### Barbara Flythe: Using Words to Bridge Worlds



About six years ago, Barbara Flythe took part in a People & Stories Crossing Borders series with women at Bo Robinson Education and Training Center. What she remembers most is how the participants looked at the start of the series: not angry, but expectant, intense.

“As we discussed the stories, I liked how much they were connecting,” she says. “I watched them bond. By the fourth meeting, they were coming in and talking to each other.”

As a retired educator—Flythe taught 7th- and 8th-graders in North Philadelphia before becoming a school social worker and guidance counselor—she was fascinated by the group dynamics: what were People & Stories participants learning, and how?

What appealed to her about the program was “the connecting of marginalized communities with stories and literature...people understanding the importance and the joy of reading. How you read and have an ‘aha’ moment.”

As the only African-American member of the board—and the child of parents who discussed education, union organizing and civil rights at the dinner table—Flythe hopes to help the organization sharpen its lens on racial justice while making its work more widely known.

Her own sense of justice and responsibility was honed early. Flythe’s mother—“a church lady who wore big hats”—routinely handed nickels to disabled World War I veterans who were begging on street corners. “One day, at seven or eight, I asked her, ‘Why are we doing this?’ She said, ‘It’s not your job to judge that; it’s

“People & Stories isn’t clothing anybody or feeding anybody...[it] is the only organization that deals with the mind.”

your job to just keep giving.’ I’ve always had a sense of caring for the other.

“There are community organizations that serve communities of color,” Flythe says. “Most are providing a service—re-entry, youth advocacy. People & Stories isn’t clothing anybody or feeding anybody. People & Stories is the only organization that deals with the mind.”

As someone who sits comfortably in multiple worlds—from comfortable Lawrenceville living rooms to struggling urban neighborhoods—Flythe would like to see People & Stories bridge those two geographies, those disparate cultures. “I want people in Trenton, for example, to understand that somewhere there’s a group of people who care about what they read.”

### Charlotte Friedman: Believing Every Patient Is a Story

In Charlotte Friedman’s narrative medicine classes at Columbia University, pre-med undergraduates read classic and contemporary writers—from Tolstoy to Alice Munro—and write about the texts as well as their own lives, thoughts and questions.

“The idea is that if you can understand that a patient is more than a body, that the patient is a story, and that you as a clinician are part of that story, it will lead to better care,” she says.

When Friedman moved to Princeton four years ago and learned about People & Stories, the organization felt like a perfect fit for her interests. She’d taught narrative medicine not only in university settings, but at senior centers and shelters, with populations of teenagers and caregivers.

“I really believe that story is how we make meaning of our lives,” she says. “And reading in a



group builds community. It helps people to articulate their own stories. It develops that capacity to be present....that's one of the things I believe is going to hold our society together, if we learn to listen to each other, to pay attention closely, to train our empathic imaginations."

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Friedman also values People & Stories' emphasis on inclusion—programs that reach seniors, those who are homeless and people in prison. "I think it can be very empowering; to develop that self-knowledge in the company of others is quite powerful." She would love to see People & Stories programming reach into health care settings, where patients, caregivers and staff often feel isolated.

As a child, Friedman read so much that her mother sometimes said, "You can't sit there on the couch all the time." As a writer, a mother and a widow—Friedman's husband passed away 12 years ago, when their son was six—she understands acutely the power of stories to help navigate difficult experiences.

"Story was what held me together, that ability story has to piece together a past and a present and a future that aren't what you imagined. We certainly shape the stories we tell, but we're also shaped by them."

## Andrea Honoré: Working Where Art Meets Health



For years, Andrea Honoré's passion found its home at the intersection of arts and health, a broad arena that spans from artist residencies in hospitals and book groups for caregivers to healthcare-based arts & crafts collectives in South Africa.

To Honoré, the dovetailing

of health and arts makes intuitive sense. "It's a benign, no-side-effects way of bringing people with creative gifts together with medical students, with patients, with family members...I hope there's a time when it takes a bigger role in people thinking about health care, how to bring in a more human element to the care."

