

Puerto Rico GyC helps hurricane victims find voices

by *Anndee Hochman*

The site coordinator at the Gente y Cuentos group in “El Caño” had lost the roof of her house.

It was post-Hurricane María, and this group was one of five funded by a mini-grant from the Fundación Puertorriqueña de las Humanidades (the Puerto Rican Endowment for the Humanities). They read José Luis González’s despairing tale, “There’s a Little Colored-Boy at the Bottom of the Water,” about a community of internal migrants flanking a four-mile ribbon of stagnant water and raw sewage.

In this case, life had transcended art. In “El Caño,” the Caño Martín Peña community where González’s story is set, local activists began organizing in 2002 to clean up the river and transform their neighborhood.

“Because they had a history of engaging and solving problems, they were quick to respond to the hurricane,” explains Alma Concepción, director of Gente y Cuentos Puerto Rico, which began in 2015 when she led a training for sixteen facilitators at the University of Turabo.

“Hurricane María devastated the island,” says Concepción. “Many people lost their homes and jobs; families were split apart. But people began to develop self-sufficient projects in agriculture, in health.”

Several Gente y Cuentos groups operated on a volunteer basis prior to Hurricane María. After the storm, Gente y Cuentos Puerto Rico applied for the mini-grants to pay for copies and transportation to hold sessions in El Caño, along with a men’s prison in Guayama, a detention center in Santurce for women who’ve been convicted of minor offenses and who have young children, a rural community in San

Lorenzo and a senior center in Barrio Amelia, Guaynabo.

At the men’s prison, participants were immersed in “La prodigiosa tarde de Baltazar” (“Balthazar’s Marvelous Afternoon”) by Gabriel García Márquez, while the women brought their experiences of post-hurricane loss to the story, “Es que somos muy pobres” (“Because We Are So Poor”) by Juan Rulfo.

“The facilitator says the women have found a way to reflect and find hope, even when the story has a death at the end,” Concepción says. In the face of ravaged communication networks, flooded roads and ruined public spaces, the simple act of gathering as a group can feel redemptive.

Concepción says the Puerto Rico groups echo the vision of People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos founder Sarah Hirschman, who began the program more than forty years ago by reading stories with Spanish-speaking women in a poor neighborhood in Cambridge. “Many say, ‘I was so into this story that I forgot where I was.’ It’s the ability to be able to get out of your own situation, your own life, in a certain sense, and use your imagination. It’s like a spiritual healing.”

When the group in El Caño read González’s story, adult participants were shaken by the ending, an apparent suicide by a child who, after staring at “the little colored-boy” in the river, finally leans in to meet his friend.

“The day that the story was read, there was this little girl—she sat to listen to the story,” Concepción says. “At the end, when everyone was lamenting that the ending was so tragic, she said, ‘No, the baby did not drown. The father came back to get him out of the water.’ For me, that was a metaphor for the people who have survived Hurricane María, saying, ‘There’s not going to be one more dead person.’”

“When something like this happens, you lose everything, including your own voice. In finding ways to survive, you find yourself again. And these stories help.”

“The humanities are...windows into what it is to be human. And, therefore, the drama, the story, the history, the thinking and philosophy of what it is to be human is the subject matter.”

--Jerry Brown
Governor of California

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30-year tenure at P&S/GyC: sparks & stories

by Patricia Andres

“Life goes like a dream.”

So says Virgie Rainey in Eudora Welty’s short story collection, *The Golden Apples*. When I think of my thirty-plus-year tenure at People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos—twenty-one of those years as full-time executive director—in linear terms, I’m right in there with Virgie Rainey; it went like a dream!

Breaking through the curtain of that dream, though, are moments when the sparks of poetic stories touch that within us that is too deep for words. Moments when poetic images and symbols and rhythms of stories give us glimpses of what Dylan Thomas called “the force that through the green fuse drives the flower.”

I would like to share some moments when I had the privilege to witness our participants be deeply moved in the presence of the power of poetic literature.

There is a moment in Jersey State Prison reading and discussing Carson McCullers’ “A Tree, A Rock, A Cloud” in the company of men serving life sentences when we talked about the main character’s changing definition of love:

“It was like this,” the man continued. “I am a person who feels many things. All my life one thing after another has impressed me. Moonlight. The leg of a pretty girl. One thing after another. But the point is that when I had enjoyed anything there was a peculiar sensation as though it was laying around loose in me. Nothing seemed to finish itself up or fit in with other things.”

