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Writing program connects diverse group of teens while building confidence, leadership skills

By Sue Suchyta For Digital First Media



Lynne Golodner (left), founder and chief creative officer of One Earth Writing, and Instructor Christina Weaver work with teen writers to build confidence, leadership and give a voice to teens while connecting them across racial, religious and socioeconomic lines.

Local non-profit One Earth Writing is using writing to build confidence and leadership skills while connecting teens from

diverse racial, religious and socioeconomic backgrounds during its Winter 2018 Ambassadors program.

Participant Hannah McKeen, 18, a senior at Huron High School in New Boston, said the One Earth Writing program is helping her expand her world view beyond her home town.

“These are new writers who have entirely different lives, but it doesn’t matter, because here we are the same,” she said.

McKeen also heads up the writing club at her school, which students use to share what they have written with each other.

“It’s good that they are comfortable sharing their writing in the small group,” she said. “It’s definitely a small club, but the fun and development of writing styles and skills is what matters.”

McKeen plans to pursue a degree in pharmacy to provide a comfortable lifestyle, which would allow her to pursue writing, which she has loved since she was in sixth grade, on the side.

“It is definitely a really big part of me,” she said. “It kind of helped me find who I wanted to be through my characters.”

Rizk said she likes seeing people’s different writing styles.

“There are people who are a lot more developed than I am in writing, so I see their styles and try to apply that to mine,” Rizk said. “It’s really helped me. I have definitely seen a big difference in my writing.”

Participant Rawan Rizk, 14, an eighth grader at McCollough-Unis Middle School in Dearborn, said she likes the way writing short stories lets her create her own world.

“I can create the rules and the laws, and what’s normal and what’s considered taboo,” she said. “When I write I try to make everyone equal. Skin color, your age, where you are from doesn’t matter in my world, whereas your personality — are you kind, what do you prioritize — that is what I like.”

Rizk is trying to go outside her comfort zone through the One Earth Writing program by creating a longer, more complex story.

“I usually stick with short stories because they are my ‘go to’ thing, but now I’m trying to create a plot line and characters to create a real story,” she said. “I think I could see it becoming something more, but it needs a lot of development.”

Instructor Christina Weaver said she loves that the program brings young people together to write in a safe environment.

“They can bond with each other, they can be creative, and it is a way for them to express how they are thinking and how they are feeling,” Weaver said. “They are not being judged and they are not being graded. It is a wonderful way for them to creatively express themselves and learn about new ideas, new people and people that come from different backgrounds.”

Lynne Golodner, founder and chief creative officer of One Earth Writing, said the non-profit was launched in 2016, and is offering its third 8-week Ambassadors class. Graduates of the program may return as senior ambassadors to work with the current group of students.

She said they are getting more applications to the program, and are considering offering two classes at a time during the school year. This summer they are launching writing camps at Wayne

State University, and college essay writing workshops in the fall. For more information, go to oneearthwriting.org.

Golodner said that what she thinks is successful about the curriculum is that it comes from an identity building perspective.

“It is really enabling and empowering teens to say, ‘this is who I am, and this is who I want to be,’ and then having the courage to use that voice to go out in the world and make change,” she said. “So writing essays or creative writing all comes from that sense of knowing who I am and having the courage to be that person.”

Golodner said because the participants’ writing is not graded and they are not in a classroom environment, they can really ignite the passion that the participants already have for writing.

“That goes back into the classroom, and they have that passion and that inspiration that deepens their work in school,” she said. “So inevitably it improves their grades, their engagement with literature and language and it’s just fantastic.”

Weaver said she loves seeing the teens’ enthusiasm.

“I love when they think about new ideas,” she said. “I love that they all get to meet different people that they are not meeting in their schools, so they are meeting kids from different neighborhoods.”

Weaver said the program provide participants with more self-confidence and makes them more well-rounded.

“It is not only benefiting their writing, but how they think, how they view the world, how they view themselves, how they communicate with other people,” she said. “Really giving them a

confident voice to go out — and we need voices like that right now in our world.”

Golodner said in addition to writing, a leadership training component is added during the third week.

“It’s writing all the way through, but then we add this leadership development component,” she said. “The goal is that as the kids strengthen their identity, and connect with peers who are different races, religions and socioeconomic origins, they can then have the courage and confidence to go out in the world and inspire others, so those leadership skills really pay off down the road.”