

"I love short stories because I believe they are the way we live. They are what our friends tell us, in their pain and joy, their passion and rage, their yearning and their cry against injustice."

—Andre Dubus



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word of mouth

NEWS FROM PEOPLE & STORIES / GENTE Y CUENTOS

Elm Court exults: In-person groups resume Longtime participants stayed in touch during hiatus

by Anndee Hochman

Pat Smith didn't realize how tightly wound she'd been until the moment, around the People & Stories table at Elm Court in Princeton, when she finally let go.

The longtime group of seniors, first launched at a different location in 2008, stopped meeting abruptly at the beginning of the pandemic. Zoom sessions weren't possible for this crowd of older adults; not everyone had a computer or the tech-savviness to navigate a virtual group.

Throughout the hiatus, participants continued to e-mail—"I miss everyone. How are you doing?"—and keep tabs on each other's health, families and well-being. In early May, with everyone vaccinated and boosted, and mask requirements relaxed, the group gathered again.

"You would have thought it was a family reunion," Smith says. "Everybody coming in with hugs and squeals...and the sadness because a couple of people had passed. I was closed up for so long. But I'm sitting there at the table and felt a little bit lighter."

Group dynamics hadn't changed, says Smith. "The same people who argue, still argue. The people who try to stop it still do that. There were lots of laughs, lots of yells."

Among the stories in the spring series was "The Arrangers of Marriage" by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. In that story, a Nigerian man who has been living in America for eleven years brings his new bride to join him, insisting that she assimilate in language and culture. "A lot of the women who immigrated here themselves could relate to it," Smith says.

Over the years, she's noted how participants both challenge and bolster one another. "I remember some women who were Caucasian saying they didn't realize some of the things they thought and believed and did were so off-putting to African-Americans." And when one woman expressed wariness about speaking her mind in front of male participants, another responded, "It doesn't matter what they think. It matters what *you* think!"

"After that particular session," Smith says, "every week, something was brought up about how alike we were, no matter where we came from...It's a mixed group of all kinds of people who found out that they all have a lot in common."

For the final session, I had the honor of being a guest writer with my autobiographical story, "Beautiful Girls," about my struggle to respond when strangers commented, in relation to my young daughter, "She's beautiful. Does her daddy lock her up on weekends?"

While snacking on homemade poppyseed cake and fresh pineapple, the sixteen participants talked about the sexualization of children, the influences of social media, the persistence of gendered double standards and the challenge of teaching our kids to be both brave and safe.

The conversation included personal disclosures—one woman said her brother was molested as a boy and didn't reveal that to her until midlife—and moments of humor. One participant described seeing a bowl of brightly colored packets at a doctor's office and thinking they were candy. Then she realized they were condoms. "So I took two!" she said, and the women dissolved in laughter.

Smith says she's learned from this group that "age is really, truly just a number. These women: the things they have done and the things they still do...I want to be just like them when I grow up."

"You would have thought it was a family reunion. Everybody coming in with hugs and squeals...and the sadness because a couple of people had passed."

P&S/GyC Coordinators

Argentina
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California
Matthew Colvin
Patricia Estes
Darin Garr
Stefanie Gyles
Cristi Jenkins
Mitch Lindenbaum
Tanya Lindquist
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P&S adds new, returning board members

Program's first chair carries organizational memory

by *Anndee Hochman*

Keith Wheelock had taught at Raritan Valley Community College. He'd been a foreign service officer in Congo and Chile, and had worked with investment and management companies. But the teaching methods and philosophy he learned during a People & Stories coordinators' training was something new.

Wheelock met Sarah Hirschman more than 25 years ago, just as People & Stories was becoming a full-fledged non-profit organization; he was part of a porch conversation that resulted in the first board of directors, which he chaired.

"It was Sarah's passion, enthusiasm and the way that she had defined a process" that intrigued him. "The coordinators would facilitate, but they didn't have the answers."