After moving to a focus on how to love, the narrator says,

“And now I am a master, son. I can love anything. No longer do I have to think about it even. I see a street full of people and a beautiful light comes in me. I watch a bird in the sky. Or I meet

a traveler on the road. Everything, son. And anybody. All stranger and all loved!”

One man responded, “He’s talking about a power greater than us. About Love, capital ‘L.’” The silence in the room spoke of how we all knew we were in the presence of something beautiful and true.

Millie, a woman who had rarely spoken, said, “It makes me so happy. It’s like a child’s playground.” Members of the group affirmed her comment, and I will never forget Millie’s smile when she heard them say they felt the same way.

There is the moment at the Reading Academy in Trenton, for pre-GED adults reading below fifth-grade level, when we discussed Gabriel García Márquez’s “Balthazar’s Marvelous Afternoon,” which describes a “flight of the imagination,” the birdcage at the story’s center:

The cage was displayed on the table: with its enormous dome of wire, three stories, with passageways and compartments especially for eating and sleeping and swings in the space set aside for the birds’ recreation, it seemed like a small-scale model of a gigantic ice-factory.

Millie, a woman who had rarely spoken over the course of many sessions, said, “It makes me so happy. It’s like a child’s playground.” Members of the group affirmed her comment, and I will never forget Millie’s smile when she heard them say they felt the same way.

Then there is the moment at St. Martin's Health Center, where former crack cocaine addicts met to discuss Toshio Mori's "Abalone, Abalone, Abalone":

After forty minutes of cleaning and polishing the old shell it became interesting. I began polishing both the outside and the inside of the shell. I found after many minutes of polishing I could not do very much with the exterior side. It had scabs of the sea which would not come off by scrubbing and the surface itself was rough and hard. And in the crevices the grime stuck so that even with a needle it did not become clean. But on the other side, the inside of the shell, the more I polished the more lustre I found. It had me going. There were colors which I had not seen in the abalone shells before or anywhere else. The different hues, running berserk in all directions, coming together in harmony. I guess I could say they were not unlike a rainbow which men once symbolized.

Andrew said, "This is not just about shells! It's about all of us, about me. We look broken on the outside, but on the inside we're working on our inner light and the more we work at it, the stronger it will grow."

There is the moment at Lawrence Plaza, a low-income senior housing facility where we discussed James Joyce's "Eveline":

Home! She looked round the room, reviewing all its familiar objects which she had dusted once a week for so many years, wondering where on earth all the dust came from. Perhaps she would never see again those familiar objects from which she had never dreamed of being divided.

Joan talked about how happy she was to have an apartment with a kitchen after living in her car for nearly a year, and group members told her how glad they were to have her as a neighbor.

There is the moment at Bo Robinson Assessment & Treatment Center when we discussed Chinua Achebe's "Marriage Is a Private Affair." The story depicts a father and son who have

been estranged because they disagree over tribal beliefs and customs. Then, a softening in the father's heart occurs:

It was one of those rare occasions when even nature takes a hand in a human fight. Very soon it began to rain, the first rain in the year. It came down in large sharp drops and was accompanied by the lightning and thunder which mark a change of season.

With tears running down his cheeks, Chris began to speak: "My son is a doctor. He hasn't spoken to me in years; he's so ashamed of me. He called recently to let me know his first son was born. I want to be part of their lives if they'll have me." As Chris spoke the men said in unison, "Keep it real, keep it real," a mantra in facilities when honesty breaks through the posturing that so often prevails in prison.

Breaking through the curtain of that dream, though, are moments when...poetic images and symbols and rhythms...give us glimpses of what Dylan Thomas called "the force that through the green fuse drives the flower."

I will always be grateful to the many participants who shared their insights, hopes, dreams and sadness with me in the context of reading and discussing literature over the years. For me, the force driving the flower will always be the people I encountered and the literary and life stories we shared.

"Stories create community, enable us to see through the eyes of other people, and open us to the claims of others."

