



Remembering Sarah Hirschman, “large in heart”

by Patricia Andres

“She was a large woman with a large purse that had everything in it but a hammer and nails.” So opens Langston Hughes’s “Thank you, M’am,” one of the first stories Sarah Hirschman added to the People & Stories bibliography in English.

In stature, no, but in every other way, Sarah was a large woman: large in vision; large in imagination; large in courage; large in determination; large in heart.

Hughes’s story goes on to reverse expectations: the woman, whose purse a young man has just attempted to steal, takes the teenager home, offers him a meal and gives him the money he tried to take.

Sarah reversed everyone’s expectations when, in 1972, at a housing project near Cambridge, Massachusetts, she approached a group of Puerto Rican women with little formal education: Would they like to discuss works by Gabriel García Márquez; Juan Rulfo, Jorge Luis Borges?

Sarah’s academic friends and colleagues said it was a crazy idea. But Sarah had trust in the innate intelligence of people regardless of their formal education. She believed in the power of enduring fiction to, in her words, “allow imagination to fly, give the readers permission to enter new worlds, some related to our lives, others totally different but always interesting, curious, to make us wonder and to give us the courage to explore vaster, new territories.”

In Hughes’s story, the large woman says to the young man, “You put yourself in contact with me and if you think that contact’s not going to last awhile you’ve got another thought coming.” Contact with Sarah was genuine, totally present, lasting.

A core aspect of People & Stories/Gente

y Cuentos is genuine dialogue. Not a ping-pong-like back-and-forth; not a process of ratifying and solidifying the opinions and stereotypes you came in with. But talk that moves you. Talk that changes you.

One of Sarah’s favorite stories was about a moment in Marquez’s “Tuesday Siesta,” when a mother whose family has been supported by her son’s boxing says, “Every mouthful I ate those days tasted of blood.” There are no canned speeches people can bring to that remark, no stock responses.

Sarah loved one of the mantras that comes up in our prison programs when people are honestly probing their own responses to the story, connecting deeply with one another: “Keep it real, keep it real, keep it real.” When she heard this, her eyes would sparkle.

Keep it real comes to mind when I think about one of our last conversations. I asked Sarah how she was doing after her surgery.

“Is there anything new and interesting happening?” she wanted to know.

I read her some testimonials I had recently gathered from People & Stories participants at the Trenton Rescue Mission: “[Reading this way] made me want to pay more attention to the details of the moment.”

“Now that’s interesting,” she said. “Much more interesting than talking about my surgery.”

Hughes’s story concludes, “He wanted to say something other than, ‘Thank you, M’am’.... but he couldn’t even say that as he turned at the foot of the barren stoop and looked up at the large woman in the door. Then she shut the door.”

The young man is moved beyond words, as we all have been by Sarah Hirschman’s extraordinary life and work.

As we move forward to take her vision to those in prisons, re-entry programs, homeless shelters, halfway houses, low-income housing facilities, senior centers, alternative schools, libraries and detention centers, we will continue for a very long time to say, “Thank you, M’am.”

People & Stories/ Gente y Cuentos creator was passionate, vital, inspiring

by Anndee Hochman

Russian was her first language. Then she added French, English and eventually Spanish—learned from reading *Don Quixote*—to her repertoire. She studied with Russian tutors as a girl and with Simone de Beauvoir as a young woman.

For Sarah Hirschman, creator of *People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos*, literature was the enduring bridge between past and present, between homeland and adopted country, between disparate lives.

The program, begun in 1972 with a single story, “Siesta del Martes,” (“Tuesday Siesta”), became “her creation, her life project,” her daughter, Katia Salomon, said at a memorial service January 21. It was a program built on Hirschman’s “conviction that everyone, even those who had not had access to literature before, could find their own voice in it.”

Hirschman was born in Lithuania to Russian Jewish parents; as an adult, she murmured Russian poetry aloud to herself in bed and would reread classics such as Dostoevsky’s *The Possessed* “to keep my language afloat,” she said in 2008.

Her family emigrated first to France, then to the United States; later, married and with children of her own, she moved to Bogotá, Colombia. She became fascinated with Latin America and later studied with Brazilian scholar Paolo Freire, whose theories about education and empowerment informed *Gente y Cuentos*.

