

# Writing project spurs young minds

## Urban students urged to create from within

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Writing about his family life was an easy assignment for Joshua Quichocho. The 13-year-old has been filling up journals and notebooks for years.

But reading his essay to classmates did not come as naturally.

"It's scary," Joshua said. "When you're writing . . . you're wondering what the reader's thinking. You don't want to bore the reader. I guess it helps to get some feedback, but it's hard."

An eighth-grade student at the year-round Clark Middle School in City Heights, Joshua and nearly 40 classmates are spending winter break at a San Diego State University program for young writers.

Taught by professors, the course is meant to help students write often and better, while giving the inner-city youths a glimpse of college life.

The workshop is one of the many programs developed for the City Heights Educational Pilot, a three-campus project designed to improve the education of urban students and give university students hands-on experience in teaching and social work.

"These are reluctant writers," said education professor Leif Fearn, who is co-teaching the course. "The majority of kids in City Heights do not see writing as a way of communication."

With so many high school graduates advancing to college unable to write fluently, Fearn welcomes an opportunity to reach students early.

About 46 percent of freshmen who entered the California State University system in the fall of 1999 needed remediation in English. Despite earning good marks in high school, the students could not read or write at a college level.

And Fearn is not one of those writing enthusiasts who believe students should be praised for simply putting a pen to paper. Spelling, grammar and structure really matter under his watch.

"You can't break the rules until you know the rules," he said.

During the two-week writing seminar, students work on fiction and nonfiction. They spend one week writing a short story and another on an essay focusing on something

from their life.

Like Joshua, Blanca Magdaleno writes in a journal to express the highs and lows of her teen-age life.

She chose to write an autobiographical story about her favorite thinking spot, a garden she planted in her back yard. But after hearing Joshua's poignant essay about his troubled family life, Blanca, 13, is hesitant to read her own words.

"I didn't know we were supposed to be that deep," she explained before launching into a colorful, descriptive essay about her garden.

Joshua was the first to offer praise.

"She didn't write too emotional, but in a way, she did," he said. "It's like we learned more about her. It made me feel a connection."

Blanca and her classmates have learned that part of becoming a writer is giving their work an audience. It also means accepting criticism.

"I've been writing since I was in the third grade," Blanca said. "I don't like reading my stories to other people because I don't know how they will react. If they are going to be immature, I wouldn't like that."

Clark, Rosa Parks Elementary School and Hoover High School are part of the City Heights Pilot.

Financed by an \$18 million donation from local philanthropist Sol Price, the six-year intervention project has brought students, faculty and resources from a cross-section of SDSU -- including the education, business and health sciences colleges -- to the three schools.

The pilot is designed to combat some of the challenges facing City Heights families, such as high rates of transience and unemployment, limited grasp of English and overcrowded living conditions.

Students have been given a host of opportunities, such as the writing workshop.

What's more, teachers working in the pilot's three schools can enroll in a tuition-free master's program specifically developed for them. Many of the master's classes are taught on the campuses, and the teachers' theses are based on research conducted for the pilot.

Sara Oswald, a history teacher at Clark Middle School, said the pilot has transformed the three schools.

"It has been wonderful," she said. "We really feel like we're making a connection with our students."

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