

Reading deeply across the USA, thanks to NEH

Aida Quiñones finished reading “Mamá de Niebla,” Poldy Bird’s story about a mother who goes to a mental hospital, leaving behind her bewildered daughter. She asked one question of the group, a half-dozen women, most from Mexico or Latin America, who live near the Pinewoods Library and Community Learning Center in Athens, Georgia.

“Who is this mother? Why doesn’t she have a name?”

One woman began to cry. “She talked about losing her mother when she was very young. She identified with the feeling that child had,” Quiñones said.

Quiñones, the library’s branch manager, hoped “Reading Deeply in Community,” part of the National Endowment for the Humanities grant that has brought People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos to states from California to Georgia, might spur the women—most of whom could not read or write—to explore more library programs.

She didn’t expect a dive into emotional territory. When the group read “Juan Darien” by Horacio Quiroja, the women recognized the baby tiger as a metaphor for themselves. “They said, ‘We live in a place where we cannot show our stripes.’”

At first, Quiñones said, participants were shy; by the end, “they all wanted to express themselves... The topics were touching very deeply in their lives—about their growing-up, their identities here, the difference between their culture and their kids’ culture, the language barriers. At the end, I could sense they had this urgency: I need to know how to speak English.”

In Pell City, Alabama, youth services librarian Kelly Cardenas partnered with The WellHouse, a program that rescues women from sex trafficking.

“I worked with the new rescues, women straight off the streets—most between 17 and 22,” Cardenas said. “Some were so intelligent; they could have been anything.”

When the group read “Do Not Attempt to Climb Out,” the story of a middle-aged janitor stuck in the elevator of the high-rise where he works, participants said they, too, had felt the panicky, “domino stuck in the throat” feeling that comes with awareness of a constricted situation.

When they read Bernard Malamud’s “The Model,” they understood the older artist’s yearning to “refresh his soul,” Cardenas said. She asked what they did to capture that sense of renewal. “One girl said she liked to draw animé. Another girl said she liked to write stories. Another said she does embroidery. It was a part of them they’d almost forgotten about.”

Sioux Center, Iowa, has seen its Latino population leap by 110% between 2000 and 2014; the community school is now more than one-third Latino. The mothers in Ruth Mahaffy’s *Gente y Cuentos* series—aged 27-48 and mostly from Mexico—wanted to help their kids thrive.

Mahaffy partners with Northwest Iowa Community College to offer GED classes at the library, where she directs bilingual services. For the “Reading Deeply” series, she visited that GED class once a week.

“With the GED, they feel a lot of pressure to perform,” she said. “This was something refreshing for them, that we could just enjoy the story, that it wasn’t about right and wrong.”

Stories that highlighted tricky parent/ child dilemmas sparked the liveliest discussions: When to protect children from harsh realities, and when to tell them the truth? “One mother had to leave her child in Mexico for a few months when the child was really little. [We talked] about how to show your child you love them when you can’t always make easy choices.”

Mahaffy treasured the words of one woman who approached her after the first session. “Thank you,” she said. “It’s been so long since someone read me a story.”

Through P&S, strangers become problem-solvers

by Maile McGrew-Fredé

“Jesse, do you think maybe People & Stories could *save the world*?”

I was asking the question facetiously, anticipating a smile from my friend and co-facilitator Jesse Koshlaychuk.

Together, we run “Reading Deeply in Community” sessions at the Rountree Medium Facility for incarcerated men in Watsonville, California.

“YES!” Jesse blurted, with a warm laugh, “I believe it can!” And I suddenly pictured millions of short-story circles spread over the earth like vigil candles—beacons slowly brightening the brutal dark of a planet tipping into chaos.

I am a librarian. It does not surprise me that literature is powerful, that it possesses the ability to transform hearts and minds. I’ve participated in, and led, other book groups. I keep trying to put my finger on how this is different. Perhaps what is unique about People & Stories is the way a collective wisdom and trust emerges and evolves through each session, transforming a group of near strangers (and possible enemies) into a group of humans, neighbors, possibly even friends. You can almost feel the tangible emergence of what Yann Martel calls the “empathetic imagination.”

