

# Writing Works

## Writer Goes to Jail

by Margaret Musgrove, T-C '91

How could I enter the jail without identification? Bridgette Muller, the Open Society Fellow who had invited me to speak to her writing class at the jail, had said not to bring my pocketbook. I thought I was wise leaving it at home, especially since I was carrying books and statues and material for my talk. But my identification cards were in my pocketbook. This was not my first time in a jail. I had visited my cousin and Shaka Wiggins, head of the writers' group at Jessup. Identification is essential to get into a jail. I should have known better.

Bridgette remained calm and I tried to imitate her. The guard behind the glass looked at her as if she were crazy when she explained that I was the guest author and a professor from Loyola College for her class. He looked her dead in the eyes and said, "I don't know who this female is!" I felt like a stray cat now and tried to make myself small up against the wall. It was a humbling moment. Jails cut all the status fluff. In this place, only this man's power determined who I was. When a social worker in the jail could identify me, he assigned a woman who worked with Bridgette to guard me. He told her not to let "this female" out of her sight. He had surely stolen some of my joy and tempered my enthusiasm for being there.

After we made our way through a maze of corridors, locked doors and ID checks, we arrived at Bridgette's small unadorned classroom. I breathed a sigh of relief, filling my lungs with the smell of bleach from the wet floor outside the door. Students helped me pull a table from against the wall to drape my kente (African strip cloth from Ghana, West Africa) strips all across the table. The electric pink, deep blue and bright green lit up the room. I put my map of Africa on the front of the podium. Both of my children's books are about African culture and traditions so the Akwaaaba statue and the kente cloth were things from African countries that they could see and touch.

Being in a woman's jail was a new experience for me and I was hoping that I could make the talk relevant to them. Bridgette's main goal for the women was to increase their literacy so that they might also

increase the literacy of their children. Those who were taking the class were interested in writing, so I hoped that using the books and talking about how I wrote them, especially the revising aspect of writing, would be helpful to them. Ursella Prather had prepared an introduction of me that was very nice, and I thanked her as I took my place before the class.

"Writing is really rewriting," I said. "The first draft of your first version of something is usually just a beginning. Don't be discouraged because something does not come out perfectly the first time." I explained to them that I had stacks of drafts from AHSANTI to ZULU and the same for SPIDER WEAVER. I told them that it took me four years to find a publisher for ASHANTI TO ZULU and six years before SPIDER WEAVER actually was in book form. They could see how short both picture books were and it helped them understand that the writing process takes time and patience.

Renee' Hammond was one of the women who read her journal to me. I commented on the content, reminding her that journal writing is most valuable for the writers, and the way we judge it is different from an essay that we would like published in a newspaper on the editorial page.

The women were particularly warm and receptive to me. I felt honored by their sincere attention to what I had to say and Bridgette seemed very pleased with the way I had reinforced her lessons. At the end of the talk they tried on the kente cloth and we took pictures together. What had begun on a hard and cold note ended in a truly gratifying – even warm and fuzzy – way. I was thankful to have had such an enriching experience teaching the writing process using my children's books to women in the jail in Baltimore City.



Margaret Musgrove

## Inside:

- From the Pen of a Teacher: Memories of Moving On \_\_\_\_\_ 2
- Baltimore Writing Marathon: 26.2 Miles of Pen and Paper \_\_\_\_ 3
- Director's Report \_\_\_\_\_ 4
- Dundalk Summer \_\_\_\_\_ 7
- Anazco is Teacher of the Year To Her Students \_\_\_\_\_ 8
- The Teacher Inquiry Institute: Stronger in the Classroom, More Respected Outside the Classroom \_\_\_\_\_ 10
- Teacher Therapy: The Professional Writing Retreat \_\_\_\_ 11
- Elephant Camp \_\_\_\_\_ 12
- Writing Retreat in Upper Marlboro \_\_\_\_\_ 13
- News and Notes \_\_\_\_\_ 14
- Belonging \_\_\_\_\_ 15
- The Gathering- Sharing Familiarity \_\_\_\_\_ 15
- New Season of Speakers \_\_\_\_\_ 16

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