

A BOUNTIFUL HARVEST



*Stories from the Growing Home Writers
Workshop*

Real Conditions volume 9 no 2 / October 2009



About the Community Writing Project

The Community Writing Project offers writing workshops to people who ordinarily do not consider themselves to be writers, and publishes their reflections and stories about everyday life. Because only the collective efforts of ordinary people can make a better world, we are interested in the creative expression and unique understanding of those who have been relegated to the margins of society, including the poor, the oppressed, immigrants, and those who risk their privilege to join them.

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The Writers

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Charles Covington

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Theodis Gibbs

Wanda Hands

Christie Harkness

William Hence

De'Andre Jackson

Tanisha Melton

Lavert Morgan

Rebecca Shaffer

Tomáchia Singley

Yolanda Thomas

Alphonso Turner

Introduction

The stories you are about to read were created in the summer of 2009 in a writing workshop at Growing Home. Growing Home provides job training to individuals in Chicago through a social enterprise business based on organic agriculture. The program provides experiential learning opportunities and employment in the horticulture field, as well as a unique job readiness curriculum that helps reintroduce participants back into the workforce. Growing Home is different from other workforce development programs because of its intense focus on the transformational possibilities inherent in learning to nurture and grow one's own food.

The authors, African American men and women primarily from low income communities, came together once a week for a month to talk, reflect, and write about their lives. Bolstered by their experiences at Growing Home working together in the fields and in their classroom studies, they shared insights about themselves and each other at the writing workshop. This sharing strengthened the bonds of their community.

Some of the stories hint at or disclose past difficulties, personal and family tragedies, as well as current struggles. Some pay tribute to influential people who helped nurture the writers or inspired them to take a new path in their lives. Some reaffirm the inner strength they possess to get through “mad times.” Some write about caring for and about others in their lives.

What is not captured here are the lengthy and wide-ranging workshop conversations that prompted these stories. Several themes stand out which surfaced again and again in discussions. The first was injustice – both past and present – as the writers recounted experiences of racial discrimination. The second was pride in trying and succeeding at creating healthy food and producing something vital to the community. Third, there was an understanding of new ways of looking at the world. And finally, there was the participants’ delight in gaining skills that might lead to unexpected possibilities for their futures.

—*the workshop teachers*

Marsha Love and Janise Hurtig



MY GARDEN

Alphonso Turner

In my garden there are three rose bushes. Two of them are blooming bright red flowers. The other one may not be receiving enough sunlight. There’s also a plot of ground covers that are spreading rapidly. Those things are very aggressive. I have a stone border along the front walkway with ground covers in between each stone. In the back is a very small plot of soil that my grandmother used to plant her vegetable garden in before she got too old for the labor. Since I’ve been working here at Growing Home I’ve excavated the plot and started my own garden. I now have two tomato plants, two chive and six green pepper plants that are flourishing well.

RACISM

Tomáchia Singley

What an ugly word. I had to experience this word RACISM at such a young age, probably as young as eight years old. I am an African American raised Catholic, attended Catholic schools. I was the *only African American* child in my school. I suffered many racial remarks: “Raisin Face,” “Aunt Jemima.” I was a quiet little girl and endured a lot, but I overcame the prejudices and became very popular: head of our roller derby, voted Junior Class secretary. I was involved in many plays, including our senior play, *The Wizard of Oz*, as the good witch.

There is a way to solve all things: Never Give Up! I will always remember that eight-year-old girl in me.



A GOOD FATHER

Lavert Morgan

Being a good father is one of the best jobs a man can have. In today's world being a father is real, because if you are not, then you are less of a man in some cases. My father was never around when I was coming up in this world. So I made a lot of mistakes, because I was looking for that father that was never around. In so many words, I was my own father. I try so hard to be a good father, because when you go through life without one, it can be really hard. I can say that as long as I'm living, my two girls will have the best of both worlds, and that is father and mother. Now don't get me wrong. I love my daddy. His mistakes just make me a real man!

CARING FOR OTHER PEOPLE?

Wanda Hands

My name is Wanda Hands. I was born in Chicago, Illinois and was raised in Memphis, Tennessee. My mom died when I was four years old. My grand mom raised me until I was six years old. I grew close to her. Years later she died, and then I had to come back to Chicago -- me and my sister and my brother. I was in the house when my grand mom died. That hurt me to my heart.