--Peter Forbes
photographer and author

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Health students deepen sense of how literature boosts wellbeing

by Ellen Gilbert

Princeton University anthropology professor João Biehl and his colleague, Amy Krauss, a postdoctoral fellow at the Woodrow Wilson School's Center for Health and Wellbeing, had a question for the undergraduates taking their Medical Humanities course last spring: "How might the humanities deepen our understanding of disease, healing, and care?"

People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos was pleased to be one of several local nonprofit agencies, part of Princeton's Community-Based Learning Initiative (CBLI), that helped students find some answers.

"We asked students to go into the programs with the question, 'What are the health benefits for senior citizens who participate in a literature program like People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos?'" said Andres. "Staff at senior facilities have reported to us that residents appear more energetic and less depressed when participating. The students credit the literature as well as the social component for the vitality they observed in members of the groups."

The process began with an orientation by People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos staff members Patricia Andres, Cheyenne Wolf, and Rachel Epstein, and was followed with fieldwork as students sat in on P&S sessions with senior adults at Elm Court in Princeton.

The goal of CBLI is to encourage research projects involving students and community organizations on issues such as health care, housing, education, economic development, homelessness, hunger, immigration, and environmental conservation. CBLI's community partners carefully consider what kinds of analysis they need to advance their work.

It's a win-win situation: students had a "laboratory" in which they could work and, as a result of interdisciplinary literature

reviews and focused posters presented at an end-of-semester gathering, we gleaned thoughtful feedback and suggestions.

Students received a copy of People & Stories founder Sarah Hirschman's book about the origins of the program and read widely in both scholarly and popular literature, including Biehl's own book, *Vita: Life in a Zone of Social Abandonment*; New Yorker cartoonist Roz Chast's mordantly funny graphic memoir of her aging parents, *Can't We Talk about Something More Pleasant?*; Anne Fadiman's *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, about the plight of a Hmong refugee family facing a medical crisis in California; and Susan Sontag's last book, *Regarding the Pain of Others*.

What are the health benefits for senior citizens who participate in a program like People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos?

A growing number of medical schools are acknowledging the usefulness of the medical humanities. It's not a new idea, of course. A recent book by Sari Altschuler, *The Medical Imagination*, shows that during the 18th and 19th centuries in the United States, doctors understood the imagination to be directly connected to health, intimately involved in healing and central to medical discovery.

Students clearly appreciate what CBLI is doing. "Although I love Princeton, I wish I had done more 'outside the bubble,'" wrote one undergraduate. "Through CBLI, I have learned more about New Jersey and local communities than I have during my past three years here!"

"I felt that I was able to live what I was learning," observed another participant. "The theoretical frameworks were no longer mere abstract concepts but an actual reality."

"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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Intimacies and insights emerge at PA's Libertae

by Anndee Hochman

Ellie Fisher was nervous to bring Peter Cameron's story, "Homework," to readers at Libertae, a women's inpatient substance abuse treatment center in Bucks County. She wondered if they would feel traumatized by the story's raw description of the narrator's dog's death: "Every time he opened his mouth, blood would seep out like dull red words in a bad silent dream."

What spilled out were more stories.

"Before we could even get to the poetics, they immediately got to personal experiences," Fisher recalls. "They talked about the impact of a pet in their lives that was in many ways tied in with their addiction." One woman told the group about the death of a beloved cat. "She said, 'What did I do? I went out and drank more.' She was crying, telling the story."

Another recalled a dog that was her best friend; after her stepmother insisted the dog could not live in her house, the animal ran out of the garage one day and was killed. "It made me wonder how much pets are brought into therapy when it comes to addiction," Fisher says.

Those experiences also made her cherish the power of People & Stories to unleash personal intimacies along with poetic insights. Fisher, an adjunct professor at Bucks County Community College and Rider University, was impressed with the frankness of the women in her fall 2017 and spring 2018 groups.

"They'll talk about jail time, they'll talk about abuse, they'll talk about the loss of somebody who was very close to them. They're very honest, which is something that I value." Participants ranged in age from early 20s to 60; some had young children.

"I realized I was choosing authors of different cultural backgrounds, religious backgrounds and racial backgrounds," Fisher says. "That has provoked a lot of conversation." When the women read "Two Words," by Isabel Allende, a

Spanish-speaking participant was certain that the words were "Te amo," ("I love you.") That story sparked discussion about the mastery of language and whether words have the power to save a life.

