



word of mouth

NEWS FROM PEOPLE & STORIES / GENTE Y CUENTOS

"You're never going to kill storytelling because it's built into the human plan. We come with it."

—Margaret Atwood

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Finding Seeds of Civic Engagement in P&S Danielle Allen leads national project to teach history

In early March, a national group of scholars and educators publicly unveiled a "road map" for teaching history and civics to students from kindergarten to 12th grade.

Danielle Allen, a Harvard professor and one of the principal investigators for the initiative, called Educating for American Democracy, traces the project's roots to conversations she had more than a decade ago with People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos founder Sarah Hirschman.

Allen told that story—how the theory and practice of People & Stories helped inspire a national reboot of history and civics education—at the organization's first virtual benefit in February.

In her talk, titled "Seeds of Transformation: Reinvigorating Civic Education for the Nation," Allen recalled chatting with Hirschman, whom she met at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, about Russian literature, contemporary politics and her "passion project," People & Stories. "Sarah had this work, she knew it mattered, but she didn't know how to prove it to people," Allen said.

At Harvard, Allen led the Humanities and Liberal Arts Assessment Project (HULA), and she selected People & Stories as one of the organizations HULA would study in depth, trying to build evidence about the value of the humanities.

But how to measure civic engagement or feelings of personal agency? How to gauge whether discussing literary short stories in a group helped to increase participants' empathy, curiosity or willingness to engage with opinions unlike their own? Allen worked with People & Stories staff and coordinators to develop new participant surveys; readers would indicate their agreement or disagreement with statements such as "I learned more about the views of others who are different from me" and "Literature helps people understand themselves, others and the world."

"We were able to develop survey instruments to help People & Stories show the power and impact of the work it was doing...That was the seed of our capacity to start rethinking civic education," Allen said. "People would say, 'But you can't even measure it.' We'd say, 'Actually, we do.'"

Now, the 300 diverse scholars and educators who developed Educating for American Democracy are using the same foundation—the idea that civic engagement can be taught, learned and assessed—to propose a new blueprint for teaching civics and history to all U.S. students. That work is essential at a time of bitter political polarization and dwindling faith in democracy, especially among people under age 40, Allen said. "[Young people] have lots of reasons not to be committed to our democracy at present. But it's also the case that we haven't nourished young people with civic education for decades."

The road map released in March aims to rectify that. It is divided into broad themes—Our Changing Landscapes, We the People, Institutional and Social Transformation, for instance—and powered by questions such as, "How do borders change over time, and why?"

"The framework we've designed is an active learning framework," similar to that of People & Stories, Allen said. "We're trying, with the road map, to knit a national community of educators into a community of practice."

Stories will be an essential ingredient. "We've got to find ways of narrating our history, telling shared stories, where we are honest and clear-eyed but without slipping into cynicism, and also honest about our accomplishments without adulation...It will take decades."

"We've got to find ways of narrating our history, telling shared stories, where we are honest and clear-eyed, but without slipping into cynicism."

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Gente y Cuentos Meets at Virtual Table

Two NJ series flourish despite technological divide

by Alma Concepción

When participants from the Children's Home Society in Trenton, including a mother accompanied by her 12-year-old daughter, read "La tía Daniela" by Ángeles Mastretta, one woman commented, "Friendship is so important. You cannot do it alone."

In spite of the pandemic—and because of it—Gente y Cuentos offered virtual programs in fall 2020 at CHS and through the Newark Public Library. Each site brought successes and challenges, underscoring the technological divide.