“The basic idea I got from Freire,” she said once, “is that while people may have nothing to draw on in an academic sense, they have lots to draw on because of their very rich, very complex life experience.”

In *Gente y Cuentos*, Hirschman believed, coordinators could examine a story’s poetics, shadows, contrasts and echoes, then ask questions that would spark imaginative, unrehearsed responses from participants. The resulting dialogue, she said, could challenge people’s assumptions, build their confidence as readers and speakers, and change their lives.

Today, the program reaches more than 1,400 people a year in shelters, GED classes, drug-recovery programs, senior centers, prisons and libraries.

Hirschman’s book, *People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos: Who Owns Literature?* (iUniversity) was published in 2009; she was thrilled, a few weeks before her death, to see it translated into Spanish.

In May 2008, Hirschman’s vision and dedication were honored when she received the Bud Vivian Award for Community Service from the Princeton Area Community Foundation. Her nominators described her as a “citizen of the world who...has found ways to bring people together in discussions driven by complex stories that don’t offer easy answers.”

At the memorial service, family members, colleagues and friends described Hirschman as perceptive, exacting, unsentimental, elegant, opinionated, passionate, tender, keenly intelligent and fiercely devoted to family. Her daughter, Katia, recalled daily e-mails that—in typical Hirschman fashion—might mention both a new American bleu cheese and a poem by Anna Akhmatova; a grandson recalled meeting his grandmother in New York for frequent museum outings and lunch. A longtime colleague recalled the pleasure Hirschman took in art, literature, poetry and music.

And all of them vowed that the dialogue begun 40 years earlier, the pathbreaking conversation that grew into *People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos*, would continue. “A fabulous literary text has so many secrets within it,” Hirschman said once, “all you have to do is to find a way where you bring people to have a look at it and see what happens.”

"Madame, all stories, if continued far enough, end in death, and he is no true-story teller who would keep that from you."

--Ernest Hemingway

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Coordinators & board member recall a mentor, friend, visionary

“I remember her enthusiasm, a sparkle in her eyes in talking about the program...[She had] that sort of commitment to the coordinator rolling up her sleeves and getting her hands dirty in the story...she didn’t want anything to ever be mechanical.

“She also felt that any story has so many openings, so many doorways to discussion and to beautiful language and strong human experiences, that any story—if it’s a really great story—can be used in any group.

“Sarah encouraged me to use stories that are difficult. She’d inspire me to go out on a limb and do something that was a little less safe...But I always felt that she was behind me, saying, ‘Go ahead, Marcy, do it.’ She has been a mentor in the program, pushing us to keep the quality and to keep challenging ourselves.”

Marcy Schwartz, coordinator

“Alma, Sarah and I were a team, sharing stories and preparing study guides for the *cuadernos* (notebooks). This was where we got to know each other through the story itself. It echoed everything we do with the participants.

“I used to go up and knock on her door. I had studied Russian in college, so I would give her a greeting in Russian. She would correct my pronunciation, but in a very gentle way.

“Sarah was very sensitive to the poetics in the story...and the ambiguities. It honed my ability, as a coordinator, not to anticipate or have a fixed notion of what the story was about, but to let it develop on its own with the participants, in a community of expression. I learned to have that “aha” moment.”

Lawrence McCarty, coordinator

“Sarah had a magnetic, shiny presence that captivated you immediately. She was just such a...curious and generous person

in the sense that she wanted to pour her interest in people and to know as much as possible from them.

“She took so much delight in going over these stories with us. The most important thing that she always reminded us about was to really look for the spark in the story that would connect with people’s experiences and with their memories and their inner knowledge.

“It was so much about listening to the others [and learning] how many possible readers there are who are not constricted to the academic world or to people with a formal education.”

Alma Concepción, coordinator

“Sarah just walked into the library and began to talk to me about *Gente y Cuentos*. She really wanted to get it going in Newark. I was instantly very interested.

Sarah [had an] enthusiasm and energy and absolute conviction and love for the program; you wanted to be part of that.

“I knew Sarah in the context of *Gente y Cuentos*. I knew how intellectual she was, how interested in everything, and her love for Latin America, and her commitment to the program.

“I’ll remember her total conviction that literature could change people’s lives. That sounds so phony. But [*Gente y Cuentos*] changed people; it had an impact in their lives, on how they saw themselves.”