When Honoré first learned of People & Stories, it reminded her of "literature in medicine" programs—facilitated book groups in hospitals that involve staff at all levels, from receptionists to internists, reading and discussing a book together in forums where "there are no wrong answers...One of the unexpected take-aways is that it increased job satisfaction and broke down some of the hierarchy in the hospital.

"That has similarities to People & Stories. Everyone in the story circle—their opinion has as much value as the next person's. Everyone's together, sharing what they bring to understanding a work of literature."

As a child, Honoré read voraciously; she and her cousin competed during the summer to read 100 books. Since 2013, she's been part of a book group that alternates between classics and contemporary literature.

After a stint at Johnson & Johnson, Honoré worked at the Arts Council of Princeton; she managed a training program in partnership with the National Center for Creative Aging to help New

Jersey artists work more effectively with seniors. She also worked at the McCarter Theatre Center and as a non-profit fundraising consultant.

Honoré believes People & Stories is good for participants' health—spiritually, physically, mentally. She'd love to see the organization grow more explicitly into that realm, extending programs to caregivers, people living with illness and aging populations.

"People in transition seem to benefit most from this program," she says, "and those are all transitions."

"Everyone in the story circle—their opinion has as much value as the next person's. Everyone's together..."

# Evergreen Forum students feel “the power of words”

## Older adults respond creatively to P&S story series

The idea is “learning for its own sake.” Since 2001, the Evergreen Forum, a program of the Princeton Senior Resource Center, has offered daytime study and discussion programs to older adults—everything from the Civil War to cosmology to klezmer music—taught by volunteers from the community. The emphasis is on group participation.

Last spring, P&S board president Ellen Gilbert led a dozen Evergreen Forum participants in “People & Stories: The Power of Words,” a series that yielded robust discussion and creative responses to stories by Tillie Olsen, Tim O’Brien and Isabel Allende. “Susan Nunes’ ‘A Moving Day’ seemed to have particular resonance for an older group of people familiar with the vicissitudes of downsizing and the intergenerational dynamics that often go with it,” Gilbert said.

Here are selections from group members’ final reflections:

How cleverly one is hooked and reeled in. What happens next could be compelling, intriguing, surprising, mysterious, enigmatic, ironic, satiric, sardonic, romantic, or perhaps even nauseating or upsetting.

The reading could be a seemingly calm journey of discovery but then comes to a tumultuous conclusion. Sometimes the story is just an unfolding of events that produce a life-changing epiphany, a personal crisis or even a new identity.

I loved examining how the stories develop, the characters are revealed, the precision of the language employed and the careful use of literary devices. Most importantly, I so appreciated the insightful comments of our leader and classmates, who provided me with multiple possibilities of meaning.

*Joan Kuskin*

Excerpts from “A Re-Imagining of ‘I Stand Here Ironing,’” by Tillie Olsen

*We met 19-year-old Emily as her mother stood ironing. We learned that as a young child, Emily’s stepfather had served in the war. Imagine if, years later, he had told her about the things he had carried as a young soldier. Imagine if, years later, Emily had helped her mom pack on moving day...*

The old woman sat looking out into the pre-dawn light. The house was quiet. In the inexorable flow of the seasons of life, her kids had grown. She stared out into the uncertain light which was not quite night and not quite day...Emily remembered when she had been 19 years old. It too was a time of not quite night and not quite day, when her dark memories of abandonment were intertwined with the sunlight of her mother’s love...

Savoring these feelings, her memories took her back to the day she had helped her old mother pack...Emily recalled having been puzzled when her mother had discarded that cherished little boat—the one that was to have carried her mother’s Japanese culture forward to the next generation...

Emily also recalled sitting with her father late one night. She remembered the depth of his emotion as he spoke of his early days as a soldier....At first, he had carried things that would anchor him to his civilian past, but as he walked ahead on the jungle path that led into his soldiering future, these things had become burdensome and he needed to let them go.

Emily was at peace as she sat with her memories. At peace—as the growing light of day dispelled the shadows of the night. She felt grateful for her mother’s courage in discarding the boat on her moving day. She felt grateful for her father’s courage in choosing to drop the things he had carried.