Wheelock began leading programs at Somerset County Jail, where he often felt stunned by participants' insight. "One person said, 'This

is the first time I've been treated as a human being for years.' [This was] a person who'd spent half his life in jail; to hear him interpret Eveline by James Joyce—[he had] a better understanding than anybody with a master's in English."

He recalls one man responding to Langston Hughes' "Thank You, M'am," by saying, "That's me and my mother;" and how participants cherished copies of the stories—

staples carefully removed by Wheelock, in keeping with the facility's rules—sometimes asking for extra copies to share with a family member.

"I think [People & Stories] is even more important now. For helping people get over a tough spot, they first have to get in touch with themselves and realize they're not alone. I think [People & Stories] has changed lives."

The pedagogy of People & Stories—the organization's foundational belief in human beings—spilled over to Wheelock's college teaching. One day a student announced that he was in the

class "to flunk World Civ. "What I'd realized from People & Stories was that people needed other people to believe in them." So



Wheelock responded, "Not only will you not flunk, you will do well and take World Civ 2 and do well.' It was the first time anyone had ever told him that he was good."

Wheelock learned to prepare for a story discussion while remaining open and responsive to participants' questions and thoughts. He learned to embrace short silences and never to say "that's wrong." And he realized that not all short stories worked with all populations. He kept notes on every discussion, dating back 20 years, and often thinks of how much he learned from the men at Somerset County Jail.

Wheelock was an avid reader as a child, tearing through all the Oz books and poring over the New York Times at age seven in order to keep pace with his parents. "In the summer, at the library, I was upset because I could only take out three books at a time. I've been a reader all my life, and a writer."

In 2000, when he underwent surgery for colon cancer, Wheelock left active involvement in P&S/GyC. But he remained connected—through his wife, Georgia Whidden, a longtime board member, and through his enduring interest in literature, teaching and community.

For incarcerated men, Wheelock says, People & Stories groups may have been the first time they were invited to express emotions, within the context, safety and structure of a story discussion.

"I think [People & Stories] is even more important now. For helping people get over a

tough spot, they first have to get in touch with themselves and realize they're not alone," he says. I think [People & Stories] has changed lives."

As a child in Buenos Aires, Argentina, Susana Plotquin wandered on solo adventures from bookstore to bookstore: giant emporiums whose interiors felt like works of art or tiny stores crammed with dusty volumes.

"I went all the time," says Plotquin, an artist, teacher, translator, composer and musician who recently joined the People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos board. "So many years ago, you didn't need an adult to take you anywhere. You just took the subway or walked. We were less free in many other ways; but in that way, we were more free."

Plotquin first encountered P&S/GyC at the spring 2022 gala featuring author Susan Choi. But it wasn't the event itself that hooked her. "It was the story of Gente y Cuentos," she says. "I got curious, went to the website and got the book," by founder Sarah Hirschman. "I work with other organizations trying to help people who don't have the resources they need. But I have never worked in an organization that works with people who don't get to have literature. Being a teacher, and being always in contact with people who suffer for different reasons, I thought: This is phenomenal."

In addition to teaching at Parsippany Hills High School, where she was a lead educator in the world language department, Plotquin also taught Spanish and Latin American Studies at Rutgers University; she has volunteered with HelpArgentina, Solidaridad Princeton and the Latin American Legal Defense and Education Fund in Trenton. A visual artist who uses weaving, crochet and macrame to create wall pieces, Susana is also

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a composer and musician. She raised two daughters in Buenos Aires and northern New Jersey and currently lives in Bordentown.

Teaching has been her profession and her passion. "[I love] the connection with somebody who wants to learn, and being able to guide them. I always worked with kids and teenagers; I love the back-and-forth that goes on with them. I love everything about teaching. I worked for half of my career as a music teacher, half as a Spanish teacher. I'm retired now. The subject doesn't matter; it's the education that counts."