After reading “Spilled Salt,” by Barbara Neely, Nick—one of the approximately 12 men who attend our sessions—said he had always thought rapists should get a lethal injection, but was re-thinking that position after encountering the protagonist’s struggle to forgive and accept her adult son, convicted of rape and recently back from prison. “Killing Kenny wouldn’t have fixed it,” he said. “Kenny was also someone’s child.”

When we read “Ovrashki’s Trains,” by Lara Vapnyar, Jacob was struck by the description of a seashell the little girl finds among her absent father’s things: “I thought maybe the sea had been in there

before, but then had seeped out.” He believed this single line contained the story’s entire poignancy; he added that he *never ever* wants his own young daughter to wonder what has happened to him, to wrestle with a barely understood sense of loss.

Another participant, in response to that story, remembered finding out at age 18 that his father was not dead, as the family had always maintained, but instead was serving a 17-year prison sentence. That information could have made all the difference for him as a child, he said, countering deep feelings of abandonment.

After reading “The Thing Around Your Neck” by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Xavier, his Aryan nation tattoos bristling across neck, scalp and fingers, recalled having been forbidden to interact with “the tribal girls” from a neighboring village near his home. He said he identified with the main character’s sense of “being an outsider,” then explained to the group that the “thing around her neck” is “a paralyzing fear.”

After we read “Mother Dear and Daddy” by Junius Edwards, an African-American participant who had been silent addressed the group for the first time, eloquently outlining the differences between house slaves and field slaves as the origin of an American caste system based on skin color. Jim described feeling judged by his own relatives for his wide African features, kinky hair and dark skin.

People & Stories discussions do something I think is truly rare: they set up an atmosphere in which human dignity is presumed for all. The stories start us off in a safe zone, with everyone literally on the same page. And even though there may be a wide spectrum of interpretations about what has transpired, or why it transpired that way, the humanity in the story always seems to re-unify the group.

Yet there is also no guarantee of simple agreement. The People & Stories approach encourages something better: collaborative teasing apart of views, ideas and voices. It encourages discernment and generative dialogue, even a sort of civic-minded problem solving. I find it to be one of the most hopeful things I can do with my time each week.

**“There is no doubt
fiction makes a better
job of the truth.”**

--Doris Lessing

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Does literature aid in pursuit of happiness?

by Patricia Andres

Reading made People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos founder Sarah Hirschman happy.

In an unpublished paper written near the end of her life, Hirschman reflected on her relationship with literature: “I often exclaim, ‘I just love to read!’ and my friends understand what I mean by that—I love losing myself in fictional worlds, I love the adventure of following a tale...

“I know, too, that that particular experience adds something special to my life that is hard to describe and even harder to quantify but that adds to my well-being, my quality of life, and yes, to my happiness.”

Here, Hirschman echoed what may be the first work of literary criticism, Aristotle’s *Poetics*, in which he names pleasure as the core experience born of connecting with a poetic work. Yet, at a time when literature and the humanities seem to need more justification than ever, are happiness, pleasure and well-being enough?

In her paper, Hirschman also outlined a number of specific benefits that come from reading literature—and particularly from the shared dialogues that follow the reading in a P&S/GyC session. Those include: emotional tension that stimulates critical thought; an understanding of different points of view, which promotes tolerance; an identification with varied characters that can prompt more complex understandings of self; and an acquisition of new cultural referents that can lead to a deeper understanding of the world. Those benefits correspond with the “outcome domains” we use to assess participant gains: critical thinking, literacy, cultural context, authentic voice, well-being, engagement and understanding of self and others.

Yes, outcomes such as well-being, understanding and happiness are difficult to measure. However, these are the gifts that make literature—and the humanities in general—crucial to our growth and

capacities as people. How different a world might we have if more people experienced the deepening of the empathic imagination that literature promotes?

Cognitive psychologists and neuroscientists have recently explored the impact of sustained contact, through narrative, with a character’s interior landscape. Research shows that “theory of mind,” the capacity to intuit and construct a mental map of other people’s feelings and intentions, is sharpened by reading fiction.

