MAPW in the Community

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Green Card Youth Voices: Stories from an Atlanta High School and Related Projects

Green Card Youth Voices seeks to empower American students who are immigrants through a compilation of diverse and dynamic stories, art, and educational material.

What is Green Card Voices of America and what has been your role in relation to it?

Green Card Voices (GCV) is a Minneapolis, Minnesota, nonprofit organization founded in September 2013. Led by a team of community leaders, most notably under the day-to-day direction of co-founder and executive director Tea Rozman-Clark, this organization’s mission and purpose is to “build a bridge between immigrants, non-immigrants, and advocates from across the country by sharing the first-hand immigration stories of foreign-born Americans, by helping us see the ‘wave of immigrants’ as individuals, with interesting stories of family, hard work, and cultural diversity.”

The organization uses digital storytelling, published essay collections, art installations, curriculum materials, and community outreach initiatives to share authentic, first-person stories in an effort to facilitate better understanding of the complexities of immigration. The project is multifaceted; first focused on young immigrant stories in the Midwest—Minneapolis, Fargo, and St. Paul—through a partnership with KSU, the work expanded to the American South and featured the stories of “Dreamers.” The organization is expanding, reaching to Madison and Milwaukee as well as curating stories of entrepreneurs. The hope is to one day have a repository of digital stories and narratives representing the voices of immigrants from all fifty states. The outstanding contributions of the Atlanta community and KSU faculty members and students resulted in a partnership that will allow us, including undergraduate English studies students and graduate MAPW students, to continue to engage with the project through editing, publishing, writing, internships, research, and a range of other collaborations.

What inspired you to compile Youth Voices: Immigration Stories from an Atlanta High School?

This project came to KSU because of a relationship established by Dr. Darlene Xiomara Rodriguez, an assistant professor in the Department of Social Work and Human Services. Dr. Rodriguez, Paul McDaniel, who is an assistant professor in the Department of Geography and Anthropology, and I met in a KSU faculty learning community focused on Community Engagement in 2017. We quickly forged a research team and started working on community-engaged initiatives examining topics related to immigrant communities in Georgia. Dr. Rozman-Clark had a desire to collaborate with...
scholars and local organizations to create a collection beyond the Midwest and felt our research team could provide the needed local support.

Interestingly, when I met with Dr. Rozman-Clark, I did not have a full view of the scope and depth of the organization’s vision and work. I seized the opportunity to connect the Department of English’s community of writers and editors to the project because I felt it was a rich, valuable project that we could support and because it would be an excellent tool for putting writing and editing in action to help our students experience this type of work through an authentic project with a civically-engaged focus and professional value. The project exceeded my expectations and hopes.

Working with my research partners and the GCV organization, I built the project into my undergraduate professional editing and internship courses. I then reached to MAPW students, particularly Kelsey Medlin, to lead an editorial team that developed additional components for the project and worked toward publication of the first issue. Estefany Palacio, another MAPW student, provided critical support on narrative development, community relationships, and general leadership team as well.

As we worked through the first edition, I knew that the partnership had much more potential than the publication of the first edition. We have since brought students to public events and readings, expanded and edited a forthcoming second edition, developed research projects with graduate research assistant support, obtained external grant funding, helped write instructions for the Story Stitch card game, and mentored young immigrants in areas including public speaking, college essay preparation, and professionalization topics, and a range of other projects. It is simply an amazing project—one that I am so thankful to the organization and my research partners for welcoming the contributions of the MAPW program and the Department of English.

What was the most powerful moment you experienced while working on it?