The daughter of avid readers, Plotquin loves Latin American authors including Julio Cortázar, Laura Restrepo and Mario Benedetti. "The beautiful thing is that they are from different countries (Argentina, Colombia and Uruguay), from different perspectives of life."

Plotquin believes that by reading together, participants find connections between the text, their own lives and the lives of others. Reading brings participants "close to something they never experienced before. As they make connections to their own lives, they see that other people are in the same place, and that helps them to heal whatever they need to heal. To see: Yes, I'm not the only one. Making connections with the literature, being close to the literature: I think that makes you stronger."

Erica Disch, co-founder of Sourland Mountain Spirits and the Triumph Brewing Company, and a Spanish teacher for fourteen years in Montgomery public schools, also recently joined the People & Stories board. She was unavailable for an interview by the time of publication. Her profile will appear in a future issue.

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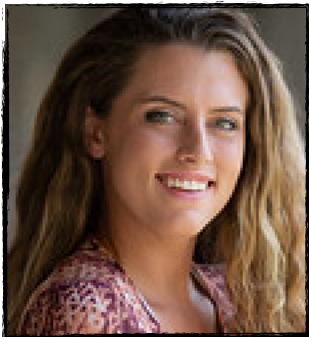
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Scott Feifer
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Anndee Hochman

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Faith Kelley
Chelsea Kirkland
Deborah McKinney
Megan McNitt
Emily Menchal
My Nguyen
David Quick
Myra Remegio-
Leonard
Janice Rosen
Tatyana Safronova
Jayanthi Sambasivan
Janna Tanner
Alexis Waide
Eric White

From Executive Director Cheyenne Wolf

A focus on hiring and strengthening staff to spark the next 50 years



Fifty years ago, our founder Sarah Hirschman launched her first Gente y Cuentos program. She described her reason for starting the program as “... very, very modest. I just wanted to share my love of reading and enjoyment of literature with people who had not had the opportunity to read. Also, it was finding a way of communicating with people whom I never had had a chance to know.”

Both our mission and our methodology are essentially the same today as they were in 1972—a powerful testament to the strength and longevity of our work against the backdrop of a rapidly changing world. Existing for half a century is reason enough to celebrate, but I’m pleased to share some added causes for celebration in 2022:

- In early January, we began our intensive “HR Refit” project—a year-long endeavor aimed at strengthening our human resources efforts and reviving our staff. Fueled by a generous grant from the Bunbury Fund of the Princeton Area Community Foundation, we have been fortunate to receive on-demand advisory services from HR expert Jessica Moore of ThriveWise Solutions. Jessica helped us to overhaul our workplace policies and procedures, including the creation of an employee handbook, as well as to hire not one but *two* outstanding new staff members.
- A National Endowment for the Humanities American Rescue Plan grant supported the addition of our new Program Manager, María Sáiz, in March. María, our first staff member who is a native speaker of Spanish, has been a passionate coordinator with years of experience facilitating Gente y Cuentos programs. María’s unique perspective and creative ideas, together with her love of literature and deep respect for our method, have helped us to shape and deliver on strategic programming goals. We also received a major two-year American Rescue Plan grant from the National Endowment for the Arts to support the hiring of our new Communications Manager, Debra Lampert-Rudman, in mid-June. I have no doubt that Debra’s impressive skills, together with her enthusiasm and ambitious goal- setting, will help drive awareness and propel our mission forward.

Hiring and on-boarding new staff members was no easy feat amid what many are now calling “The Great Resignation”—a phrase coined by an organizational psychologist in May 2021 to describe the higher-than-usual number of employees switching careers and/or leaving the workforce entirely. But hiring is only part of the equation; this fall, we are focused on training and retaining staff and solidifying our exceptional team. P&S/GyC staff has begun monthly “lunch and learn” training sessions, and I’ve been taking full advantage of one-on-one coaching to advance my leadership skills and learn how best to manage employees. It’s clear to me that our programs are needed now more than ever. Investing in our growth as individuals and as a team will pave the way for our next 50 years of sustainable growth.

