

word of mouth

NEWS FROM PEOPLE & STORIES / GENTE Y CUENTOS

"Literature is where I go to explore the highest and lowest places in human society and in the human spirit, where I hope to find not absolute truth but the truth of the tale, of the imagination and of the heart."

—Salman Rushdie

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Gente y Cuentos at Princeton Library 25 years of stories and sustenance

People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos board president Ellen Gilbert doesn't speak Spanish. But at an October gathering to celebrate the 25th anniversary of Gente y Cuentos at the Princeton Public Library, she could tell that each participant who said "Buenas noches" to the crowd spoke in a slightly different accent.

"There were so many countries and cultures represented there," Gilbert said. "The longevity of the group is amazing. They're living proof of the power of People & Stories."

Twenty-five years ago, coordinator Angélica Mariani wasn't so sure. She'd left the corporate world in Manhattan to "reactivate" herself with a new career; she took literature classes at Princeton and taught writing to Spanish-speakers in Trenton.

"I heard of [People & Stories founder] Sarah Hirschman through a friend. We used to spend hours discussing the cuentos." But it wasn't easy to persuade Trenton residents, some of them new immigrants, to come to the library for weekly story discussions.

"I used to go to the barrios where they lived and talk to them," Mariani recalls. Some people were juggling two jobs; others had to care for family members. "Some needed transportation. I would go from house to house and pick them up. Some brought their little children."

Slowly, the group grew: people from Mexico, Guatemala, Cuba, Puerto Rico, Peru, Argentina, Chile, the Dominican Republic. They read stories by Gabriel García Márquez, Jose Martí and Angeles Mastretta. Today, there are more than 20 participants; they call the group "La familia de Gente y Cuentos."

Marita Martinez has been there since the start. "When we read the stories, everybody noticed things that reminded them of experiences that happened in their lives," she said. She recalled a 1919 story by Lastenia Larriva de Llona that described a 60-year-old woman as ancient. "Now, when you are 60, you think, 'What are they talking about?'" Martinez laughed.

A Mastretta story, "La tía Daniela," became a lifeline during a difficult period in Martinez's life, when she despaired the end of a long-term relationship. "Reading that and seeing how how this person went through a similar thing ... that was helping me," she said.

Hugo Arrué, a Guatemalan-born architect and writer who joined Gente y Cuentos eight years ago, asked Mariani if the group could occasionally read one of his short stories; he was gratified to hear various interpretations of his work. "I learned that it's not until you share with others that whatever you do starts to grow," he said.

In the group—the longest-lasting People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos group led by the same coordinator—participants found enduring bonds amid differences of age, class and nationality. "We had philanthropists next to house-cleaners," Mariani said. One member helped another to pay for her daughter's college tuition; others brought meals when a family member was ill.

"I love, love, love what I do," Mariani said. "I learn so much from them. We are united by the love of literature and the bond of friendship." ♦

"When we read the stories, everybody noticed things that reminded them of experiences that happened in their lives."



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From the Director ...



Finding Liberty In Literature

If someone had told me five years ago that I'd be employed by a literature-based non-profit—or that it would teach me more than my traditional education ever had—I would have scoffed. I was taught that “reading” and “learning” happened between the pages of a textbook, and that if you wanted to continue learning, you had to stay in school.

People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos transformed many of my own beliefs, behaviors and biases. The words “I never knew I loved to read. I never knew that reading other people’s stories could help me realize who I was,” were spoken by an inmate participant, and his journey into literature as a means of self-discovery is not unlike my own. I, too, have discovered a love of reading and a firm belief that literary fiction can build empathy, strengthen awareness, and nourish a hunger to learn.