“Narratives offer a unique opportunity to engage this capacity, as we identify with characters’ longings and frustrations, guess at their hidden motives and track their encounters with friends and enemies, neighbors and lovers,” wrote Annie Murphy Paul in “Your Brain on Fiction,” a 2012 article in *The New York Times*.

Paul, author of the forthcoming book *Brilliant: The New Science of Smart*, noted two studies showing that individuals who frequently read fiction seem better able to understand others, empathize with them and see the world from their perspective. Literature, then, does more than boost our own, singular well-being; it invites us to be changed by another’s experience.

Danielle Allen, a Harvard professor who is researching People & Stories’ outcomes, wrote in *The Washington Post*, “Let’s not forget that you can’t do well in math and engineering if you can’t read proficiently, and that reading is the province of courses in literature, language and writing. Nor can you do well in science and technology if you can’t interpret images and develop effective visualizations—skills that are strengthened by courses in art and art history.”

If we turn away from the humanities, we lose an essential aspect of ourselves. In a recent *New York Times* piece, “Don’t Turn Away from the Art of Life,” Brown University professor of comparative literature Arnold Weinstein writes about new technologies that enable us to swiftly find the most direct route to a destination.

“Finding an address is one thing,” Weinstein wrote. “Finding one’s way in life is another.” As participants and facilitators discover through the readings and conversations of People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos, fiction can provide a rich—and delightful—map.

“There have been great societies who did not use the wheel, but there have been no societies that did not tell stories.”

--Ursula K. LeGuin

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Stories unlock “real issues” at Bo Robinson Talking with Eric Freund

***“Stories have to be told
or they die, and when
they die, we can’t
remember who we are
or why we’re here.”***

--Sue Monk Kidd

Before he’d learned the People & Stories method, before he’d even heard of the program, Eric Freund was already trying to sneak authentic questions into his high school classroom.

Freund, an English teacher who began his career in Portland, Oregon and now works in an economically deprived neighborhood of Edinburgh, Scotland, had long admired Paolo Freire’s theories of pedagogy as a form of social justice.

He tried, in his own classroom, to offer a counterpoint to the relentless drumbeat of standardized testing, emphasizing a “more holistic citizenship education. We take a piece of literature, and...I have high school kids bring their own experiences into it.”

When Freund’s family decamped for New Jersey in 2015—his wife was a visiting professor at Princeton University—he learned about People & Stories, read founder Sarah Hirschman’s book about the program and became a Crossing Borders participant at the Bo Robinson Assessment and Treatment Center in Trenton.

He recalls feeling jittery on his first visit: the windowless room, the posters with self-help aphorisms, the two dozen men in identical jumpsuits seated in a circle. Ninety minutes later, “I walked out of there, thinking, ‘Wow, what a privilege I’ve just had, discussing a story, discussing life and sharing all our commonalities.’”

Later, Freund became a coordinator of the Bo Robinson program. He was struck by the men’s unflagging respect for each other’s views. Sometimes, Freund said, a participant would make a sexist or homophobic comment and, before he could respond, “someone else will step up and, in a very non-confrontational way, make sure that person knows what was said was prejudiced.

“In this space, where I’m supposedly sitting with people who are too dangerous to be part of our society, I’m thinking that

if we had this level of discourse everywhere, we wouldn’t have the problems that we have.

“One guy said to me, ‘The discourse [in prison] is boring; everybody talks about music and videos. Here, we talk about real issues.’” For instance, after a recent reading of Tim O’Brien’s “The Things They Carried,” the group discussed masculinity and the lengths to which men go in order to hide their emotions.

The men at Bo loved stories by Louise Erdrich and Sherman Alexie. They responded powerfully to “Where I Slept,” by Stephen Elliott, the chronicle of a teenaged boy’s year of being homeless; the story includes themes of sexual abuse and parental neglect. “It touches on the things that are really traumatic in people’s lives. It brings up issues of how we see what we want to see,” Freund said.