Ingrid Betancourt, coordinator

“When I first came on the board, it was very much Sarah’s program. At that point, she was interested in trying to create a structure for the program beyond herself, with a concern that the program would live beyond her.

“Her understanding of the program was so much deeper than any of us on the board. She was never afraid to state her point of view, but she was also able to let the board develop and become more involved in management of the program.

“She was very focused on who our audience really was. She really wanted it to be people who hadn’t had the opportunity to be involved with literature...people who weren’t used to being heard. Sarah’s voice has been the bellwether, the true voice: this is what we’re really about.”

Georgia Whidden, board president

“People create stories create people; or rather stories create people create stories.”

--Chinua Achebe

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People & Stories/ Gente y Cuentos grew, with new readers across the U.S.

by Patricia Andres

Nearly 1,500 people had a close encounter with literature this year, thanks to People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos. In the midst of a still-unsteady economy, the organization remained robust, with a total of 49 programs in 25 different locations.

Our local and regional programs included Latino groups; men and women in transition from prison back to their communities; seniors; at-risk youth; residents of youth detention centers; adults with disabilities; and adults in transition from homelessness.

“Crossing Borders with Literature” continues to grow, bringing suburban readers together with clients at our urban locations. All participants in these programs consistently describe the deeply satisfying experience of reading and discussing literature in a diverse group, people with whom they ostensibly have little in common. Devoted suburban participants often recruit friends to join them, and we are pleased to see the number of Crossing Borders participants growing.

Another exciting area of growth is “Story Talk,” our national project for youth funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities. We served 513 youth in 29 different Story Talk programs around the country, in locations including juvenile detention centers, alternative high schools, psychiatric hospitals and after-school programs. Librarians nationwide have been enthusiastic about this project, and we’ve added fifteen new stories to our bibliography, each with accompanying study guides and podcasts.

The NEH grant also led to a new training workshop, “Train-the-Trainer,” in which we coach librarians on the People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos method so they can train others in their respective library systems, expanding the scope of our library outreach.

The numbers tell only one part of the

story; the heart of People & Stories is revealed in participants’ comments:

“In a People & Stories session, we are physically here [in prison] but mentally elsewhere...smelling the scent of a memory, feeling a touch, seeing the scene described by the author.”

“The connection to the stories helps me to feel so much less alone in the universe.”

“I learned to really pay attention to the specifically chosen words in short stories because short stories are compact—the words are chosen very carefully.”

“People & Stories has greatly increased my appreciation of, and respect for, the literature of authors of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds.”

“[In this program] you learn to truly listen to and respect the opinions of others, which is the essential basis for effective communication, and ultimately peaceful coexistence.”

At the end of 2011, we began a partnership with Dr. Anne M. Hewitt, faculty member at Seton Hall University and director of the Seton Center for Community Health, who will help us launch a multi-pronged evaluation strategy for our programs.

Lastly, as we begin 2012, we celebrate the extraordinary life of Sarah Hirschman, founder of People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos, who died January 15. We will celebrate the 40th anniversary of Sarah’s conception of People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos and her vision of bringing the enjoyment of literature to new readers.

People & Stories, at a glance, in 2011:

- 39 programs in New Jersey; 4 in New York; 6 in Pennsylvania
- 38 programs in English; 9 in Spanish; 2 bilingual format
- 11 Latino/a groups; 13 re-entry from prison groups; 11 groups of seniors; 6 of at-risk youth; 3 of youth in detention centers; 1 of adults with disabilities; 1 of people transitioning from homelessness
- 18 Crossing Borders programs
- 29 Story Talk programs

“All stories interest me, and some haunt me until I end up writing them. Certain themes keep coming up: justice, loyalty, violence, death, political and social issues, freedom.”

--Isabel Allende

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Alma Concepción
Deborah Salmon

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Katia Salomon

It would be impossible for People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos to accomplish our work and to grow as an organization without your support. In this regard, we want to acknowledge all the friends and donors who help keep People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos vibrant, so that we can continue to affect readers' lives... one story at a time.

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“If history were taught in the form of stories, it would never be forgotten.”