*Rick van den Heuvel*

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# Manos House residents dig deep into selves

## Poetry and soul-searching from young men in recovery

by Scott Feifer

On any given Tuesday at Manos House Drug and Alcohol Rehabilitation Services in Lancaster, you might hear Nysir worry that his mom will abandon him because he can't leave the streets alone. Quamyr may declare that he will be a better father to his child than his dad was to him, while Darion scrawls onto the page that he feels as if he is falling from one of the towers and just keeps falling and falling.

These are just a few voices among the chorus connecting to the story of the evening. For more than 15 years I have shared a weekly program at this long-term residential treatment program for young men. The participants are among my most valued teachers. I am grateful for their courage, trust, and truth.

Recently, I was delighted to be part of two National Endowment for the Arts-funded series. Each week included a writing component, and each series welcomed several visits by writer and teacher Marci Nelligan, author of the poetry collections *Infinite Variations* and *The Ghost Manada*. With each poem Marci offered for consideration, I felt as though I were watching a person hold something precious in her hands and invite you to come close: to observe it, touch it, make sense of it and then make some part of it your own.

Among her offerings was Tupac Shakur's poem "I Cry." We talked about when and why we cry or why we don't. It was poignant to hear the young men talk about how they were taught not to cry, to toughen up, to "man up." Many pieces began with the prompt, "If I cried, I would cry about..." which seemed to give their authors permission to voice deep-seated and often muted pain.

On a subsequent visit, Marci shared essays from *The Book of Delights* by Ross Gay. These offered a chance to consider the wonders of the natural world around and within us—magnifying, exploring and celebrating things that often go unnoticed or unappreciated. Participants were encouraged to pick items in the room for inspiration; they wrote about the clock, the pool table, the window crank, the exit sign. Our poems offered meditations on faith, freedom, our choices and changes, our families.

Marci led us inside Marie Howe's "What I Did Wrong" to catalogue the speaker's list of wrongs, which inspired confessional pieces about our own wrongs: how we felt about our errors then, how we feel about them now. Participants challenged themselves to delve into the powerful emotions of anger, fear, and regret.

Each week at Manos House, the writing becomes a kind of moral inventory. For those who step into the vulnerable place of responding to the prompts and perhaps even reading their work aloud, I hope it becomes an act of liberation: to put voice to experience, to reach for greater influence over our lives, to take a step closer to claiming ownership of our life stories.

"Our poems offered meditations on faith, freedom, our choices and changes, our families."

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## On the bookshelf...

*Maggie Brown & Others*  
by Peter Orner  
Little, Brown, 2019

by Connie Hassett

Peter Orner's *Maggie Brown & Others* is a rave-reviewed collection of ultra-short stories, featuring plain-speaking, colloquially funny, often poignantly somber people who yearn to connect with one another, with themselves, and with recalcitrant ordinary language. Orner's tales have a succinctness and clarity well suited to a People & Stories roster. Characters recur, but the stories can stand alone.

In "Return," a midwestern woman receives phone calls from a long-estranged brother who "took off" as a teenager and "vanished into New York City." Janice wonders, as they talk, "how to stuff all the years into a few words."

In "Solly," a teenage sports stringer tells of publishing a story under his own name in the *Chicago Sun-Times*. Thrilled at being summoned

post-publication to the boss's office, he is crushed when the editor says he doesn't have any talent. Boyish mortification is vividly recalled, down to the unexpectedly funny last line.

Described by the police who came to help her as a "5150"—a mentally disturbed person—the woman in "Evergreen Garden, San Francisco 2012" is currently sitting in a Vietnamese restaurant, assessing her mental panic: "the thing about being delusional...was that even while it was going on, she could always see past it."

"Gus's Highland Spa" is not a spa but a classic diner (think Hemingway), where a pair of good buddies, Walt and Alf, wise-crack about Walt's recent heart attack. The cranky and loyal Alf asks himself: "How often do you look straight at a friend's face? All these years? You ever notice the changes? A friend's face never changes until one day you look straight at it and you find it's aged."

The next story, "His Mother," is Walt's own meditation, a stream-of-consciousness struggle to conjure memories of his mother: "She had, didn't she, a narrow face?" Even the parents who raise us are strangers, and so are we. This story alone is worth the price of the book.