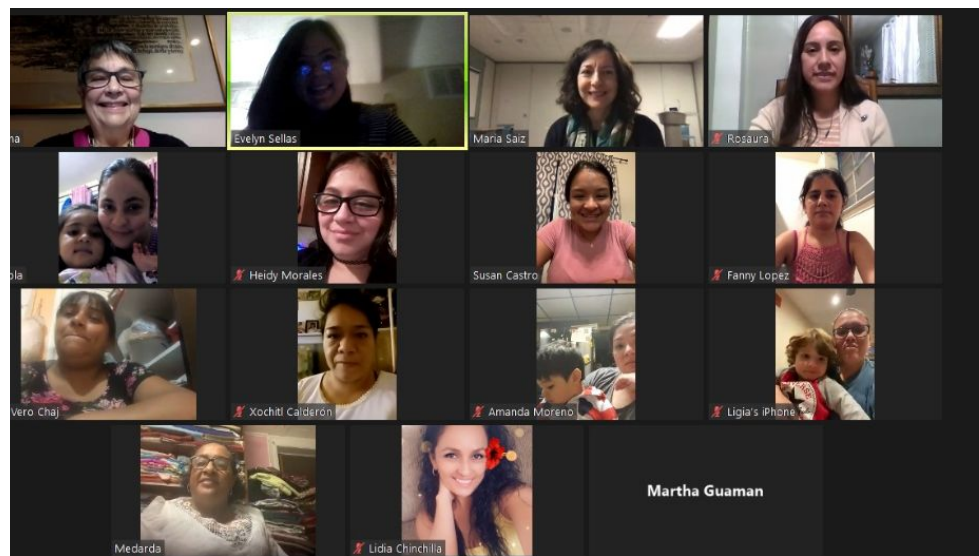
At CHS, which has a longstanding relationship with Latina women from the surrounding community, an average of fourteen women, mostly mothers, attended. But some people who expressed interest in the series weren't able to join because they lacked the technology or expertise to join a virtual platform.

"La tía Daniela" tells the story of a strong, intelligent woman who is devastated after a romantic breakup. Participants responded thoughtfully: *Help didn't work because she kept everything inside...I keep my problems locked in as if in a crystal vase, but if I can repeat what happened I can see clearly...It is not enough to text; I have to repeat it orally, with my mouth.* At the end of our session all participants exclaimed: "We want another story by Mastretta next week!"

The Newark Public Library had more difficulties, though library administrators helped to organize the series and even donated to People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos to help us continue to reach Spanish-speaking communities in New Jersey. Here, participants were recruited online. Ten responded, but only a few were able to connect—a small but diverse group, with members from Puerto Rico, Cuba, Peru, Panama and Jamaica.

One of the stories we read was "Es que somos muy pobres," by Juan Rulfo, about a country boy who witnesses the destructive impact of heavy rains on his land and family. Participants identified with the characters' struggles: *The father in the story is mad at his daughters...They are so poor that the only alternative for the girls is prostitution...I would not judge them because there are times when a person runs out of alternatives...Even today there are tensions about sexual freedom. My husband is from Argentina and when my daughter mentioned she wanted to go to a sleepover he lost his senses as if he were living in the 1800's.*

The impact of environmental disaster also resonated: *In the reading, the most important thing for the twelve-year old girl is to save the cow so a man would marry her... But the river swallowed her future...Poor people are exposed to terrible things like the natural disasters happening right now in Central America...In many of our countries there is no future...That is why people migrate...We did not abandon our country, our country abandoned us...How is it possible to send rockets to the moon and not solve problems here on Earth?*



"American History" Connects Generations

Medical students, older adults join in Crossing Borders

by Anndee Hochman

It took three tries to gather everyone at our virtual table.

Zoom is practically a mother-tongue for the Drexel University College of Medicine students who made up two-thirds of the Crossing Borders class I facilitated in the endless winter of 2021.

But for the older adults joining through Germantown's UUH Outreach Program or the Cliveden Nursing and Rehabilitation Center, the platform felt foreign: tiny pictures on a mobile phone, unstable Internet, strings of call-in numbers and passcodes.

For our third session, a discussion of "American History" by Judith Ortiz Cofer, all were finally on board—some in their Zoom boxes, some joining by phone for a story that, though published in 1993, felt painfully relevant: a tale of race and class prejudice, exclusion, aspiration and crushed dreams.