--Rudyard Kipling

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Stories pry open doors to seeing past stereotypes

by Amdee Hochman

We don't wear nametags. And though someone inevitably mentions "not judging a book by its cover," we're culpable of doing just that. I'm guilty of it, myself. I extrapolate from small signs—that delicate cross nestled in one woman's collar, the gruffness in an older man's voice—to guess how People & Stories participants will react to the texts I bring.

Here's what really happens: As we peel away layers of the story, trying on different interpretations, stereotypes cede first to surprise—*Really? You think that?*—and finally to a deeper, clearer vision of each person in the room.

At the Camden Senior Day Center, a dozen elders, most of them African American, were discussing "Say Yes" by Tobias Wolff. In the story, a couple argues about intermarriage; the husband opposes the idea, while the wife keeps pressing him. "Do you mean," she says, "that you wouldn't have married me if I'd been black?"

The story ends with the wife asking her husband to turn off the light before she emerges from the bathroom. While anxiously awaiting her, he hears only "the sound of someone moving through the house, a stranger."

I worried about how participants in their 70s, 80s and 90s would respond; I assumed that, black or white, they belonged to a generation that disdained intermarriage.

"My brother married white," said Morris, who is old enough to recall "colored" and "whites only" water fountains in the South. "My son is married to a white woman... and still there are places they go where people turn up their noses at them."

Caroline, a white woman, said that when she was a girl, the primary ethnic conflict was between Irish and Italians; blacks and whites simply didn't mix. Or if they did, Lucille added, they didn't talk about it. She recalled having a white friend who was always welcome at Lucille's house, though

Lucille was never invited to the white family's home. In fact, she said, the girl kept their friendship a secret from her family.

It is not easy for white and African American people, of any age, to share experiences around race. Such stories come cloaked in shame, guilt and rage. But the text helped ease our hesitation, made it possible to say what formerly seemed unspeakable.

A different group of seniors read Shay Youngblood's "Did My Mama Like to Dance?" in which a young black girl craves answers about her mother's death. The town beautician finally shares the painful story: the girl's mother, Fannie Mae, was raped by a policeman's son who became incensed after seeing her in the park with a white friend. Fannie Mae became pregnant; her daughter was the product of that rape.

Though people claim that "what you don't know won't hurt you," Florence said, she knew better. "My son was born out of wedlock, and when he was a teenager, he came home one day and said, 'Someone said I was illegitimate. What does that mean?' I told him that no babies are 'illegitimate,' but that I was not married when I had him."

"Kids will hear it on the street, and who knows what they'll be told, so you're best telling them yourself," Caroline said quietly. She told us that she, too, had given birth to a baby out of wedlock.

It happened again and again: A woman at Elkins House, well-coiffed and demure, recalled childhood nightmares of jack-booted Nazi soldiers. A man in that group, who usually offered gruff commentary on the stories, voiced his spiritual doubts after reading "Cathedral" by Raymond Carver. "I'm a Catholic, a man of faith, but can I say that I really believe? More and more, I'm not so sure..."

The stories, with their whorled paths, lend permission to share uncertainty, to try ideas and possibilities on for size, to surprise ourselves. When a series ends, I often think of the disjuncture between my first impressions of participants and the fully dimensional people I have come to know. They are co-residents of the senior housing complex, lunch companions at the day center, people who—black and white, old and younger—are perhaps a bit closer

"To share our stories is not only a worthwhile endeavor for the storyteller, but for those who hear our stories and feel less alone because of it."

--Joyce Maynard

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Author, teacher to read at P&S benefit April 13

Talking with Chang-rae Lee

Chang-rae Lee likes to tell his students at Princeton that the only stories without friction are on greeting cards.

“The central problem of all literature is that there’s tension—psychic tension, social tension, spiritual tension,” says Lee, a prize-winning novelist and director of the creative writing program at the university’s Lewis Center for the Arts. He is also the featured reader at this year’s People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos benefit April 13 at the Nassau Club in Princeton. Lee will be introduced by poet C.K. Williams, who also read an original poem at Hirschman’s memorial in January.

“What we want to explore in stories, as readers, are human possibilities,” Lee said. “We have to do that through moments of difficulty and trouble. [My students] sometimes forget that stories are about a set of obstacles.”

In his novels—*Native Speaker*, published when Lee was 29, along with *A Gesture Life*, *Aloft* and, most recently, *The Surrendered*—characters grapple with alienation and cultural dissonance.