The most powerful moment, without a doubt, was the day that I was at one of the high schools with a group of student editors working to expand the narratives. I wrote about the experience for the Spring 2019 issue of Spark: A 4C4Equality Journal. Below is an excerpt of that piece:

I was sitting in the library at one of the high schools with students contributing to the collection. It was the week following the tragic shooting at Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, so outside the library window active shooter training of some sort was taking place. In this small space, desks were huddled together so DACA-impacted authors and KSU editors could work on the developmental editing of the essays. I recalled that early that week, this school lost a student due to complications with the flu. I glanced down and where I had just received alerts on my phone from CNN and The New York Times reporting that Congress would not be moving forward
with DACA or any other immigration-related legislation. I paused. Here, in front of me, was a room of young individuals with hopes and dreams who were encouraging one another to put forward their best work. They had created a community for work and writing. But, outside of this safe space, young immigrants and high school students in Atlanta and across the country are living in precarious times, fraught with uncertainties.

What was powerful was that while originally it seemed as if there were two distinctive groups of students from two different communities, I now see that they were united. Through this project these young men and women understood they were actually members of a larger, shared community where they were all working, all studying, all dreaming, and all pursuing their own versions of the American dream.

How has Green Card Voices impacted the community thus far?

Locally, the Atlanta community has welcomed and embraced the project with a range of public events: the book launch at the Alliance Theater; a featured program at the Center for Civil & Human Rights with Jesse Jackson; readings at the Decatur Book Festival, Decatur Library, and Museum of History and Holocaust Education; local and national conference presentations; and media stories and research articles. The focus of these public interactions is not our students, but the immigrants; however, our students have been invited to participate, be present, and share their experiences with the project. We hope to share more with the KSU community through a special event this spring.

I see the project impacting many different communities. First, the local and national community of individuals interested in better understanding the complexities of immigration through the stories steeped in ethos and authenticity from the young writers. Second, an increased desire for more stories, more understanding—my research team and I are regularly asked to consider publishing another...
edition . . . or two . . . or five! We, however, are focusing on supporting the needs of our community partner, GCV, through this project and the related components. Third, the KSU English Department and university community through the work, pedagogy, and dissemination that affirms the value of our work as writers and editors. Finally, I see the strengths of this project supporting future work in other states and helping others see that there are ways to contribute to projects like this with their unique skills and abilities to bring these stories and this project forward.

Are there any future plans to expand the project?

Yes. So many plans. At KSU, through a grant received from the National Geographic Society, we have increased community outreach through a research project that allows us to measure the value and impact of the public events, the digital stories, and the published collection. This grant also provides funding for the creation of curricular materials and financial support for graduate research assistants. Currently, the books are the course text in a geography course, and we see the collection fitting into other courses at the college and high school levels.

In addition, at KSU, we have opportunities to support forthcoming editions of the books from other states, which will allow for engagement with this topic for a new group of students and reveal to them how their abilities as writers and editors can connect to community needs. We are also exploring how we can contribute to a forthcoming graphic novel version of the Green Card Voices project that will be created in collaboration with Nate Powell, the National Book Award recipient—that is particularly exciting! In the meantime, our students will continue to develop research projects not necessarily about this project but building from their experience as community-engaged writers and scholars. We also have internship opportunities available with the organization working in the Innovation and Community Engagement Co-Working Lab in the summer of 2019.

I see this project as a partnership that has opportunities for so many individuals to engage around the subject of immigration. I hope interested students will enroll in courses such as PRWR 7600/Practical Internship this summer and PRWR 6800/Careers in the Literary Arts in the fall, where components of the courses provide community writing projects related to the project. In addition, students can contact me to pursue research, capstones-related work, and other engagement opportunities. The goal here is not only to address the critical social justice issues surrounding the work of the organization with our unique skills as writers and storytellers but also to provide experience and knowledge for individuals in our program to build upon this for other work serving other communities of individuals.
What is Cowboys For Christ?

Headquartered in Fort Worth, Texas, CFC promotes Christian outreach through chapters in 29 states. CFC primarily serves those with an interest in raising livestock, participating in or attending rodeo events, ranch living, or anyone who fancies themselves a cowboy/cowgirl. Mostly, CFC members go to where these folks are: local rodeos, cutting contests, trail rides, cattle judgings, or to someone’s old barn where people gather for Christian fellowship. Otherwise, 74 chapters hold regular meetings which include singing hymns, sharing devotionals, and asking prayer for those in need. CFC’s primary communication to members is the printed newsletter, The Christian Ranchman (circulation 25,000+).