In April, Freund coordinated the new People & Stories series at HomeFront Family Campus in Ewing; participants were primarily mothers who either lived on-site or came to the center for work training or GED classes. “A lot of the women have said, ‘I want to do this because I want to write.’ They’re interested in sharing their own experiences as they touch on the stories.”

Freund, who returned to Edinburgh in June, said he would carry aspects of People & Stories with him.

“So much of what occurs in the classroom, even at its best, is trying to lead people to some end. Open-ended questions are infinitely more useful in learning.” People & Stories also refutes the notion that only certain texts qualify for discussion. “In any good piece of literature, everything’s there,” he said. “It’s really about thinking of great questions that will inspire people to respond.”

Freund said he might try to lead a People & Stories program at the prison or in the community of Edinburgh. In the meantime, he’ll recall the spontaneous applause that followed every reading at Bo Robinson. He’ll remember how the men swarmed the bookshelves before leaving the room, hungry for reading material to sustain them until the next session.

“They are fascinated with being able to leave prison for a while, through reading—

Coordinators:

New York

Alma Concepción
Deborah Salmon

France

Katia Salomon

to step into someone else's shoes, to go places where they may not be able to go. They're coming to see themselves as readers."

The men at Bo sometimes wrote in response to the stories. The following two pieces were inspired by "The Delight Song of Tsoai-talee," a poem by N. Scott Momaday.

Am I the smoke,
or am I the drug?
If he is the bullet,
then I am the gun.
Am I the disconnected heat pipe
or the writer's breath of a meek life
or the darkness that follows
a broken street light?
Am I the scar on a whore's face,
or an open court case?
Am I an empty crack vial,
or an unpaid support payment?
Am I that child?
Am I the drug given to the kid,
or the late night sneaky uncle
your daughter's living with
because of your Baby's Mother
or the gun given to your Baby Brother?
Am I the two fucks given
so why even bother?

I am the responsibility of being a Father!

by Kevin

I Am

I am a father and a son
a revolutionist of one.
I am a giver and a taker
original man, I am a maker.
I am a student
sometimes a teacher.
And on my off days,
I may be neither.

A man of morals,
a child at times.
A savage beast, those traits are mine.
A lover of art, an artful lover.
A friend to some, an enemy to others.
A master of manipulation!

Don't panic though,
It's all in our nature.

And after all those things I claim to be,
there's still one more:
I am Free!

by E. Greene

The prompt for this piece was: Write a "how-to" for something you've learned in life. This is an excerpt.

How I Survived Poverty and My Own Thinking

I grew up in extreme poverty! I remember coming home from school, running to watch cartoons and looking in the 'frigerator and finding nothing but a glass of water. Me and my brothers used to eat mayonnaise sandwiches, ketchup and mustard sandwiches and anything that we had was fair game. My mother had four boys and we survived on welfare. I remember on Christmas the only thing we got was a pizza and a 2-liter soda and my mother had to get that on credit from the store owner.

My mother used to buy her clothes mainly from The Reserve Mission, and when she did buy us new clothes she went without any. This made me realize at a very young age—nine years old—that if I was going to get any new clothes I was going to have to go out and get them myself. That's when I learned how to "boost" (shoplift), steal cars, and do burglaries.

...As I grew older, I learned through observation and older peers that I needed discipline because I had no father to do it for me. So I joined the Armed Forces, my brother under me did the same, and this was the beginning of me changing my thinking and trying to change my life. Then I went back to school and got my GED and my brothers did the same. I went to college; my brother under me did the same.

...So I changed my own thinking, and some of my brothers did the same. Now I'm constantly trying and striving to be the BEST ME I can be, and I'm not sorry about the things I've been through or the trials I've endured because I wouldn't be the person I am without them...I survived poverty and my own thinking and an adolescence. NOW I KNOW MYSELF!

by Robert Brooks

"...I cannot remember a time when I was not in love with them—with the books themselves, cover and binding and the paper they were printed on, with their smell and their weight and with their possession in my arms, captured and carried off to myself."