"American History" takes place on the day of John F. Kennedy's assassination and follows Elena, a 9th-grader from a Puerto Rican family, as she navigates both the national tragedy and a personal affront.

After being invited to the home of a classmate—a white boy, Eugene, also an outsider at school because he's from the South and loves to read—she receives a stinging rebuke from Eugene's mother, who nods at the tenement where Elena lives, mutters "I don't know how you people do it," and says her son doesn't need new friends.

"American History" is anchored in a specific time and place: Paterson, New Jersey, November 1963. The older adults were in middle school then; the Drexel students wouldn't be born for nearly another four decades. How to find resonance in this story for readers across the lifespan?

The text, as always, pointed the way. Annette recalled being let out early from junior high school on the day JFK was shot. "I went straight home," she said. "My mom made me get down on my knees. We had to pray." Caroline remembered neighbors calling to one another through the woods with the

devastating news. "JFK was going to be the hope, the great hope," she said. Clyde concurred: "When Kennedy was killed, we lost the best friend Black people have ever had."

For the students, 1963 was ancient history. But they were old enough to remember 9/11. Erika's mother worked near the Twin Towers and wasn't able to come home for a few days; Erika described her fear and anxiety as a five-year-old missing her mom.

Rim recalled that day and its aftermath differently; as an Arab-American, 9/11 meant stepped-up scrutiny, a feeling of being targeted. It took Caroline to draw those strands together, connecting both generations' memories with the story of Elena: "She went from being innocent to being marred."

For the older adults, all of whom were Black, Eugene's mother's words—especially the phrase, "You people," rankled with painful familiarity. But on the far side of the civil rights movement, the Drexel students had also experienced race-based ignorance and hatred.

Jade recalled white neighbors pulling their children away when she, a Black girl, tried to play with them. And Andrew's Asian features prompted playground taunts of "Chinaman—which pissed me off because I'm not even Chinese."

This story didn't close the chasm of experience between older and younger members of our group. But it allowed each participant to reveal something of themselves; in those painful, transformative moments, we glimpsed each other whole.

I'd opened the session with a question: "If you were a vending machine, what would you vend?" Clyde said he'd dispense empathy; Annette would deliver love songs; Lynnell would provide suggestions of great books to read. The students' answers included patience, plants, chicken nuggets (and a vegetarian alternative), hugs, inspirational quotes and affirmations.

Every suggestion earned nods from the others, as if to say: *Oh, yes, the gift you're offering: that is something we all need.*

"How to find resonance in this story for readers across the lifespan? The text, as always, pointed the way."

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From Executive Director Cheyenne Wolf

Losses, gains and growth during a year of “pandemic programming”



People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos has a long history of creating access to literature and harnessing the power of story to strengthen relationships and communities. But our practice of breaking down barriers was tested this past year as we encountered barriers brought on by the pandemic. A full year of “pandemic programming” yielded some gains, some losses, and a few important lessons that we will carry with us into the future.

It has been exciting to see our new virtual programs reach participant groups in different states and vastly different settings. Proximity and mobility are no longer obstacles, allowing us to reach more adults with disabilities, homebound seniors, caregivers and others who would have likely faced challenges attending our in-person programs.

