

"Books make people less alone...They show us that conversations are possible across differences."

—Jonathan Safran Foer, author of *Everything Is Illuminated* (and other books)

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# word of mouth

NEWS FROM PEOPLE & STORIES / GENTE Y CUENTOS

## D.C. Libraries Offer P&S in Range of Forms Readers Seek Community throughout Pandemic

One sticky Friday afternoon in Washington, D.C., Gente y Cuentos participants chatted in Spanish about jogging, hobbies and relations between Puerto Rico and the United States. On a different afternoon, an 80-year-old participant and her daughter liked Junius Edwards' story "Mother Dear and Daddy" so much that they opted to use it for their monthly book club.

And during Wednesday lunch hours throughout the summer, deaf and hearing-impaired residents signed on for readings of Jamaica Kincaid's "Girl" and James Joyce's "Eveline" while an interpreter signed the stories in American Sign Language. (ASL).

When the COVID-19 pandemic shuttered libraries in the nation's capital this spring, People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos plugged on, using telephone and online platforms to connect with readers.

David Quick, adult services librarian for the 26-branch system, wanted to provide programming to D.C. residents who might be feeling adrift during the pandemic—including those who were not tech-savvy.

Along with librarians who had already been facilitating People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos in partnership with senior day programs, women's shelters and other neighborhood nonprofits, Quick developed a weekly series that readers could access by WebEx, an online platform, or by calling a central number. Every fourth week would be in Spanish. "The potential for disconnection and isolation is something we need to be really mindful of right now," Quick says. "These stories hold up a window to what it means to be a human being, to have empathy for someone else's experience and to share that with a community of people."

The sessions didn't draw huge crowds—anywhere from two to a half-dozen people typically attended—but discussions were lively and poignant, the librarians say.

Chelsea Kirkland, who finished her People & Stories training the day the libraries closed, facilitated the monthly Gente y Cuentos series, in which a discussion of "Jogging" by Juan Antonio Ramos included talk about leaving one's comfort zone and about the persistent colonial relationship between the U.S. and Puerto Rico. Participants included English speakers who wanted to practice their Spanish as well as a recently arrived immigrant from Colombia. "People are using [P&S/GyC] as a way to start to connect and access resources," Kirkland says.

Janice Rosen, a librarian at the D.C. system's Center for Accessibility, had completed two People & Stories series in ASL and had begun a third when the pandemic hit. She quickly pivoted to conduct sessions on WebEx. "I found that doing it online seemed to help attendance as people could just log in during their lunch break while working from home."

Rosen, who is hard of hearing and fluent in ASL, reads the story while an interpreter signs. During the discussion, Rosen speaks and signs, with the interpreter voicing or signing as needed. Langston Hughes' "Thank You, M'am" evoked robust discussion, including speculation about the story's title. "Someone brought up the idea that maybe he had written that story to thank someone who had helped him when he was a boy."

Wanda Jones, a librarian who was part of the D.C. library system's first training cohort four years ago, led two Friday sessions, including one in which a listener lamented the mother's decision, in Barbara Neely's "Spilled Salt," to leave her adult son after he returns from prison.

Participants on those calls "wanted a break from the muck and mire, the politics and the pandemic," Jones says. "People want a good story, an uplifting story, to give them hope and a distraction from what's going on in reality right now."

"People want a good story, an uplifting story, to give them hope and a distraction from what's going on in reality right now."

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# Gente y Cuentos: A Bridge through COVID

## Trenton program grapples with technology inequities

by Alma Concepción

Throughout my thirty years with People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos, I have witnessed the program's resilience and creativity. In Gente y Cuentos sessions, participants may come from more than twenty different countries; there may also be members of the Latinx community who were born and raised in the United States. That diversity inspires coordinators to develop new strategies: allowing participants to express themselves in English or Spanish, according to their comfort level; connecting with community leaders for help with recruiting; making phone calls to remind participants of meetings. But no prior challenge has been as difficult as responding to the COVID-19 pandemic.