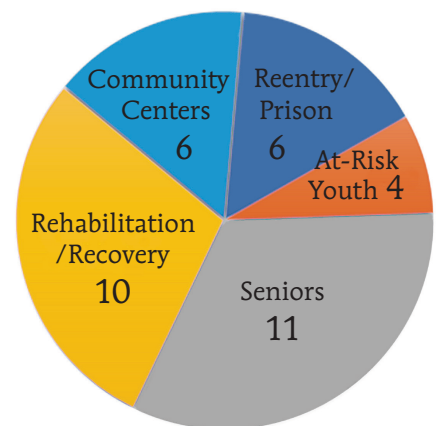
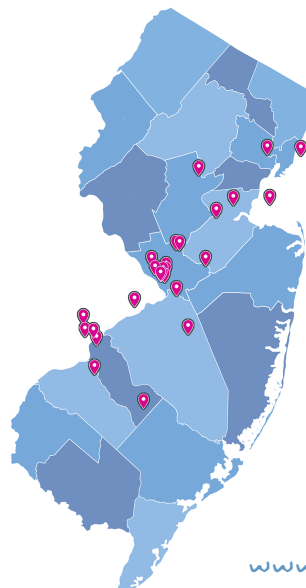
Sadly, people in prison are often starved of this kind of sustenance. There are extensive barriers to getting books into prisons—restrictions regarding content (no sex or violence), quality (only new books) or quantity (no more than two books at a time). For those who can’t read, the barriers are even greater. Studies estimate that illiteracy rates among U.S. inmates are between 60-75%. That means more than 1.5 million people are sitting in jail cells without access to the most powerful transformative tool we have: literature.

California has taken the lead by embracing education as a crucial part of rehabilitation; still, only an estimated six percent of California’s inmates are enrolled in academic classes. People & Stories programs have proven effective and popular even with inmates who resist academic programs; there have been waiting lists at all three California prisons we’ve served.

This March, five additional prison librarians completed our training and will reach underserved institutions throughout the state. Brandy Buenafe, Department of Corrections’ Library Services Administrator, shares her hopes for our partnership: “Not only will this program increase literacy in participants, it will also assist in their preparation for returning to the community by allowing them to practice pro-social behaviors, such as respectful disagreement, empathy, and critical thinking.” Buenafe envisions bringing People & Stories to all DOC institutions, serving 135,000 inmates, within the next three years.

I can’t help but feel immense gratitude for the ways People & Stories has influenced me personally and profound excitement for all those who will discover increased liberty through literature in the years to come. We extend our gratitude to all our friends and supporters for making our work in 2018 possible.

2018 Impact Report	
Participants Served	841
Programs	52
English	44
Spanish	8
Stories Presented	416
Writing Workshops	12
Coordinators	29
Coordinator Trainings	3



For a complete list of our program partners, visit www.peopleandstories.org/audiences

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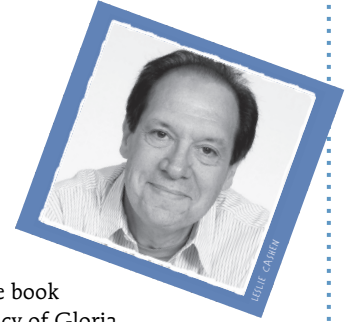
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Stories That Bridge Separateness: P&S 2019 Benefit



“What do you hope the audience will take with them when they leave the theater after one of your plays?”



That was the first question in a dialogue between playwrights Emily Mann and Ken Ludwig at the spring People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos benefit.

Mann, longtime artistic director of Princeton’s McCarter Theatre Center, has also written, directed and adapted plays including *Having Our Say*, adapted from the book by Sarah L. Delany and A. Elizabeth Delany. Her play, *Gloria: A Life*, about the activism and legacy of Gloria Steinem, recently finished an off-Broadway run. Mann will retire in 2020 from the McCarter, where she’s become known for championing the voices of women and people of color in the theater.

Tony Award-winning playwright Ludwig’s best-known works include *Crazy for You* and *Lend Me a Tenor*; his plays have been performed in more than 30 countries and more than 20 languages. Ludwig’s newest play, *The Gods of Comedy*, just ended a limited engagement at the McCarter.

Here’s how they answered that opening question. Mann said she hoped audiences would feel “that they’ve had an experience, one that will make them weep, think, talk to their children, their partner ... one that lives in their memory.” Ludwig added, “That they come out and say, ‘I’m part of a shared community.’”

Those sentiments capture the experience readers from all walks of life—whether they are men in prison or teenagers in a GED program, older adults in a day program or women in recovery—have during People & Stories, says Executive Director Cheyenne Wolf. “When we experience art together—whether that be in the theatre or gathered around a table to listen to a story—we discover a bond that breaks through our illusions of separateness. Emily and Ken wholeheartedly shared their stories with us, and by doing so, allowed us all to connect more deeply with one another.”

The event, which included a silent auction of items ranging from a weekend getaway in Maine to a hand-crafted chess set, drew an audience of more than 100 people and raised nearly \$30,000 for P&S/GyC programming. ♦

PEOPLE & STORIES

GENTE Y CUENTOS

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