Other stories, like "The Model" by Bernard Malamud, stirred controversy; some women empathized with the aging, lonely artist who wishes to paint a nude woman as a means of re-engaging with life, while others saw him as a "dirty old man" who deserved the young model's ire.

The story sparked discussion about ...whether words have the power to save a life.

"I found a ten-minute film based on the story, from New Zealand," Fisher says. "In the last scene: the camera moves to the painting. Of course, he's a wonderful artist and he did this beautiful painting. There was quiet in the room. Nobody anticipated that ending. Then the perspective changes about what they think of the model and what they think of the man."

One ongoing challenge at Libertae was the ebb and flow of participants—some were asked to leave the program early—and emotions. "These women are working really hard, but they're also struggling," Fisher says. "Sometimes they'll tell me, 'It's been a really difficult week.'"

At the start of each series, Fisher aimed to put the group at ease with introductions and a question: If you could be anywhere right now, where would you be? "Their responses are all different: [one says] in a log cabin in the mountains with her dog, and someone wishes her mother was still alive and they were sitting on a beach together...I had one say she wanted to be where she was right now, at Libertae.

"I've learned that...literature is available to everyone, not just the privileged. I've learned that there are intelligent, interesting, engaged people regardless of their circumstances. That when they start to open up about their childhoods, their living situations, you realize that they are anybody and everybody."

"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

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Teaching stories with a pedagogy of conversation

Talking with Connie Hassett

The story was Ernest Hemingway's "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place." The setting was HomeFront, an agency in Ewing, New Jersey that provides emergency shelter, food and case management in an effort to end homelessness. The participants were parents, many of them with young children squirming by their sides.

"These were parents who'd lost their livelihoods, their apartments, their cars and had been forced into homelessness," remembers Connie Hassett, who was observing her first People & Stories session. "You might think the presence of small children would distract the parents. But the conversation flowed."

One woman arrived late, listened to the dialogue underway and prefaced her comment with an apology: she'd surmised that the story was a conversation in one character's head—that his mind was the "clean, well-lighted place."

Hassett was stunned. "No one thought their tardy friend had made a mistake. Instead, they collaborated on a first-rate literary insight."

She'd known about People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos for several years, ever since her husband, poet James Richardson, was a guest writer at the Rescue Mission in Trenton. The program's mission resonated for Hassett, a former junior high school English teacher and, for the last forty years, a professor at Fordham University.

Hassett never forgot the time when she turned to a middle school student and asked her opinion of Shirley Jackson's story, "The Lottery."

"She liked that her opinion mattered, in a room full of her peers. She liked being invited to share her thinking out loud. [Her] delight became emblematic for me. Everyone should know that their view matters."

That same validation, she saw, came in People & Stories discussions. It happened again at Operation Fatherhood in Trenton,

when men read "The Things They Carried" by Tim O'Brien, a story based on O'Brien's experiences in Vietnam.

"There were military people in the room. They talked freely about what they knew the soldiers in the story feared. They feared mortal peril, but also personal failure, the lasting consequences of a moment's inattention.

"I was struck that they could unpack the fear in such an existential way. It was so powerfully articulated by the men in the room. There were moments when the talking stopped—as if they realized they'd just done or said something impressive."

"Everyone should know that their view matters."

At Fordham, Hassett teaches courses using *The New Yorker* fiction archives as texts—stories by writers including Laurie Moore, George Saunders and Jeffrey Eugenides. She prods her students to examine the stories' dynamics; she insists that everyone in the room comment in every class.

"My pedagogy with *The New Yorker* stories is—no secret—good conversation. My emphasis is on reading like a writer, paying close attention to formal structure, how a scene off-site is worked technically into the story. From the [People & Stories] sessions, I realized I could step back a little bit. Don't ask, 'Did you like the story?' but ask questions that will let people unfold their responses to the story in a more personal way."

Since joining the board a year ago, Hassett helped organize 2018's benefit reading with Vijay Seshadri. She'd love to see more intergenerational programs; she cites research showing that children who are read to develop stronger vocabularies and more robust powers of concentration.

She remembers the impact of her own childhood reading, including *The Poky Little Puppy* and other Little Golden Books, with their compact size and shiny spines. "I loved the near-nonsense of the passage about the puppies. Most of all, I loved the defiance of the puppies who continued to dig holes under that fence. I identified with those little reprobates."