I started a program at the Latin American Legal and Education Defense Fund (LALDEF) in Trenton on March 3. As we gathered for our first sessions, a few people commented nervously about the pandemic that had hit parts of the U.S. But by our third week, New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy had banned large meetings, and our program was suspended until further notice. Everyone was at home, numb, just trying to understand the scope of the pandemic, its disproportionate consequences for the elderly and the poor, African Americans, Native Americans and Latinx people. Neighbors in Trenton were facing school closings, job losses, hospitalizations and death. LALDEF closed its doors.

Together, we found a way to keep the program going. LALDEF office manager Katy Domínguez and I first envisioned continuing by phone. It was not until April 14 that we were able to meet, using our cell phones via Google Hangout. It was difficult not to be able to see each other; nevertheless, participants enjoyed the reading.

People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos executive director Cheyenne Wolf suggested that we try Zoom. That platform brought fresh challenges: unstable Internet connections and the question of how to distribute evaluations and certificates. Our two most vulnerable participants were unable to connect online. Katy sent the stories to participants' phones and could show the text while I read, but we couldn't offer gift books at the program's conclusion.

For future online sessions, a question will be how to recruit participants, since the LALDEF program involved readers who were already engaged in a face-to-face series. The challenge will be to see if the same approach can be as successful with newcomers. The most essential and urgent need is access to computers for the most vulnerable within Latinx communities.

Our partnership with LALDEF was crucial, and in these difficult times, it has only grown stronger. Some staff joined our sessions as participants, and Katy became indispensable. Hopefully we will be able to secure the same kind of commitment with other sites as we continue to work online.

This spring, we proved that Gente y Cuentos can be as appealing online as it has been in person. We must gain flexibility, meeting readers where they are while preserving our commitment to the most disadvantaged—a mission that remains at the heart of our program.

"This spring, we proved that Gente y Cuentos can be as appealing online as it has been in person."



*A session at LALDEF before the pandemic forced programming to move online.*

# Mining the stories of lived experience

## Young men at Manos House write through the turmoil

by Scott Feifer

Every Tuesday evening for more than sixteen years, I have offered a program with the clients of Manos House, a nonprofit drug and alcohol rehabilitation center for young men near Lancaster, Pennsylvania. When each week's story is finished, we begin to mine the stories of our own lived experiences.

During the quarantine imposed by COVID-19, I was grateful that Manos House found a way for us to use Skype and then Zoom to continue the programs. These have felt like a valuable antidote to isolation and a rich way of navigating through the turmoil of current events. I feel glad that Gate House for Women and Colonial House Recovery, whose participants usually visit Manos House monthly to share the program, have been willing to zoom in with us when they can. One of the challenges in offering the program virtually has been that participants are listening without always having a copy of the story or writing prompts in front of them. That has called for a different type of attention, but it has not seemed to impede the power of sharing the texts or our personal stories.

I have been grateful that staff at Manos helped me to stay as connected and engaged as possible. Staff members were willing to collect participants' personal writings and drop them off at my home or allow me to come, masked, to the front door to retrieve them. I would return the writings along with some refreshments on the following Tuesday by leaving them on the bench outside the facility.

These drop-offs allowed us to keep this added connection to group discussions, giving clients the option to share their pieces with me and, in return, receive a written response. I've always offered this for both those who read aloud and for those who prefer not to share their work publicly.

As always, I value the attendance of faithful participants at Manos House each week. Because only a certain number of

residents can be in the boardroom at one time, it limited the number of people who could participate in the virtual program. However, it did allow for a more intimate and cohesive group of consistent participants.

In one of our first virtual sessions, we read "The Man Who Found You in the Woods" by Catherine Ryan Hyde. Some participants wrote about the people who would never give up on them. Alex wrote a letter directly to his mother and brother thanking them for being a support, for teaching him to be humble and for offering a shoulder for him to cry on. Bryan wrote about his recently deceased grandmother, who saw the good in him, always took his side and made him feel "smart and loved."

In spite of quarantine, in spite of losing those we love, the writings called those beloved people close and invited them into the room.