Join us for 50th Anniversary celebratory events happening this fall! To learn more and register, visit: www.peopleandstories.org/upcoming-events

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Cheyenne Wolf'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal line underneath.

P&S/GyC Welcomes Two New Staff Members

Program director and communications manager vow to boost visibility

by Anndee Hochman

The first time María Sáiz planned to facilitate Gente y Cuentos, at the Latin American Legal Defense and Education Fund (LALDEF) in Trenton, the building was



locked and ringed with caution tape.

"This woman, maybe from Guatemala, said, 'Don't worry. I'm going to take you to a restaurant one or two blocks away,'" Sáiz recalls. "Inside the restaurant, they were watching a soccer game. They had to turn off the TV. These women, they love the program so much that they didn't say, 'Let's go home.' We did it there."

For Sáiz, a native of Spain and longtime teacher of Spanish at high school and college levels, that day demonstrated the power of P&S/GyC, a program she learned about after moving to Princeton five years ago with her husband and their daughter, Nora. "P&S/GyC is such a unique organization. I'd never heard of any nonprofit that just wanted to bring literature to different audiences to let them enjoy it."

Sáiz took the coordinator training and, with mentorship from Alma Concepción, began to facilitate programs at the Children's Home Society (CHS) and the Puerto Rican Association in Perth Amboy. She recently became program manager.

She remembers her first Gente y Cuentos group at CHS: the story concerned a wife who was unfulfilled in her marriage. "One woman said, 'If you're married, it's forever. You do it under God.' Another said, 'Yeah, but if you are not happy, you better leave and start over.' Talking about topics and sharing opinions in a safe space...I guess for a lot of us, that might be the only time we can do that in our week."

In light of the past two years of pandemic-induced isolation and anxiety, Sáiz believes people need the solace

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and connection of P&S/GyC. "We live in our own bubbles. We need to be more empathetic and to listen. Everybody could benefit from these programs."

Debra Lampert-Rudman worked at the Princeton Barnes & Noble bookstore for seven years, arranging author appearances and community events. She'd never heard of People & Stories.

That, she says, is both a problem and an opportunity. As the organization's new communications manager, she hopes to boost P&S/GyC's visibility and widen its circle of supporters.

"When I found out about People & Stories, I thought: Why doesn't everybody know about this?" she says. "When I learned there was an opportunity to use my skills to help get the word out, I thought: This is for me."

In addition to working with Barnes & Noble, Lampert-Rudman has taught ceramics and watercolor at the Arts Council of Princeton. She's written children's books and a nonfiction title, *The Golden Age of Dog Shows*. Her own literary tastes range from rom-coms to the poetry of John Keats.



People & Stories taps all of her passions. While working at Barnes & Noble, she says, part of her mission was "finding ways for this big corporation to touch people," which meant everything from a Harry Potter night that drew 3600 people to a literacy program for young mothers experiencing homelessness and their children.

Lampert-Rudman envisions scaling up P&S programs to include more facilitators who can "go out into the world and bring this great gift." To raise the organization's visibility, she's started an Instagram account and plans to step up its Facebook presence.

In June, Lampert-Rudman attended her first P&S session, a program at Elm Court facilitated by longtime coordinator Pat Smith.

"When I first walked in, two women just grabbed me by the arm and said, 'I've been coming here for 20 years!' They couldn't wait to share what it means to them." During the discussion, she noted the variety of opinions and perspectives. "When they disagreed, they accepted that there was disagreement. Why isn't the world like this?"

Life mirrors literature in Gente y Cuentos group

Readers at Puerto Rican Association share confidences and trust

by María Sáiz

He was a new face, a first-time participant in the Gente y Cuentos series at the Puerto Rican Association in Perth Amboy. Usually, groups there are comprised of older women who have been part of Gente y Cuentos for years, but each series brings a few newcomers, and this spring, we welcomed a small group of men for the first time.

