

Program Encourages Budding Writers Six-Word Stories Created by Students

By Polly Summar Journal Staff Writer



Kate Buckley (left) with students at Capshaw Middle School

Eighth-grader Jefferson LaRouche is not a man of few words. During a celebration of writing accomplished in a “PEN in the Classroom” program at Capshaw Middle School on Friday, LaRouche jumped to his feet a number of times to share the writing he had done, from essays to fiction.

So, to hear LaRouche’s sixword story was a bit of a surprise: “Read every word. Knew nothing read.”

One of only six boys in teacher Mariah Runyan’s pre-Advanced Placement class, LaRouche’s interest in writing is not unusual. “This pre-AP class was new to us this year,” said Runyan, a language arts teacher, explaining that the students had to apply to get into the class. “These are all kids who like to write, to discuss.”

So when Runyan met Kate Buckley, a member of PEN USA — a prestigious membership organization of “writers of every stripe working west of the Mississippi,” according to its Web site — and discovered she was interested in bringing “PEN in the Classroom” to a Santa Fe school, Runyan thought her students were ripe for the challenge.

And she was right. Even though the 14-session program was scheduled once a week for Runyan’s sixth-period class, the 2:30 p.m. time slot at the end of the day didn’t produce a group of sluggish students.

“I’ve had kids tell me it was the most valuable help they’d gotten — ever,” said Runyan. “I also thought it was a chance to show that public school kids have the same curiosity and desire as charter school kids and private school kids.”

And there was no cost to the school for the special program. Buckley’s small stipend was paid for by PEN, which also covered the cost of publishing an anthology of the students’ work.

This was the first time the PEN in the Classroom program had been done in New Mexico, and the first time it had been done with middle school students, instead of high school students.



EDDIE MOORE/JOURNAL Morgan Botelle, left, and Heissel Guerrero listen as classmates read their writing in the Capshaw Middle School library Friday.

Buckley, who lives in Santa Fe, had previously worked in the California schools, through the Teen Abuse Prevention Project with the then Los Angeles Commission on Assault Against Women. “I saw kids who couldn’t read or write their names in ninth grade who were then being passed on to 10th grade,” said Buckley.

So trying a PEN pilot program in middle school just made sense to her. “If a lot of our kids drop out by 14 or 15, why wait until high school?” said Buckley. Many of the students in Runyan’s class already consider themselves writers, so having a professional writer work with them was a special opportunity.

“She was cool,” said Reann Omick. “She helped us edit our work.”

“She made the story line better,” said Alli Valdez. “She helped us phrase our words better.”

“We could write pretty freely,” said Keenan Malone.

That freedom produced some very frank pieces, dealing with topics from bipolar disease and obesity to homosexuality and racism. Buckley’s classes started in October, just before the election, and Runyan said they used the opportunity to discuss issues of gender and race.

Buckley had the students write “This I Believe” essays, based on the popular National Public Radio series; “I am” poems about personal identity; and haikus and microfiction.

Some of the students also decided, on their own, to read Buckley’s young adult novel, “Choices,” a coming-of-age story involving many of the tough situations young people face around drinking and dating.

Parents Martin and Amy Romero came to the celebration in Capshaw’s library to support their daughter, Eliana. Santa Fe school board members Mary Ellen Gonzales and Barbara Gudwin also attended.

Eliana Romero has already shown interest in being a writer. “She has a journal at home and really loves working in it,” said her mother, Amy. The journal is part of Buckley’s practice of having the students keep writers’ notebooks.

"We have to do some vocabulary work in it, or she'll give us a dialogue and we have to continue it," said Eliana.

Capshaw principal Sue Lujan said the middle school hopes to repeat the program next year. Parents or teachers who are interested in having PEN programs at other schools can contact Buckley via her Web site, www.katebuckleybooks.com.

Six-Word Stories

Up all night, sleep all day. --Marisa Graham

Jailed by life, freed by death. --Sebastian Garcia

I wasn't strapped to the rollercoaster. --Marcellus Davis

Got the skills, not the patience. --Keenan Malone

People believe I overly enjoy school. --Klarisa Hernandez



EDDIE MOORE/JOURNAL Marisa Graham, left, and Alli Valdez, right, listen as Jefferson LaRouche reads from the class' new anthology, "Testaments," published from their work in the "PEN in the Classroom" program conducted this past year at Capshaw Middle School on Friday.