Even with the virtual platform, there were some very rewarding and moving sessions. The program offers a reflective and liberating quality when participants express who they miss and explore the stresses of dealing with the confinement of a court mandated placement and the restrictions on visits with family imposed by the pandemic. The participants were willing to take the stories seriously, to listen to one another with respect, to reflect upon their own lives, and then offer up rich and meaningful reflections in their writing.

I appreciate the trust Manos House residents offer to me and to one another—through People & Stories, through the writing circles I share throughout the year and through my regular visits during group time with their counselors. These young men have been among my greatest teachers, long before the pandemic and during it. When their reflections stray from the suggested prompts and from the discussion of the stories, I can't help but feel that they take their writing where they seem to need to go. Or rather, perhaps, the writing takes them.

"In spite of quarantine, in spite of losing those we love, the writings called those beloved people close and invited them into the room."

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## From Executive Director Cheyenne Wolf

Seeking a “new normal” of debate, compromise, listening and respect



Things were “normal” when I was writing my piece for our spring 2020 “Word of Mouth.” I sipped a latte in a packed local coffee shop and wrote about the highlights of our recent programs. No masks, no need for social distance, no real health or safety concerns. And here I am, six months later, reflecting on the many ways our lives have been shaken or shattered due to the pandemic.

COVID-19 has taken so much from all of us; it’s taken our routines, our sense of control, and in the worst cases, our loved ones. But this virus has given us a lot, too; it’s given us reason to pause. It’s given us an occasion to reimagine what our society and our post-pandemic lives could look like. It’s given us the painful reminder that everything is temporary and the only constant in life is change. In digging through the virus’s wreckage, I’ve uncovered three invaluable truths: how little we need, how very much we have, and above all, the real value of human connection.

For most of us, it isn’t material things we long for. We crave the very thing that People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos programs foster: intimate dialogues that nurture a spirit of community within us. I am proud to share that in the recent months’ upheaval, the power of reading deeply in community was not lost. The virtual and hybrid program models we’ve launched have sparked new connections, ideas, and friendships against all odds.

I attribute much of our success to our team’s agility, born from a readiness to accept these massive waves of change and a determination not to be swept away by them. Having to cancel a dozen spring programs and our largest annual fundraising event shook us, but it did not shatter us. I was deeply moved by the many facilitators who bravely took on virtual programming, often voluntarily, and by the many generous supporters who helped us make ends meet.

This summer, we were fortunate to receive multiple federal and state CARES Act grants in support of our overall efforts and several more virtual series. We have also been awarded a grant from the National Endowment from the Arts to support a major strategic planning initiative to help ensure that our next “normal” is sustainable and prosperous.

COVID-19 is not the only pandemic we face: poverty, racism, partisanship and misinformation are infecting American society, and these insidious ills don’t come with the promise of a vaccine. Cornel West’s 1993 book *Race Matters* reminds us that racial and economic disparities are not new, and moreover, that our personal values and commitments to curing them are not small: “We either hang together by combating these forces that divide and degrade us or we hang separately,” West writes. “Do we have the intelligence, humor, imagination, courage, tolerance, love, respect, and will to meet the challenge? Time will tell. None of us alone can save the nation or the world. But each of us can make a positive difference if we commit ourselves to do so.”

In this dark time, I find myself more committed than ever before to advancing our mission. In People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos, we debate, we compromise, and we listen to and respect one another even as profound differences continue to exist. Alone, I can’t change the hearts and minds of a nation, but by committing to People & Stories, I can nurture a more tolerant, inclusive, and democratic nation that we can all be proud to call home.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Cheyenne Wolf". The signature is stylized and fluid.

# Children's books spark nostalgia, enthusiasm

## Columbus House series included sessions on reading to kids

by Ellen Gilbert

The overwhelming evidence that early literacy leads to greater success in all aspects of life encouraged me to include conversations about reading to young children during a fall 2019, pre-COVID, eight-week session with women in Columbus House at the Bo Robinson Education and Training Center in Trenton.

For two sessions, our texts were an array of nearly two dozen children's books, and the results were particularly gratifying as the women took turns reading, displayed the books' illustrations, and—most importantly—relished the wonderfully entertaining stories.