He was Cuban and had come to New Jersey via Venezuela, after four months of traveling through Latin America.

"I would not change my trip for even one day in Cuba," he declared. "Things are getting really bad there. There is no medicine, no food, no milk for children. People are tired. The repression is brutal. They just took a group of twelve-year-old boys to prison because they had happened to be out in the street with people during a demonstration."

That was not the only time we were astonished by a participant's story.

It was a powerful experience to see, over and over, how ordinary life reflected the issues from the short stories we read. "Juan Darién" by Horacio Quiroga, about a little tiger who turns into a child after being breastfed by a woman

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by Horacio
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about the
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violence against
those who are
different from
us."

who later is tortured by the townspeople, brought out a discussion about the senselessness of violence against those who are different from us.

Sadly, at the end of the session, I learned that one of the women who used to attend the program was not coming because her son had been murdered in a fight months earlier. "We have visited her a few times. She is doing better, but her life was changed forever," another participant told me.

Life was again mirroring literature when we read "Los almendrones de enero," a story by José Balza about a middle-aged man who feels guilty about losing contact with his family following a move to the city when he was twenty years old. A woman who used to pop into the sessions just to say "hi" told us that, unfortunately, families grow apart over time.

"It is nobody's fault. I am the youngest of nine siblings, and only three of us are still alive. Some came to the U.S., and some stayed in Cuba. I just lost a sister yesterday. It is hard when all your family is far away, but it helps that I have friends here in the Puerto Rican Association."

The hardships of life that the group shared stunned us; those confidences also showed the high level of trust among participants. Having a safe place where people can express themselves and listen to others is such a valuable experience.

When that participant—the one who had just lost a sister—left in a hurry, with the excuse that she was waiting for a package delivery, some participants expressed worry about her. We finished the session with hope and gratitude for being part of a community that helps them stay connected with others as they age.

What our participants are saying about People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos:

- "The group was so diverse that I had to put myself in someone else's shoes to understand their point."
- "As I came to be more familiar with the participants, I felt more willing to share."
- "I now read stories to my children and create with my imagination."
- "It was cathartic to identify myself with some of the characters."
- "I learned a new way to read and appreciate literature."
- "I learned to understand more than what I expected."
- "I love the sharing of thoughts and ideas with my neighbors. I learned so much more about them and myself."

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program partners, visit
[https://peopleandstories.org/get-
involved/partners](https://peopleandstories.org/get-involved/partners)

Crossing Borders group spans generations

Teaching, learning, mentoring travel in both directions

by Anndee Hochman

The idea was to breach generational chasms: a Crossing Borders group comprised of students from Drexel University College of Medicine, mostly in their 20s, and older adults connected with the UU House Outreach Program in Northwest Philadelphia.

There were other differences: the older adults were mostly (though not all) Black; the students had ancestral roots in Syria, China and Europe. The younger participants used Zoom fluently while the older adults sometimes faltered—audio but no video, or a shaky Internet connection.

In some ways, the Zoom format blurs distinctions; when we appear, it's in same-sized rectangles, from the shoulders up, with no indication of who is ambulatory and who might have trouble with balance, who drives a car and who depends on others to get from here to there.

And though it surprised me, later, to realize this, I wasn't thinking of the particulars of this group when I chose our first story, "Abalone Abalone," by Toshio Mori. I was thinking instead of this story's poetic repetitions, how much it leaves unsaid and how—with its themes of devotion, beauty and legacy—it might speak to readers of any background.

I opened with an introductory question: "If you were a vending machine, what would you vend?" Responses spilled forth, irrespective of age: "an inspirational word...party mix...peace...fresh flowers...kindness...fruit and vegetables...crafting supplies...smiles."

Then we turned to the title: Why, I asked, does the writer use the word "Abalone" three times rather than just once? Repetition, they said, can indicate reverence or emphasis, as in the "I have a dream" phrase from Martin Luther King Jr.'s famous address.