Lee understands that perspective; at age three, he immigrated to the United States from Korea. He soon found shelter in books. “I remember my mother would drop me off at the library and leave me there for pretty much the whole day,” where he devoured novels by Ray Bradbury and accounts of World War II. “One of the great things about reading is that once you get into it, you understand that it’s a very complex and deep pleasure.”

But Lee didn’t consider becoming a writer until after college. He enjoyed writing, but thought of it as a hobby. “Maybe that’s because I was raised in an immigrant family; [my parents] hoped I’d become something honorable and stable.” At the start of his literary career, “they had a lot of anxiety,” he recalled.

Lee’s first novel confirmed his commitment, passion and talent. *Native Speaker*, about a Korean-American

outsider who becomes involved in espionage, was awarded the Ernest Hemingway Foundation/PEN Award and the American Book Award. Later Lee was named one of the 20 best American writers by *The New Yorker*.

His most recent book, *The Surrendered*, differs from his earlier works, which all featured a central character relating a first-person story. *The Surrendered* shifts point-of-view among three characters—Hector, a Korean war veteran; June, an orphan; and Sylvie, who helps run an orphanage after the war. *The New York Times* called the book “the most ambitious and compelling novel of his already impressive career.”

“What we want to explore in stories, as readers, are human possibilities.”

As a professor, Lee urges his students to read “like writers,” scrutinizing each word and considering the choices the writer has made. As a young man, when he read Hemingway or Dostoevsky, “I was especially tickled when I could hear the music of the prose and the way it was written.

“I try to get students to just slow down a little bit. You get a certain kind of emotional or spiritual presence that can come off the page.”

Lee’s own challenge as a writer is to invent the world of each novel. “I can’t just try to duplicate what I did before. Every story has a unique set of circumstances, characters, language, and all those things determine everything else: structure, tonality. It’s as if you have to create this whole universe each time, but it has to be a different universe.”

The mission of People & Stories dovetails with his own sense of purpose as a novelist, Lee said. “To me, literature is about making connections. We want to understand and have a sensitivity to others, and literature is one way we can do it. One of the most important things a writer can do is to reach out to people for whom literature is not something they would ever think is important or valuable.”

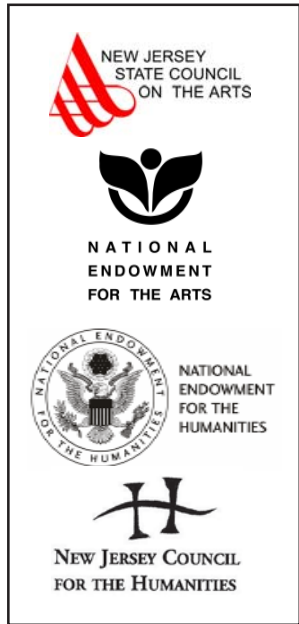
“My stories run up and bite me on the leg—I respond by writing down everything that goes on during the bite. When I finish, the idea lets go and runs off.”

--Ray Bradbury

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"E Pluribus Unum: Bilingualism and Loss of Language in the Second Generation" by Alejandro Portes and Lingxin Hao. *American Sociological Association*, Vol. 71, No. 4 (Oct., 1998), pp. 269-294

by Stephanie Hanzel Cohen

Even at the end of her life, Sarah Hirschman worked tirelessly on People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos, particularly the Spanish roots of her project; she urged reading Portes' and Hao's comprehensive article about the loss of home language in Asian and Latino/a second-generation youth. Portes and Hao find that while many second-generation youth speak English fluently, less than half are fluent in their parents' native language.

Through their study, Portes and Hao conclude that "...the main forces supporting the preservation of parents' languages are the family and peers in the

ethnic community. Those in the outside community strongly promote English monolingualism." School location, co-ethnic peers, gender and family socio-economic status also have an impact on young people's bilingualism.

Portes and Hao also explore the disjuncture in the retention of parents' language among Asian immigrants and Latino/a immigrants, finding that Latino/a youth have a higher retention rate. Asian languages, they conclude, require additional effort to learn and preserve. In conversation with Sarah about the loss of one's mother tongue, she said, "The advantages of bilingualism are the psychological and emotional health you experience when you don't cut off your roots and become a hybrid... You don't deny your sources, your past. If you shed this past, you can't connect with your