We compared illustration styles and examined the use of different typefaces to make a point (*hushed* or *LOUD*); we also talked about children's glee at finding hidden images in ordinary-looking scenes. The hilarity level is incrementally higher, we agreed, when the stories are slightly subversive—for instance, in *The Stinky Cheese Man* and *The Stupids*.

In a *New York Times* article, pediatrician/writer Perri Klass observed:

*It's a truism in child development that the very young learn through relationships and back-and-forth interactions, including the interactions that occur when parents read to their children. A new study provides evidence of just how sustained an impact reading and playing with young children can have, shaping their social and emotional development in ways that go far beyond helping them learn language and early literacy skills. The parent-child-book moment even has the potential to help curb problem behaviors like aggression, hyperactivity and difficulty with attention, a new study has found.*

Not surprisingly, Shel Silverstein's classic tale, *The Giving Tree*, about a mother tree who gives her all to keep her son happy, generated a lot of discussion, both for and against the mother's crippling sacrifices.

A number of participants expressed nostalgia for books

they had read as children—Margaret Wise Brown's *Good Night Moon* and *Horton Hatches the Egg*, by Dr. Seuss, and talked about continuing to read with young family members and friends in the future. "*Green Eggs and Ham* brought me back to my childhood, when my mother read me the book," wrote one participant.

In the other six sessions, the traditional People & Stories approach to adult texts was in full force. Stories we read included "Tuesday Siesta," by Gabriel García Márquez; "Thank You Ma'm," by Langston Hughes; "The Thing Around Your Neck," by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie; "Did My Mama Like to Dance?" by Shay Youngblood; "The Shawl," by Louise Erdrich; and "Two Words," by Isabel Allende.

Almost everyone participated as we reflected on these stories, exchanged ideas about the characters and situations, and compared them to experiences in our own lives. Participants held spirited discussions and made astute observations; for instance, several participants agreed that Allende's heroine just waving to beleaguered passers-by during her flight reflected self-preservation.

Differences of opinion were respected and sometimes assimilated to reach new conclusions. Participants' favorite stories varied widely, providing even more evidence of the disparate ways in which we each make meaning from a story, as well as the independence of mind that was at work in the

group.

Attendance was noteworthy: we started out with thirteen women, and twelve of them faithfully continued to attend every week. A shared snack at each meeting reinforced our sense of community.

At the last session, each participant received a customized certificate of achievement and a copy of *Great Short Stories by American Women* with a personalized bookplate in each volume.

"These are amazing results," wrote facilities Director Steve Johnson in response to a report I sent him at the end. "Congrats and thank you!"

Women's coordinator Gina Corforte agreed. "This is wonderful. Thank you so much for providing such an amazing service to our residents."

"...the women took turns reading, displayed the books' illustrations and—most importantly—relished the wonderfully entertaining stories."

# P&S readers learn to connect across digital divide

## Princeton Public Library's virtual series confirms power of storytelling

by Anndee Hochman

The first things we notice are the story's oddities.

Why does the overweight, solitary diner in Raymond Carver's story, "Fat," speak in the first-person plural: "I think we're ready to order now...we don't eat like this all the time." Why does he mention removing his jacket, then change his mind and leave it on?

And why, on several occasions in this spare, enigmatic story, does the waitress-protagonist have a feeling she can't quite muster into words?

It took seven women in their Zoom boxes to help unpack those questions.

My spring 2020 People & Stories series, presented in partnership with the Princeton Public Library, was my first conducted remotely. I felt wary: How would we replicate the intimacy and trust-building that happens when readers sit in a room together, a neutral zone that, at least for 90 minutes, supplants our disparate, distracting home environments?

On Zoom, we'd be visible only from the shoulders up. Would participants be able to "read" one another in this strange new medium? Could we connect across the digital divide?

It took us a little while to become adept with the conversational toggling—remembering to mute and unmute, learning the body language and facial expressions that indicate "I have something to say." But soon we were engaged in a lively back-and-forth.

"Maybe [the fat man] is acknowledging that he is big—that his size makes him a 'we' instead of an 'I,'" Julie said. "It might be sort of self-dignifying."