From there, our discussion ranged wide: we talked about parenthood and role models, about the impact of learning through words or through actions, about the shells collected by the story's older character, Mr. Abe, as metaphors for the carapaces we all carry and the interior lives we hesitate to reveal.

The students talked about mentors: Kevin had a friend in college, just one year older, who helped him become more comfortable expressing his emotions. Yasmine learned about resilience from a childhood pal who had leukemia. Julianne described her grandmother teaching her to re-use tea leaves to brew more than one cup.

It was clear, through these stories, that teaching and learning are multi-directional; age-peers and younger people influence us along with those who are older. We can't predict, based on chronological age, where wisdom will lodge or whom we will affect.

It was Ernestine, one of the older adults, who swiftly Googled "abalone" and told us that the shells don't have much monetary value. "The value was in how [Mr. Abe] felt about them," someone added.

The story's imagery helped up-end stereotypical images of age (cragged, weather-beaten, ugly) and youth (lustrous, dewy, smooth) as we read the description of the first shell the narrator cleans, with its rough exterior and stunning inner side. Roberta thought the young man, like the abalone, started out "rough," then became "polished" through his devotion to the shells.

Renee pointed out that hardship doesn't correspond with age. "We all have scabs and scars," she said. I watched the Zoom boxes: heads, older and younger, nodding in assent.

One participant noted an "unspoken community" between the two shell-collectors. And I realized that this story was an apt emblem for the group itself, a multi-generational community that would grow through reverent (and irreverent) expression of questions and ideas, a gradual accrual (abalone, abalone, abalone) of the human experience we share.

"We talked about the shells collected by the story's older character, Mr. Abe, as metaphors for the carapaces we all carry and the interior lives we hesitate to reveal."

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On the bookshelf...

The Roots of Educational Inequality: Philadelphia's Germantown High School, 1907-2014. By Erika M. Kitzmiller. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2022.

by Anndee Hochman

In June 2013, Germantown High School—a near-century-old Philadelphia public school once regarded as an academic beacon—closed its doors for good. It was one of twenty-three schools shuttered that year—closures that, according to School District superintendent William Hite, were necessary in the face of plummeting enrollment, low achievement and a persistent fiscal crisis.

In *The Roots of Educational Inequality: Philadelphia's Germantown High School, 1907-2014*, Barnard professor of education Erika M. Kitzmiller points out that the undoing of Germantown High didn't begin with the "school choice" movement of the past two decades, or with the racial tumult of the 1960s, or even with postwar white flight to suburban and private schools.

Kitzmiller tells a story that is both bleaker and more nuanced, arguing that in Philadelphia, as in other U.S. cities, inequities of race, class and access were baked into the school system from the start.

Germantown High was once considered a top-tier school, a place that drew middle-class families to the neighborhood and

lit the way for its graduates toward college admission, professional careers and comfortable lives.

But Kitzmiller, who raked over school and district archives and interviewed dozens of former students, parents, faculty and administrators, also found enduring racial segregation, fiscal uncertainty and a reliance on private funding. The result: what she calls "doubly advantaged" schools—that is, schools that serve predominantly white, middle-class students whose families then bolster the schools with financial resources, volunteer time and social capital.

Germantown High was never an equal-opportunity arena, she notes; Black and female youth were routinely barred from extracurricular programs, and students had to pony up fees for school activities, supplementing always-inadequate public budgets.

Kitzmiller shows how Germantown High was shaped by changing demographics, restrictive real estate practices, desegregation efforts and racial strife. But the school also suffered from a series of choices made by leaders who often prioritized the needs of white, middle-class families over those of Black, poor and immigrant students.

That points to the book's sole glimmer of hope—that if human actions and choices led to the demise of a once-promising high school, then our actions and choices can also redress those wrongs and foster a system that provides an equitable, accessible and meaningful education to all.



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