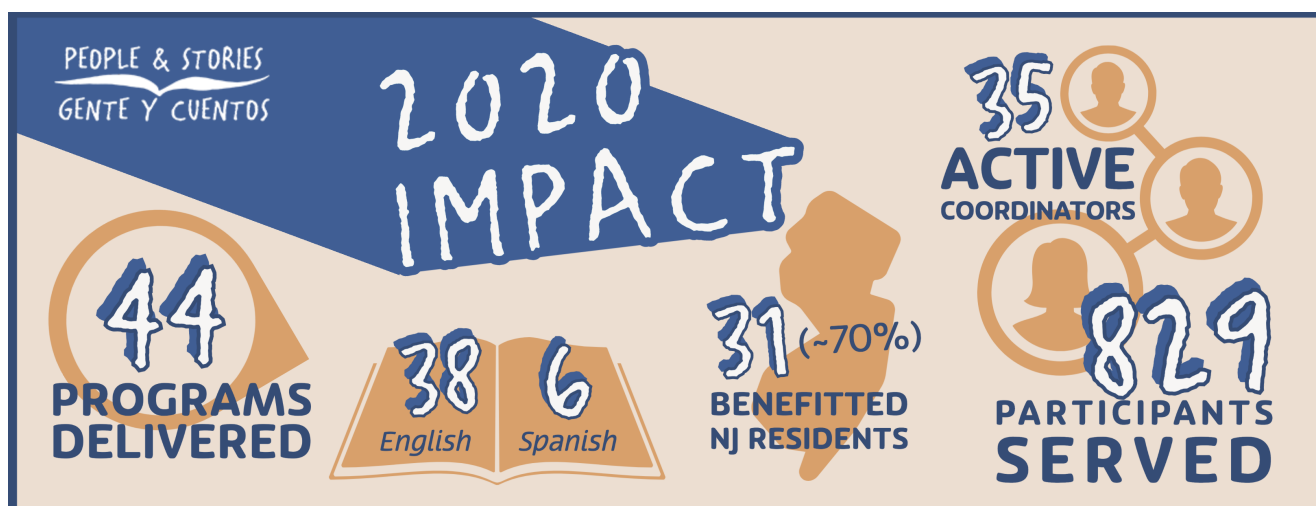
We developed some new collaborative partnerships such as those with the Newark Public Library and the Princeton Senior Resource Center, as well as expanding to both Spanish and English programs at the Princeton Public Library, a longtime partner in our work. By aligning ourselves with these three community resource hubs, we were able to recruit and serve many more participants than our own internal outreach efforts would have allowed. At the same time, a few hard-hit residential sites with limited capacity and resources had to forgo working with outside program providers altogether until their staffing situations stabilized.

While a new program modality, new partnerships, and a boundless geographic reach opened many doors for us in 2020, the doors that lead to some of our most vulnerable audiences remain firmly closed. Adults in prison, in re-entry and residential treatment programs, and those without in-home Internet access were among the most difficult to reach, as were those with limited digital literacy skills.

Given these obstacles, our commitment to meeting participants “where they are” challenged us to reach beyond the digital domain. A few coordinators delivered regular dial-in sessions, others mailed stories and corresponded via written letters, others made audio recordings of stories read aloud when all other means of engagement were impossible. Coordinators pursued creative alternatives, often voluntarily—a powerful testament to the heart and dedication they bring to our work.

We are proud that our adaptive measures allowed us to stay more or less on track with our annual program goals. At the same time, it is important that we see beyond our own accomplishments and advocate for equal access to information and communication technology on behalf of the communities we couldn’t reach.

The societal problems we face won’t be easy to solve. Fortunately, People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos programs prepare us to grapple with the hard questions of our time. Through shared story and inclusive, collaborative dialogue, our participants model for us the path toward collective solutions.



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Three Coordinators Find Stories Ripe for Pandemic Times

Transcendent Love: A Respite from the News

by Ellen Gilbert

*"Son, do you know how love should be begun?"
The boy sat small and listening and still. Slowly he shook
his head. The old man leaned closer and whispered:
A tree. A rock. A cloud."*

—"A Tree, A Rock, A Cloud," by Carson McCullers

One of the pleasures of being a People & Stories coordinator is the confidence that almost any selection from our remarkable bibliography of English and Spanish short stories will carry the day.

Carson McCullers' strangely beautiful "A Tree, A Rock, A Cloud" proved to be a particularly apt choice this year when the 2020 observance of "Giving Tuesday" came in the midst of challenging days of uncertainty about the pandemic, chilling accounts of social injustice and heightened anxiety about climate change, all set against a bitterly angry political scene.