What is your role in the organization?

I do several roles. First, I am an ordained Cowboy Chaplain, meaning I minister to the needs of individuals, make hospital visits, and can perform weddings and burials. Mostly, I concentrate on outreach to complete strangers, especially the ones I can see are hurting. Second, because there is no chapter near me, I’m active in two Georgia chapters: Middle Georgia (Zebulon) and Redeemed Riders (Ringgold). Lastly, I head up the Horseshoe Ministry, a traveling venue that hand-stamps people’s names into specially forged horseshoes. Then, we give them away for free, usually at large community events. When asked, I give devotionals.

What kinds of material have you written and how do you use your writing to inspire the cowboy community?

Early on, I noticed little written material was aimed at cowboys. Few Christian publications had horses or cowboys on covers or in titles. I asked about writing for Cowboy Churches and was told, “Everybody loves cowboys. Everybody loves to talk about cowboys. If you can get them talking, I can tell how to minister to them. So, you do your job and I’ll do mine.” It began with a small piece, that became a short story, that became a book, that became a trilogy, that became an audiobook: Dusty and the Cowboy. I also write a men’s Christian podcast, “The Techie and the Cowboy”: thetechieandthecowboy.com.

What are your future writing plans?

Based on the trilogy, I’m currently working on a screenplay called Bad Water. When that draft is completed, I’ll switch to drafting the TV pilot script. This version will be called The Trail Ends in Texas. Because Bad Water can be seen as a somewhat different story than the trilogy, I’ll then write Bad Water as a novel. But like the trilogy, each chapter will have study questions related to Christian theology, so that it, too, can be used as a men’s Bible study. I have one unfinished novel, Texas Cool Million, that I really need to complete as well.

T.W. Lawrence is an MAPW student and member of Booth Writer’s Guild. Find out more about it here.
What is Lion Life?

Lion Life is a non-profit organization that works with a team of volunteers and interns to provide educational services to incarcerated individuals in local county jails. We primarily serve the North Georgia area and offer G.E.D., English as a Second Language, entrepreneurship, Freedom from Addiction, creative writing, and music classes.

What inspired you to create it?

I served as a Chaplain and G.E.D. Instructor for several years inside a county jail. While working alongside the inmates in those capacities, I saw the impact that programs could have on individuals. However, I also realized that there was a great need beyond what was currently being offered. My wife and I started the nonprofit organization to be able to offer a more expansive suite of classes, especially classes that were centered around creativity. At Lion Life, we believe wholeheartedly that art has the power to affect radical change in a community.

What impact has it had on the community thus far?

Oh wow, that’s a hard question to answer! Getting to see lives changed and vicious cycles broken is a front row seat to transformation that definitely has a way of impacting all parties involved, myself included. Some individuals who have come through our G.E.D. program are now in college. Others are starting their own businesses thanks to the Entrepreneurship course. Several inmates have completed full length novels, and a group of guys are getting ready to perform a three act play for the upper jail administration that they wrote as an assignment for our creative writing course. I believe our work proves that art and education can truly change the world.

Where do you see the program going in the future?

Our creative writing and music classes will soon be moving beyond the walls of the jails. We hope to foster a post-release community around creativity where returning citizens can continue their studies. We hope that as a result they will be able to encounter compassion and collaboration from people on the outside. Incarcerated individuals are often treated poorly upon release, and our society has little existing infrastructure to aid them in their return to freedom. When the individuals who are struggling the most in our communities begin to succeed, everyone’s success is multiplied.

Are there any volunteer opportunities?

Yes! We have many volunteer opportunities. In fact, we cannot do what we do without volunteers with big hearts who are willing to jump into this kind of work. People can sign up to volunteer through the volunteer page on our website at www.lion.life.

Brody Smithwick is an MAPW student and the founder of Lion Life, a nonprofit organization that believes in education for all.
What is The Write Room and what is your role?