"The human species thinks in metaphors and learns through stories."

--Mary Catherine Bateson

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Men in prison contemplate how we change

by Marcy Schwartz

At the end of the first session at the Federal Correctional Institution at Fort Dix, New Jersey, as I scanned the group of more than 30 participants from all over the Spanish-speaking world, I knew we were off to a dynamic start. As we concluded the discussion, I asked if anyone had any questions. One of the participants eagerly raised his hand. “I was going to ask what this program was really for,” he said, “but now that I’ve been part of one session, I have seen it. I don’t need to ask.”

At this prison, located on a military base, mostly middle- and late-middle-aged participants are sent to complete long sentences for federal crimes. One of the recurrent themes in our discussions has been change: How is it possible for people to change? What kinds of experiences prompt us to change? How do changes in our environments, our neighborhoods or technology impact our lives?

In the story “Scribbles” by Pedro Juan Soto, the protagonist is an aspiring artist who draws a mural on a wall in the family’s basement apartment to evoke a remembered romantic past. The tropical scene of his youthful wife, naked on a horse and surrounded by palm trees, contrasts with the dreary apartment and the dirty snow outside.

The story describes the gloomy winter sky as “grandiosamente opaco” (grandly opaque), and the participants mentioned how the weather weighs on them in winter, how the cloudy sky can be “asphyxiating.” Rather than accept the man’s gift of the drawing, his wife takes offense and erases it. Some of the participants thought his plan to rekindle the couple’s love would be impossible; others said it would only work if both were equally committed. Another said that once you lose the magic, it’s gone.

We read two stories about siblings that underscore family changes, the transformations of growing up, and how

adult decisions complicate or reinforce sibling tensions. In José Balza’s “The Almond Tree in January,” two brothers drift apart when one of them leaves their small rural town for the big city. In Emilio Díaz Valcárcel’s story “Obligatory Death,” a brother comes back to the family village for a funeral after years of living in the U.S., and his sisters agree that he has not changed.

One of the recurrent themes...has been change: How is it possible for people to change? What kinds of experiences prompt us to change? How do changes in our environments, our neighborhoods or technology impact our lives?

Nearly everyone had something to say: one participant declared that “change only happens from within,” while another noted that it takes something dramatic to push people to change. Another suggested that even if people change, their essence remains the same. In an especially poetic moment of our discussion, one participant compared change to being caught in a rough current or whirlpool in a river: “You have to accept it and allow yourself to get through it.”

Short stories read and discussed collectively—through their imaginative language and evocative fictional worlds—lead to unexpected avenues of memory and self-discovery. When we talked about the characters in the stories and whether they had changed, we ended up questioning whether we can truly change. One of the participants answered affirmatively, “Of course! Just look at us!”

“Sometimes reality is too complex. Stories give it form.”

--Jean Luc Godard

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On the Bookshelf...

The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human, by Jonathan Gottschall. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012.

by Anndee Hochman

Human beings, according to science journalist and professor Jonathan Gottschall, differ from other species not only in our bi-pedal posture and our deftly opposable thumbs, but because of our penchant for stories: myths and sacred tales, fiction and film, epic narrative poems and immersive video games.

And it's not just that we make stories—incessantly, habitually, all over the world and throughout the ages. Those stories, Gottschall argues, also make us.

This provocative, engaging and accessible book uses neuroscience, philosophy, literary argument and cultural history to show how narrative shapes our brains,

helps us rehearse for everyday life, confirms values and bolsters group norms.

Fiction may entertain, Gottschall says, but it is not frivolous. He cites recent brain science demonstrating that reading about a car crash or a passionate kiss lights up the same neural circuits as the actual experience; he describes the ways that sacred stories and cultural myths encourage “decency” and cooperation within a group (while also fostering wariness and animosity toward those who adhere to a different story).

Gottschall's book reminds us that, for centuries, storytelling was a communal activity involving a live teller and rapt listeners. Even today, when we consume stories in forms ranging from podcasts to live story slams, graphic novels to blog posts, narrative still organizes our waking (and our dreaming) hours.

“Story—sacred and profane—is perhaps *the* main cohering force in human life,” Gottschall writes.

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