

Writing program for students promotes tolerance

Niraj Warikoo, Detroit Free Press 10:50 p.m. ET May 9, 2017



When a writing program for students started one day in March, the mostly Arab-American Muslim students from Huda School in Franklin gathered on one side of the room, while the mostly Latino and African-American students from Southwest Detroit Community School gathered on the other.

But by the end of the writing workshop organized by One Earth Writing, the students were mixed together, working on stories, exchanging phone numbers and promising to keep in touch.

"Our programs are all about finding that commonality," said Lynne Golodner, founder and CEO of One Earth Writing. "We may have our unique beliefs, but we respect one another and have a humanity that's universal."

As the mother of four teenagers, Golodner of Huntington Woods said she was looking for a way to help promote dialogue among youths at a time when their identities are forming. Started last year, One Earth Writing promotes writing among students through free workshops, in schools, and in an Ambassadors program where students apply to work with writers and other students. About 1,000 students have taken part in the effort since it started in early 2016, said Golodner.

Tonight, One Earth Writing is to hold its first fund-raiser and public event at the Maple Theater in West Bloomfield. It will celebrate its first class of student writer Ambassadors and feature a screening of the movie "Freedom Writers."

This year, One Earth Writing will hold workshops that pair new refugees in metro Detroit with student writers, said Golodner, who often works on refugee issues.

"One Earth Writing uses writing workshops as a way to connect teens from different races, faiths and socioeconomic origins, and we're seeing a huge need for this in our current political climate," she said. "We are all more similar than we realized."

During the March workshop at Huda School in Franklin, the students were asked to "write a letter to the world telling what they need to know about them," she said. Many wrote about how they felt there was prejudice against their groups.

"The Muslim were saying: 'Just because I'm Muslim doesn't mean I'm a terrorist,' " she said. "And many of the Latino students were writing: 'I'm an American, don't build a wall.' "

Golodner said she hopes her program can bridge divisions during a tense time.

"I didn't see it coming," Golodner said of the tensions over the November election. "I didn't see our country was so divided. And it really made me sad, because we're all Americans. ... I don't think we can function as a society if we're so deeply divided."

Contact Niraj Warikoo: nwarikoo@freepress.com or 313-223-4792. Follow him on Twitter @nwarikoo

Tonight's event for One Earth Writing starts at 6:30 p.m. at the Maple Theater in West Bloomfield. After a screening of the movie "Freedom Writers," a Q&A discussion by journalists Brian Dickerson of the Detroit Free Press and Laura Berman, formerly of The Detroit News, will follow.

Tickets are \$25 (includes popcorn, beverage, movie) and available at the door at Maple Theater or visit <http://tinyurl.com/OEWFreedomWriters> It is sponsored by the Zingerman's Foundation.

One Earth Writing is accepting applications for its next Ambassadors students program, July 10-20, 2017. To apply, click here: <http://oneearthwriting.org/ambassadors/>

For information, call 248-376-0406 or e-mail lynne@oneearthwriting.org