Suzy pointed out how the customer ruefully refers to his behavior: "Believe it or not...we have not always eaten like this." She imagined him seeking therapy to change his habits. "Maybe he's choosing between who he is now and who he wants to be."

"Or the person he was," Julie added.

"It took us a little while to become adept with the conversational toggling—remembering to mute and unmute, learning the body language and facial expressions that indicate 'I have something to say.' But soon we were engaged in a lively back-and-forth."

"I wonder if he had a loss, the loss of a person, and that [sadness] makes him eat...and that person is sort of eating along with him," Metta offered. And Vida wondered if the man might be a circus performer who must eat to maintain his role.

We talked about societal bias against people who are obese, and we noted the moments when the waitress's view of the fat customer begins to change.

She defends him when other staff in the diner comment crudely about the man's size. In a final exchange with Rudy—the restaurant's cook and the waitress's boyfriend—she insists, "Rudy, he is fat, but that is not the whole story."

The waitress's brief encounter with the fat man prompted a reckoning, Julie said. "She sees that this man is sensitive, and a gentleman...and she imagines how it could be to spend time with someone who was that kind and that appreciative...what it might be like to be with someone who loved her."

The story's ending makes clear that Rudy is not that person. The two have sex, despite the waitress's apparent lack of desire, and she imagines feeling "terrifically fat, so fat that Rudy is a tiny thing and hardly there at all."

How could we not think about impotence, especially with the contrast of the fat man's "long, thick, creamy fingers" and her fantasy of cutting Rudy down to size? How could we not consider the reversal of roles? "She has the power," Kathy said. "She has the control. [Rudy] is nothing. He's the incredible shrinking man."

The waitress finishes telling her story, then thinks, "It is August. My life is going to change. I feel it."

Maybe she's pregnant, one woman suggested, or she wants to be. Perhaps she's decided to leave Rudy. "I like the last line—the feeling that gives me," Lindsay said. "It's a nice way to think, to feel 'my life is going to change.'"

And that, we agreed, is how change sometimes happens—an intuition that starts in the gut and gradually makes its way to speech. I mentioned the song from West Side Story, "Something's Coming." Julie began to hum the tune. We were still in the heat of summer, but fall, with its crisper rhythms, would soon arrive.

What this People & Stories series helped me remember is the power of storytelling to lift us out of our present circumstances. We do not have to be the fat man, eating bite after joyless bite. Like the waitress, we can imagine a different future for ourselves and choose to move in that direction.

For a complete list of our program partners, visit [www.peopleandstories.org/audiences](http://www.peopleandstories.org/audiences)

# Zoom platform demands deep listening

## Aging adults find “shared humanity” in PSRC series

by Ellen Gilbert

The ability of literature to tap into our shared humanity triumphed in the age of COVID-19 as P&S/GyC facilitators, shut out of their usual venues, found alternative ways to reach at least some of their audiences and to explore new groups via online program.

An eight-week Zoom session with fifteen participants who registered through the Princeton Senior Resource Center (PSRC) wasn't the same as meeting with “my ladies” at Bo Robinson, but it was a compelling experience that helped prove the strength of the P&S method of reading great stories and talking about them.

The Resource Center is a nonprofit organization serving aging adults and their families in the greater Princeton area. While I had run P&S sessions as part of PSRC's Evergreen Forum program, this was the first time we had collaborated directly.

In spite of some initial anxiety about how this new platform would work (copies of each story were e-mailed to participants in time for the week's session), feedback from the group—not to mention my own elation at the end of each session—indicated that it went very well, indeed.

The stories, of course, won the day. We read Hernando Tellez's “Just Lather, That's All,” Nadine Gordimer's “The Soft Voice of the Serpent” and James Joyce's “Eveline.”

In an eerie coincidence, in the days before George Floyd's murder, I had selected “A Worn Path,” Eudora Welty's story about Old Phoenix, who walks from her home to the city of Natchez to get medicine for her sick grandson.