--Eudora Welty

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Cindy Welsh
Alexis Waide

Board welcomes 3 new members to promote P&S

Talking with Kate Baxter: The Business of Education

When Kate Baxter sees an ad or review for an intriguing new novel, she clicks onto Amazon and loads the titles into her virtual cart. Then she orders them from the Princeton Public Library.

"I'll have over 100 in my [Amazon] cart. Then I'll see: Oh, this one popped up at the library. It's kind of a fun way to read, since you don't always know what you're in the mood for."

As a child, books were both her escape and an affirmation. The youngest of five siblings, Baxter loved stories featuring take-charge girls; the Nancy Drew series was a favorite.

"I was an English major in college," she says. "I love to read all different things. I wish I could say I only read the Pulitzer Prize winners, but I have some guilty pleasures as well."

Baxter's work in academia—she moved from New York a year ago to become assistant dean of faculty at Princeton University—stirred her interest in People & Stories, which she learned about from board member Anne Seltzer.

"People & Stories has a little bit of everything I love," she says. "It has such a poignant mission—bringing literature to communities that may not have access to it. It can build people's confidence and make them more interested in learning. It's a way to use literature as a bridge to all these different worlds."

Before coming to Princeton, Baxter was executive director of alumni affairs at Columbia University's business school. That job demanded frequent travel and numerous events—"a lot of being 'on,'" she says. Her new job involves more administrative duties: working with university departments to plan curriculum, appoint visiting lecturers and conduct searches for assistant professors.

"I've worked in higher education for over

fifteen years—east coast, west coast, student life, faculty affairs," she says. "I love the idea of what education can do for people. It opens doors."

At the same time, Baxter says, running an educational organization—whether a small non-profit agency or a large university—is also a business. "We need to be strategic and mindful of the practicalities. "Whether I'm hiring faculty, working with students or trying to raise money, we're all doing it so the students can be the global citizens we're educating them to be."

Baxter also serves on the Friends of the Public Library board in Princeton and volunteers with Good Grief, which is devoted to helping children who have lost a parent or sibling. "I lost both my parents in my 20s; this seemed like a way to give back to a community that I can relate to."

And as the hectic pace of university life down-shifted a bit in June, Baxter had the perfect book on hand—*The After Party*, a novel about Houston socialites in the 1950s. "It's a fun, you-can-get-lost-in-it book for the start of summer."

Talking with Beth Filla: The Value of Connections

When Beth Filla first learned about People & Stories, she felt a pull in some deep pockets of memory.

As a teenager, she was left breathless by Herman Hesse's novel, *Siddhartha*. In her undergraduate days, while studying English and secondary education, she'd loved the idea of having high school students delve into literature as a way to dissolve the separations between them.

She'd spent years designing community-based education for non-profit groups, including Planned Parenthood. And as the owner of a yoga studio in Collingswood, New Jersey for the past decade, Filla had brought her students the practice of Jivamukti—a form of yoga rooted in philosophy, often accompanied by readings from the Bhagavad Gita or other texts.

When Filla and her husband, Brett Bonfield, relocated so he could become director of the Princeton Public Library, she met People & Stories board member Claire Jacobus and learned about the program's mission of changing lives through literature.

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

--Rudyard Kipling

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“It felt like a beautiful amalgamation of the things I’d been doing—not ever dumbing something down or segregating people based on your perception of what they want to read or what they would think is interesting.” She agreed to join the organization’s board.

“The thing I’m going to focus on most is helping out with a strategic plan”—something Filla has done for various organizations and school districts. “It’s hard to think broadly when you’re in the weeds, day to day. But I love to do that.”

As a child of the sit-com-saturated 1970s, Filla watched an inordinate amount of television. But there were always books available, along with a few junior high and high school English teachers who demanded rigor and excellence. “These teachers ‘taught up’ in a big way; they were challenging, demanding, quirky and interesting.”

She began college as an art history major, until she realized she was more eager to read the textbooks than to look at the actual art. She particularly loves studying the modern period in America: the confluence of literature, art and ideas that emerged after World War II.

After graduating, Filla taught high school for a few years, then moved to Philadelphia and worked for non-profit organizations; she trained staff, wrote curricula and led professional development sessions on organizational culture while earning her master’s in social work.