"A Tree, A Rock, A Cloud" is about a lesson in love that an unnamed older man insists on sharing with a young paperboy (also unnamed), who has happened to stop by the cafe where he sits drinking alone. McCullers' descriptive details are rich and not always pretty; the man is "long and pale, with a big nose and faded orange hair," and our young hero "wore a helmet such as aviators wear" and lifts a flap to expose "his pink little ear."

While the boy has come to expect that someone in the cafe might "speak to him in a friendly way" on a morning like this, the old man's tale is surely more than he bargained for. Beckoning him ("Son! Hey Son!"), the man recounts the anguish of losing a woman he loved and the peace-giving "science" he developed in the face of his loss.

The only named character in the story is the cafe's owner, the "bitter and stingy" Leo, whose continuous stream of cynical remarks punctuate the man's narrative as he describes the love he is finally able to feel for anyone and anything.

When it was selected for the *O. Henry Award Anthology* in 1942, editor Paul Engles described "A Tree, A Rock, A Cloud" as "the most perfect short story in American literature." It certainly had a profound effect on my "Giving Tuesday" participants. "We tend to think of Zen awakenings as something that came to the west in the

"Carson McCullers' strangely beautiful 'A Tree, A Rock, A Cloud' proved to be a particularly apt choice this year...in the midst of challenging days of uncertainty about the pandemic, chilling accounts of social injustice and heightened anxiety about climate change."

1960's, and yet there Carson McCullers was in the 1940's, writing about loving rocks, trees, and clouds," observed one. I asked if that experience of transcendent love might be found in W.H. Auden's poem, "The More Loving One," or in Thomas Merton's description of standing at a Louisville intersection and realizing that he "loved all these people, that they were mine and I theirs."

"Hearing folks' interpretations of the story is always the best part," said one veteran participant that afternoon, and I like to think that that feeling spoke to the "giving" part of Giving Tuesday. "As always the story was provocative; no easy answers," said someone else. There seemed to be consensus that the most caustic character, Leo, may have actually had the deepest understanding of what had transpired that morning in his cafe.

"Listening carefully to everyone's comments has given me much to consider," wrote a participant in her thank-you note later. At the least, it did seem to be a welcome respite from the

daily barrage of grim news.

An "Aftertaste" of Tenderness at Manos House

by Scott Feifer

On a July evening during quarantine, I Zoomed in with Manos House, a six- to nine- month recovery program for adolescent males, and shared Cynthia Weiner's story, "Aftertaste." The story centers on a young woman, Abby, who has recently returned from drug recovery treatment. As she walks home from the grocery store and has an awkward conversation with a neighbor, Gideon, we glimpse Abby's self- imposed isolation, the depths of her drug use and her sense that her body betrayed her when it would no longer get high.

The men were seated around a table in a small conference room. As we discussed the story, I asked about Abby's desire to pull up her sleeves and show Gideon her scars. Damon said he thought it was a combination of trying to be honest with him, so he would really know her,

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and perhaps trying to test him to see if he would stay once he knew the truth.

At one point, Abby says that “kindness can be as treacherous as heroin.” Quinn said perhaps she meant that kindness can be addictive; once you get a taste, you want more. Or, Matt offered, maybe Abby has learned that kindness eventually disappears, and you’re left wanting.

I told the group about a young man I had met in the detention center who once told me, “Mr. Scott, I can tell you 24/7 where I can find some drugs, but I can’t always tell you where I can find some kindness.”

We looked at the end of the story, when Abby and Gideon study some pipe cleaners bent into the shape of flowers in a store window and stuck into “cheap carnival glass.” By the story’s end Abby looks at those flowers again, this time as “graceful in their carved glass as fully living things.” I asked them to consider how Abby might be like those flowers. Gavin said she seems to be coming back to life; Jacob said she is starting to bloom.

Each week, after talking about the story, the participants write. That evening, some wrote about times when they felt their bodies failed them or they failed their bodies. They wrote about isolation; they wrote about the scars they have or scars they’ve hidden. Gavin wrote about his dad’s drug addiction and the emotional scars it left on him. Jacob wrote about never really being claimed by his father and the wound it has created.

