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Tales from the cellblock

A writing project encourages female inmates in Riverhead to examine their lives using the written word

BY RHODA AMON
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They sat on the hard benches, alike in their drab green prison uniforms, but the women in the Riverhead Correctional Facility each had a different story to tell.

Their stories were part of a writing project that motivates female inmates in the Suffolk County facility to examine their lives. The focus is on who they are inside, not on what they've done. On the first anniversary of the Writers Workshop, an



Erika Duncan, founder of Herstory, is at center with name tag as Riverhead Correctional Institute inmates listen to readings.



Angelique Wadlington, 19

"I trusted a man who I thought loved me ... [and he turned her in to police for selling drugs.]

outreach of the Herstory writing program, the women read excerpts from their works in progress. They wrote about childhood abuse, poverty, neglect and hope.

Samantha Cunningham, 33, yearned to see her children after an eight-month separation, and risked jail for a brief stolen reunion with her 4-year-old son in a home she had been banned from.

Angelique Wadlington, 19, tried to "fit in" and please a drug-dealing boyfriend, who turned her in, she said.

But Gwendolyn Smith, 50, drew laughs with her colorful-language tale from her past as a kindergarten renegade, waiting in the principal's office, fearing "capital punishment" from her outraged mother.

Like proud parents at a graduation, Lonnie Mathis and Linda Coleman, Herstory facilitators who guide two weekly prison workshops, joined with the inmates in laughter, tears and hugs. "They're just regular women who made bad decisions or were hurt so bad they did things they wouldn't have wanted to do ...," Mathis said of the writers.

"We never ask the women what they're

in for," Coleman said. "We're only interested in helping them to tell whatever story they want to tell." The classes, limited to two groups of 10 each because of the tight prison space, have a long waiting list.

Such workshops are a growing movement in prison life nationwide. Unlike other writing exercise programs, Herstory helps women craft the opening of what could become book-length stories of their lives.

The emphasis is on "reader empathy — you want the stranger reader to care about what happens to you," said Sag Harbor author Erika Duncan, who founded Herstory nine years ago.

Long Island community programs include workshops in English and Spanish in a family resource center, sponsored by the Town of East Hampton. In Farmingville, English- and Spanish-speaking writers work together with an interpreter.

"We're committed to work with those women whose voices are most often silenced," Duncan said.

Coleman of Southampton and Mathis

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of Central Islip, who have written their own life stories in community workshops, started the prison project last year, using the Herstory technique of women reading their memoirs to each other.

Though not intended as therapy, the writing helps the women “get their feelings out,” said Lt. Darlene McClurkin, commanding officer of the Suffolk Coun-



Gwendolyn Smith, 50

“While sitting there in the principal’s office, I was nervous. My hands were sweaty. I was really scared about my mother arriving first at school. Because she believes in capital punishment, in other words, ass kicking time. I would rather my father arrive first.”

ty Sheriff’s Office Rehabilitation Unit.

Gwendolyn Smith of Central Islip, who was sentenced to four months on a petty larceny charge in connection with taking what she said was rightfully hers from her father’s estate, goes free May 27. “I’ve taken some wrong roads in the past,” she said. Now, she has a computer certificate and plans to work with a charity program as well as continue her colorful, humorous writing.

Cunningham’s troubles stemmed from a domestic altercation during which, she said, she struck her husband with a lamp. Arrested on a charge of “assault with a deadly weapon,” she was ordered out of her home. She writes that she violated the order of protection last Christmas Eve when she sneaked into the house, having decided she would “go to jail or die before not seeing my babies ...” “The violation cost her a year’s sentence for criminal contempt.

Cunningham goes free in August with a certificate in plumbing, she said. “I hope to get into the union – they need female plumbers,” she said. Meanwhile, she said, “I couldn’t live without my writing.”

Angelique Wadlington, 19, the youngest writer, dropped out of Bay Shore High School in 11th grade. “My mind wasn’t focused on school then,” she said. She was sentenced to four years in jail for “the sale of a controlled substance” under the Rockefeller Drug Laws which require mandatory minimum sentencing even for first-time offenders. Wadlington, who has earned her high school diploma and a computer certificate hopes to take college courses in a boot camp program upstate. “I want to be a counselor and help young girls in trouble,” she said.

Although it’s not known when Wadlington will go free, McClurkin sees a bright future for the young writer. “I don’t think we’ll see Angelique again,” she said.



Samantha Cunningham, 33

“I planned I would violate the order of protection ... and go to jail or die before not seeing these babies I waited 30 years to have ... I hoped if I waited until after midnight Christmas Eve, I could sneak into the house while everyone was sleeping. Then I could lie in Eddie’s bed and hold him until Christmas morning... We smiled at each other and I said, ‘Hey, Eddie, Mommy’s here for Christmas, and Santa’s coming in the morning.’ He reached for me and I kissed him and held him. He was bigger than a few months ago but just as soft and sweet. Oh, this moment is so worth it.”