

CLASS ACTION

BY MEREDITH QUINN

Healing words

A graduate program reaches beyond the classroom.

When Kansas Poet Laureate Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg says that the Transformative Language Arts MA program that she founded at Goddard College is changing the world, she isn't exaggerating.

Graduates have gone on to help others write their way through trauma, build community and create social change. They work with veterans, disenfranchised youth, cancer patients and survivors, victims of domestic and sexual violence, minorities, the elderly, those going through transition and any underserved population in need of writing as a form of therapy—even if they don't realize that they need writing or therapy.

But that line between writing group and therapy session is a fine one, and

one which Mirriam-Goldberg's program stresses must not be crossed. "There are ethical dimensions to everything," says Mirriam-Goldberg, pointing out that one can never know what will trigger another person or push someone to tears. "How facilitators handle that has everything to do with how safe the participants feel and how clear it is to participants that we are in an artistic-based group doing this work together. We don't tell each other what the writing means. We don't try to interpret or critique it. We're not here to fix one another."

Mirriam-Goldberg, who has been teaching at Goddard since 1996, encourages graduates to use degrees for the good of all, herself having followed that same path. "I came to writing as a teenager as a way to save my life during a

very traumatic time," says Mirriam-Goldberg. "Sometimes in our culture, we tend to look at healing as a private matter, but I believe that community building and how we make a living and how we work with each other is instrumental to our emotional and physical health."

While leading workshops, Mirriam-Goldberg realized that people weren't interested in craft but rather in giving their lives meaning. She explains, "It goes back to that Yiddish saying 'Anything can be survived if it's part of a story.' So I started developing an MA program that would help educate people on how to do this in their communities."

Preparing students to use writing, storytelling and performance for bettering both individuals and the community at large, the TLA program combines psychology, sociology and technique in a low-residency format. The eight-day sessions bring together students ranging in age, getting them to focus on key elements during their studies: one's own writing, "theoretical underpinnings" or big questions about community. Students are encouraged to team up with licensed professionals and to cull a list of resources, hotlines, ways to get support and counseling to fully serve workshop attendees. Outside of sessions, in an online class, students learn about facilitating an artistic process, creating ground rules, structuring workshops and setting up what Mirriam-Goldberg calls a container "so that people won't walk out of the room a little too raw."

Other topics covered by the TLA program include marketing, coming to terms with money, setting realistic

fees and making connections with community groups—all through the lens of each student's personal tenets. "We talk a lot about right livelihood," says Mirriam-Goldberg, the Buddhist term that she loosely translates to: "how to draw on your gifts to interface with your community in a way that serves people, does the work of your spirit and allows you to do it in a way that fits your values."

One of Mirriam-Goldberg's main goals is to demonstrate that there are careers beyond teaching for writers who pursue higher education. "In this world, at this time," she says, "there [are] few career paths that are stable. I have family in corporate advertising—which seems very stable—who have been laid off repeatedly. Strangely enough, in my teaching and writing and supporting myself as a poet and facilitator, I've never been laid off."

She points to the hundreds of graduates clamoring for a single tenure-track university teaching job, to the underpaid adjuncts who neglect their own creative work while cobbling together a living. While she too has juggled part-time jobs to stay afloat, Mirriam-Goldberg wants students to see the plethora of options.

"There's such a hunger in all communities for people to tell their stories and to connect with one another," she says. "To find greater strength and clarity about 'This is why I'm alive and this is what I need to do in this moment of my life.' This is what I've always wanted to do but was afraid to do. Or this is how I'm trying to make peace with an absolutely impossible medical diagnosis or family situation! That putting words on the page and sharing them with the community has tremendous power to help people."

She cautions that would-be facilitators should be aware of their own issues: "If we have a history of wanting to fix people, we have to be cognizant of that so we don't step over that line in this setting. So we look at how to work with

Goddard's TLA success stories

Taina Asili—Uses singing, songwriting, workshops and more for social change, focusing on issues of race and community building.

Yvette Hyatt-Adams—Once a CEO of a consulting firm for Fortune 500 companies, now runs writing and arts workshops for health for African American women CEOs.

Minna Dubin—Works with teens and young adults in the San Francisco area through Writers Corps.

Nancy Morgan—Recently retired from the Lombardi Cancer Center, where she was the arts and humanities coordinator, creating an arts program for those with cancer and their caregivers.

Seema Reza—Facilitates writing workshops and events with wounded warriors at two major military hospitals in the DC area.

Jennifer Cross—Created Writing Ourselves Whole in San Francisco, where she facilitates workshops focused on reclaiming oneself after a traumatic event.

Angie River—Uses TLA as a bursary to help women reclaim their bodies no matter their shape, size, color or background.

yourself and your own issues that might come up. And then we look at how to focus on the craft and the passion of what you're doing."

"We [all] have to continually work on our own issues," Mirriam-Goldberg says. "If we haven't experienced big trauma yet in our lives, it's coming. People we love will get sick and die, we may have serious diagnoses, jobs we love may vanish. All kinds of things happen in this life, and developing greater resilience through the arts so that we know how to roll with that is a lifelong practice."

Mirriam-Goldberg herself endured personal trauma, and her experience facilitating workshops helped her get through it. During treatment for breast cancer, she wrote every week and submitted her work to her oncologist, who came to know her as a person—not simply another patient. That led to facilitating workshops in that hospital and later at Turning Point, The Center for Hope and Healing.

While she admits that she doesn't have all of the answers, even after creating the TLA program and leading workshops for 25 years, Mirriam-Goldberg does know one thing: "What people write in workshops, even those people who don't consider themselves writers, can be as powerful and spectacular as the best published writing. When people land in their own words, that have the most meaning for them, very amazing things can happen."

About the work that she does at Goddard, Mirriam-Goldberg says, "By helping writers learn how to connect with their communities, how to deeply make inroads in places where they are needed as writers, and collaborate with others to find resources to meet the needs of their communities, that can be a godsend for the writers, for the people the writer works with and for the community." ■

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