I don’t know if it was the story, the writing prompt, or just the chemistry of who gathered in the room, but on this night, after each participant read, the group walked over as a unit to embrace the reader in a way that was not typical of Manos House.

I kept waiting for the hugs to turn into a joke, but they never did. It just happened to be one of those occasions when participants were willing to be vulnerable, in front of one

“That evening, some wrote about times when they felt their bodies failed them or they failed their bodies. They wrote about times of isolation; they wrote about the scars they have or scars they have hidden.”

another and for one another. And that place of vulnerability seemed like their greatest strength.

Looking For a Breakthrough at TASK

by Virginia Kerr

Chinua Achebe’s “Marriage Is a Private Affair” was the third story I chose for a Zoom series I facilitated last summer for the Trenton Area Soup Kitchen (TASK). The story has nothing to do with a pandemic, but like so many of our stories, its words and themes rise up to strike us in the moments we are living through.

When the TASK series started, we had been shut down for six months, the COVID-19 death count was rising and family visits, particularly with grandparents, had stopped. There was no sign of an endpoint.

Achebe’s story, set in Nigeria, tells of a young man, Nnaemeka, raised in a rural Ibo community, who goes to Lagos and falls in love with a woman, Nene, who is not Ibo. No one from his village has ever married outside of it. His father, Okeke, is deeply religious and disapproves of Nene, who is a teacher and not a woman who accepts the role set out for her in Okeke’s understanding of the Christian tradition. He refuses to accept the marriage, ceases all communication with his son, and says of Nene, “I shall never see her.”

Nnaemeka thinks his father will relent, but he does not. After eight years, Nene writes to Okeke, telling him that his two grandsons wish to meet him. Okeke tries to “steel his heart,” but a high wind rises, followed by the first rain of the year: “It was one of those rare occasions when even Nature takes a hand in a human fight.”

The story ends with this sentence: “That night he hardly slept, from remorse—and a vague fear that he might die without making it up to them.”

My TASK group was diverse, including one volunteer tutor and one participant in a rehab facility. Many of us, it turned out, worried that we or a loved one might die before we could see one another or resolve an old grudge that had come to seem unimportant. What I remember most is one participant’s comment: “If only winds would blow and it would rain when we needed something to tell us to listen to our hearts.”

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What Our Participants Say...

from Interim House, a substance abuse recovery program for women in Philadelphia:

“I enjoyed it a lot. I think it was great to have the discussion and bounce off people’s points of view, to think about things from different perspectives.”

—Toby

“I thought People & Stories was going to be boring when I got here. It turned out to be one of my favorite things. It makes your mind work. It makes you think. It makes you use different scenarios for things.”

—Renee

“I liked sharing with people, how we share and participate. Just getting good at reading, myself. It really helped me with that, also. I really appreciate that.”

—Tiffany

from a Crossing Borders series that brought together medical students from Drexel and older adults from UU Outreach and Cliveden Nursing Home in Northwest Philadelphia:

“Personally, the most memorable moment during this program was when all of the participants shared a memory of a

traumatic event that had happened during their childhood, most of us talked about 9/11 and it was fascinating to see the different perspectives of the same event...I did not expect to have such a wide range of ages in the program, but I am glad we did because it was great to hear from different perspectives...I felt that the people in the group became more and more comfortable expressing their opinions freely and without fear of judgment as time in the program went by.”

—Rim, a medical student

“It was interesting hearing the differences in thought in younger people vs. older people. The interactions and hearing the opinions of others on issues of life was interesting.”

—Roslyn, an older adult

“Having the different age groups in the class was very interesting; I had never had a class with such a large age range. It was a very positive experience!

“This group allowed me to take a break from my busy schedule and get immersed in literature. This class gave me the opportunity to get to know some of the challenges that other people have faced in life and how they have persevered through those challenges...it was a safe place to share my thoughts and experiences.”

—Lauren, a medical student

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