“When Phoenix was so long in answering the attendant in the office, I wondered if her grandson had passed away,” one participant said. There was divided opinion about whether or not the grandson was still alive, and when exactly he had swallowed the lye that destroyed his esophagus. One participant pointed out the story's parallels with *The Odyssey*, and many agreed.

Tim O'Brien's Vietnam-era story, “The Things They Carried,” resonated deeply with this over-55 group who shared vivid memories of that time. “A Moving Day,” Susan Nunes' story about generational tensions, evoked descriptions of a beloved meat grinder in someone's kitchen, and being in our respective homes enabled us to do a bit of show-and tell.

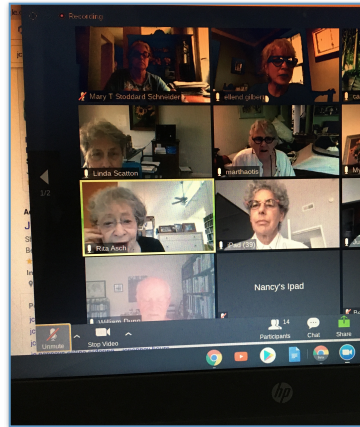
Board member Julie Denny, a participant in the group, held up a glass bottle filled with old rose petals, and I suddenly remembered and pointed out “The Ties that Bind,” an artwork hanging right behind me each week, made by book artist Maria Pisano from a piece of her deceased mother's clothing.

Being able to communicate during the week enabled some discussions to continue: Louise Erdrich's poignant story “The Shawl,” a painful tale of generational trauma in a Native American family, led to interest in another story called “The Shawl,” by Cynthia Ozick, set during the Holocaust in Europe. Both versions of “The Shawl” were devastating; they teach us, as James Baldwin once said, “that the things that tormented me most were the very things that connected me with all the people who were alive, who had ever been alive.”

Though participants weren't in the same room, we still watched each other's faces and listened to each other's voices every week. When I think about what we can offer during this time, I often remember Simone Weil's suggestion that “Attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity.”

Recently, I was struck by my disinclination to participate in a regular book group I have attended in the past. We were supposed to read *Mansfield Park*, and in the weeks before the session, several heavy-hitters in the group circulated treatises about Jane Austen and this title.

I realized how much I prefer Paolo Freire's “education as the practice of freedom.” At P&S/GyC—whether in-person, via phone or on Zoom—we listen to each other.



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## On the bookshelf...

*Quicksand*, by Nella Larsen. Martino Fine Books, 2011 (originally published 1928) and *Passing*, by Nella Larsen. Martino Fine Books, 2016 (originally published 1928)

by Anne Seltzer

The board members of People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos love books and, like so many people, we have found literature essential as a way to understand living through a pandemic. When I asked board member Charlotte Friedman, a published writer and poet who lives in Princeton and teaches at Barnard, what books she was enjoying these days, Charlotte responded that she has found the act of reading somewhat challenging.

Lately, she said, she has been drawn to historical fiction as a way of wrestling with these complicated times. In our conversation, she introduced me to a writer I had never heard of: Nella Larsen, the first African American woman to win the prestigious Guggenheim fellowship in 1930. Larsen, another of those “hidden women” who contributed much to our literary history,

was an acclaimed writer of the Harlem Renaissance and wrote *Quicksand*, a novella; *Passing*, a semi-autobiographical story; and several short stories.

*Quicksand* paints a picture of Helga Crane, a young Scandinavian/West African teacher who impetuously (and literally!) throws her teaching materials out the window to search for her version of happiness, a journey that takes her to Harlem, Copenhagen, back to Harlem and finally to the rural American south. Throughout, she questions whether she knows how to be happy.

The novel is dense, interior and language-rich: “For the hundredth time she marveled at the gradations within this oppressed race of hers. A dozen shades slid by...sooty black, shiny black, taupe, mahogany, copper, gold, orange, yellow, peach, ivory, pinky white, pastry white.”

When I next caught up with Charlotte, she was well into *Passing*, a story of the friendship of two women. As in a People & Stories discussion, when one comment ignites another, Charlotte’s enthusiasm for this writer fanned my own curiosity and led me to new and enduring books.

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