The Write Room was an online literary magazine I created in 2008 while attending the MAPW program at KSU. My intent was to create a less threatening forum in which to publish my classmates. Very quickly the magazine grew and we were publishing writers from all over the world. Before The Write Room was archived it had over 3000 subscribers. My role was editor, founder, webmaster, and I designed all the artwork.

What resources does The Write Room provide for writers?

We had a section called the “Author’s Forum” that featured interviews with published authors offering insight into the writing process. In addition, we featured an “Opportunities” section where calls for submissions were published.

What impact has The Write Room had on the local community?

Our lasting impact is our monthly open mic, Play Pen, which started as our community outreach. Play Pen offers aspiring and published authors, poets, musicians a platform in which to perform their work, develop a following, sharpen their presentation skills, and socialize with other creatives. Additionally, I wanted to introduce people who would not normally attend a literary reading the opportunity to see what we do. This is why Play Pen is held in an Irish pub. I think I’ve said this a thousand times but creatives need a community and

after university people tend to drift away. Writers and poets need a support network. I try to provide that. In August, Play Pen celebrated ten years of being that platform and networking opportunity.

Are there any current submission opportunities for writers?

Unfortunately, there are more writers who want to be published than there are literary magazines. However, there are opportunities for individuals who would love to resurrect a magazine. My vision for The Write Room never came completely to fruition.

It is a tremendous amount of work and requires editing, decision making, and diplomacy when it comes to working with authors and poets.

What’s in store for the future of The Write Room?

Currently all nine hundred plus pages of the magazine are archived online along with hundreds of unread submissions. I have learned a lot about literary publications in ten years. Many of them are individual operations, a fact few if any will admit to publically and far too many literary magazines die from lack of participation. I’ve been thinking about a new home for The Write Room and toying with some social media ideas. My concepts and strategies are and have always been too big for one person. I’d love the help of some dedicated volunteers who want to see how creative they can be with literature in the digital format. Who’s up for a challenge?

Joellen Kubiak-Woodall is MAPW alum and the founder of The Write Room. Find her on LinkedIn at https://www.linkedin.com/in/joellenkubiakwoodall/
What are the College Day Readings and who participates?

The College Day Poetry Readings is a day-long program of readings sponsored by Poetry Atlanta and the Java Monkey Cafe. It is a part of the Decatur Book Festival, which is the largest independent book festival in the country (https://www.decaturbookfestival.com/). Each year, the College Day coordinator, Dr. Sharan Strange, a Poetry Atlanta board member, invites local colleges and universities to participate in the readings. In the case of KSU and the MAPW, we, in turn, look to our students (both undergraduate and graduate), our faculty, and our alumni to read their poetry at the Festival. Other colleges might have only student readers or only faculty readers, but I believe our approach emphasizes the range of our writing community. This past September, forty-five poets from eight colleges and universities participated. The KSU English department was represented by undergraduates Mo Mohammed and Mary Sims. The MAPW was represented by alumna Nancy Stephan and faculty member Shelia Smith McKoy.

Why were they brought about?

Poetry Atlanta is a long-standing literary service organization in metro Atlanta, and Java Monkey has been the host of a long-running poetry reading series. The College Day Readings are a way to extend their services to a larger community and to support the efforts of local student poets. To read at the largest book festival in the country is an exciting opportunity for student poets.

In what ways do college day readings impact the community?

By highlighting the college poets, the program brings them into a broader poetry community, gives them the ability to be heard by a larger audience. It also enriches the community by providing a platform for emerging voices.

How can a student writer get involved at the next event?

I ask the KSU poetry instructors, the advisor for Ellipses Creative Writing club, and other of KSU’s poetry leaders for nominations from among our students. An interested student should inform his or her instructor about their interest in reading or may also contact me directly at tgrooms@kennesaw.edu. The call for participants will go out in April of this Spring 19 semester.

Tony Grooms is the Director of the MAPW and author of the book The Vain Conversation.