“I’m excited to work with a bunch of really intelligent, passionate people...to help continue the work that started so long ago, to figure out more ways to connect it with other places,” she says. “The [People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos] model can be replicated all over the place; I love that idea of interconnectivity.”

Talking with Lisa Sehgal: Words that Open Worlds

When Lisa Sehgal worked with Room to Read, an organization that aims to boost literacy and gender equality in education, she learned that fundraising works best when leaders think both large and small.

In Singapore, where Sehgal lived, worked and raised her children for nearly two decades, Room to Read would host a

mixture of elaborate and intimate events—from an annual gala with a steep per-person price tag to author readings followed by wine-and-cheese receptions for the after-work crowd.

“It doesn’t have to be a \$1000-per-person fundraiser every time,” Sehgal said. “It can be a series of small events that keep the ball rolling and keep the organization at the top of the mind for people.”

Sehgal hopes to bring some of those fundraising insights, along with her lifelong interest in literacy, to her work on the People & Stories board, which she joined last spring.

She loved the concept—exposing people to literature they might not otherwise have a chance to read—and was eager to observe a session at the Bo Robinson Assessment and Treatment Center.

Sehgal had never been in a prison before, and she wasn’t sure what to expect.

“It was mind-blowing. I was really taken aback by the openness of the participants, how they were willing to draw parallels between the story and their personal lives, and how trusting they felt. They were willing to be very frank about their reactions to the story—what they were feeling, what they were hoping for.”

The visit to Bo gave Sehgal a glimpse of an unfamiliar world; she believes books can do the same. That’s what attracted her about Room to Read, which partners with communities in Tanzania, Cambodia, Vietnam and elsewhere to build libraries, print books by local writers and artists and encourage education for girls. “It’s a wonderful concept—that if you give people books and teach them how to read, you are opening a world to them.”

Sehgal and her family were ex-patriates—first in Hong Kong, then in Singapore—for nearly twenty years. They moved back to the U.S. two years ago. “We wanted to be closer to family, and to have our children experience what the United States was like.”

For Sehgal, books were a primary source of entertainment when she was a child. “It’s painful to me to see so many kids sitting behind iPads and phones when they could be experiencing their own world or reading a book, using their imagination. When people don’t read, I worry that they’re letting part of their brain rest a little too much.”

“There is something in us, as storytellers and as listeners to stories, that demands the redemptive act, that demands that what falls at least be offered the chance to be restored.”

--Flannery O’Connor

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On the Bookshelf...

A Curious Mind: The Secret to a Bigger Life,
by Brian Grazer and Charles Fishman. New
York: Simon & Schuster, 2015.

Curiosity drives the People & Stories/
Gente y Cuentos method: Why did the author
use that metaphor? What does that image
evoke? Where are the tensions and missing
pieces?

According to Hollywood producer Brian
Grazer, curiosity also powers the meaningful
life. Since the late 1970s, Grazer, producer of
films including *Apollo 13*, *Splash* and *A
Beautiful Mind*, has held “curiosity
conversations” with more than 500 people—
entrepreneurs and elected officials, athletes
and artists, physicians and philosophers.

These wide-ranging, open-ended talks,
Grazer writes in *A Curious Mind: The Secret
to a Bigger Life*, have helped him become “a
better boss, a better friend, a

better businessman, a better dinner
guest...Curiosity is what gives energy and
insight to everything I do.”

He suggests that people who excel in their
fields—the product designer who imagines
how people will use a new device; the
physician who wants to know the story of
his patient’s symptoms; the filmmaker who
wonders what motivates a character—are all
using curiosity.

What’s more, says Grazer, curiosity, like
the People & Stories approach to literature,
is available to anyone. It helps people enter
and examine the perspective of others.
Curiosity can be revolutionary; consider the
person who questions the king or challenges
conventional ways of thinking about race,
class or gender. “Curiosity,” concludes
Grazer in this entertaining and thought-
provoking book, “isn’t just a way of
understanding the world. It’s a way of
changing it.”

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