

Maryland Voices Serves as Model for Student Publishing in a Larger Community

by Rus VanWestervelt, TC '89

Students on all grade levels have experienced the myriad ways of publishing in the classroom. They have read aloud to other students in the class; have published in-house literary magazines, newspapers and informative brochures; and have posted their work in the classroom or elsewhere around the school so that others can read their final, polished products. And parents know the pride our children feel when publication means simply displaying a new story on the refrigerator at home. Still, there are limited in-house forms of publication, and as our students progress through school year after year, the publishing opportunities we provide may become redundant and less effective, especially if these become the only opportunities our students are given to share their work with a larger audience.

Publication completes the complex process of composing and revising for writers of any age. This final stage of the writing process cries out for originality and sincerity on the part of the teacher, and it cannot be neglected or compromised for any reason, even when time has been cut short by assemblies or even snowstorms. To our students, this is the stage that makes writing rewarding and encourages them to begin a new writing project.

Taking Publishing to the Next Level

Not diminishing the power of publishing within a classroom, a school, or at home, writing gurus such as Ralph Fletcher and Donald Murray have observed that when students publish to a larger audience, and especially when their work has a potential impact on that larger community, they feel more empowered to take greater ownership of their work and apply those experiences to future writing projects. When those opportunities are not given to our students, sometimes the well-intentioned form of publication can actually deflate the students' interest in writing. In the introduction to his book, *What A Writer Needs*, Fletcher shares this example of when a form of publishing can be counterproductive.

"I watched a teacher read *The Lorax* by Dr. Seuss to her students. These were big kids, eighth graders, and they were riveted. She had them.

"'Now, I want you to write a letter to Mr. Onesler,' she told the students. 'Tell him how you feel about the way he's been chopping down all the trees.'"

"That broke the spell. The kids sighed, slumped. They knew only too well Mr. Onesler was a fictitious character. No one would read the letters. The exercise lacked any authentic purpose. . . . You don't learn to write by going through a series of preset writing exercises. You learn to write by grappling with a real subject that truly matters to you."

Fletcher's right. Our students are real people who are a part of a real community, and we can provide publishing options that bring greater meaning to their writing. Instead of writing a letter to Mr. Onesler, for example, students could have written to local politicians or area newspapers about real environmental issues that are critical to their own communities.



Rus VanWestervelt

The Creation of the 9/11 Project

After 9/11, I realized quickly that many students were writing – in and out of school – about the terrorist attacks. I knew that we had to provide a venue for all of this writing. Thus, the 9/11 project was born. Two things were most important to me: first, that we spread the word as widely as possible to give the greatest number of Marylanders the opportunity to document their reactions, and second, that we work with teachers and students across the state to teach them about writing for publication. As a Teacher Consultant, I had been working on a new presentation that focused on the publishing stage of the writing process. In gathering resources for the presentation, I had been searching for publishing opportunities where students could submit their work for publication, either on the Internet or in a bound publication. The creation of the 9/11 Project was the perfect opportunity to teach teachers the steps needed to prepare a manuscript as a submission for publication. In workshops that lasted just 60 minutes, we could provide teachers all of the tools they needed to walk into their classrooms the next day and offer their students an opportunity to share their work with a larger audience.

Our challenge was reaching every student in the state. Without hesitation, we contacted Maryland Writing Project (MWP) Director Barbara Bass for assistance. Barbara helped us in two ways: first, she allowed us to make a presentation at a free Saturday workshop for area teachers; second, she sent out a call for submissions to hundreds of Teacher Consultants across the state through the MWP e-mail list serve. Now, in just seconds, teachers all over Maryland were hearing about the 9/11 Project. That evening, I started receiving queries from teachers interested in more details. With the help of the Maryland Writing Project, thousands of students now had the chance to share their reactions to the attacks against America on September 11.

Almost immediately after we began conducting free workshops for area teachers, we started receiving submissions from students of all ages across the state. Many of them included cover letters like this one from Lauren, a 14-year-old student in Pocomoke City, Maryland: "I am sending you a poem I wrote soon after nine-eleven. This is the first poem I have ever written. This poem contains my thoughts about the terrorist attacks and how I felt that day. I am glad that I am able to send you this poem so you may share it with others."

Lauren's sentiments were echoed by dozens of other students who submitted to the anthology. Not only were students getting the chance to publish, they were getting the chance to share their important work with a larger community. Many of them knew that their words would soothe thousands of Maryland readers. They knew that their writing would be making a difference.

In total, we received over 200 submissions from students. Of those, we were able to put 115 submissions in the book. Many of the remaining submissions will be featured later this year on our Web site, www.the911project.org, and all submissions are



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being donated to the Maryland Historical Society.

For the students, though, this opportunity did not end with the publication. All published contributors had the opportunity to participate in public readings and book signings around the state. Students-turned-authors experienced the writing process from prewriting to publication in a way that mattered to them; they were given the opportunity to publish to a larger community, and they rose to the occasion. Given the venue, our children

will continue to let their voices resonate and preserve what matters most to them.

September Eleven: Maryland Voices is currently in its second printing and will soon be available nationally through all major bookstores and college stores. For more information about the 9/11 Project, contact Rus VanWestervelt at PeaceSpring@aol.com or at 443-465-0818. *(See sample of student writing on back page.)*