Then back in Chicago my dad took over the family. He always had to work so the bills could get paid. So my older sister had to start raising us. She was only sixteen at the time. But my dad always showed his kids love. We always were together doing something, watching TV, playing games. Just sitting down eating together.

I never wanted to come back to Chicago, because I always said to myself that it was the fast life. And guess what. I was right. I finished school from 1st to 8th grade. When I got in 9th grade, things just started getting out of control for me. I start drinking and getting high, stay out all night, going to party when I'm supposed to stay in the house. Just thought I was grown. I didn't want to listen, because I was so mad at the world and God for taking the two best ladies away from me.

MY LIFE EXPERIENCE

Sabrina Brown



Part 1. An Injustice. I, Sabrina Brown, have experienced injustice from the cold world out there. Regarding being in jail, I was accused of #1 murder with attempted armed robbery. 12-1997. I fought the case for 2 ½ years at Cook County Jail and I got convicted 3-2000. They dropped the murder charge and sent me down for armed robbery with 15 years. So I went to the penitentiary for 4 ½ years. I came home 3-2005. I also went back to jail for my cousin in 2008 for a drug case for three days. But I got out on bond for \$5,000. 6-2008 my daughter got killed at the time they locked me up.

Part 2. Passing Through. This is what I went through being incarcerated. I felt like I had nothing to live for. Waking up every day asking myself am I ever going to go home. You know, being away from your kids and family for so long, that hurts. And to experience having no one there in your corner but one person, that's rough, because I have a big family. But by the grace of God I made it through in my right state of mind. Thank you, Jesus.

Part 3. A New Beginning. I hated when I came home as far as my living situation because I went from family to family and they all treated me like I was just an outsider. Living from house to house is the worst experience I've ever had in life. It's nothing like having your own place. It's rough.

It's so hard for me right now. I have to really stay focused because at times I still feel so empty on the inside, and my family is still not trying to work with me at all. But I have to stay strong for my little girl because I don't want to lose my daughter, who I love and admire.



WHEN I LOST MY MOM

Christie Harkness

When I lost my mom was the second saddest day of my life. The first was when I was 18 years old and my two month old daughter passed of SIDS in her sleep. I never had any more children, because I was afraid of the pain of her loss. I retreated from life the best way I knew how. And that continued for years. Then my mom got real sick. I really felt like God was playing a bad joke on me and that I was destined to be alone and sad. After my mom passed I retreated a little more for a few more years. But I finally came out of that cloud. I feel happy today. I know that my mom is looking down at me and proud of who I have become. I'm not saying I'm perfect. I still need work. But I came out of that cloud and into the sunshine of life.



MY DAUGHTER

Charles Covington

My daughter is the reason for me changing the way I live my life now. My attitude is positive ninety percent of the time. Just wanting to be in her life helps me make better choices in my life. I am a man that takes responsibility for all my deeds and my seeds. I get a really joyful feeling every time I hear her say, "Daddy." She is so pretty and smart. She loves to learn new things, which pretty much is everything. Everything is new to her. She is only three.

HERBS

De'Andre Jackson

Once I planted some herbs. They didn't grow the first time or the second. I planted them again a month later. They didn't grow. So the fourth time I planted my herbs I watched them carefully. Each and every day I would sit on the back stairs and watch the sun shine on my herbs. Come to find out, I went to the front of the house to receive my bike back from a close friend and when I returned I saw why my plants weren't growing. My puppy dog would be sitting under the tree sleeping with the pile of herbs under him. Eating them slow and faking like he's sleeping.



CARING FOR SOMEONE AND SOMEONE CARING FOR YOU

Rebecca Shaffer

Since I was born I know I was cared for. Ever since I can remember my mother, my father, my sisters and brothers all cared for me. And most of all, my God, because I was told I came from God and that I was a blessing. That made me feel very special. I passed the same belief to my boys and girls. And the faith goes to my grandchildren. Every day or every moment or every hour, we let it be known that we are grateful, even though we go through mad times.





INJUSTICE

Derrick Barrett

Injustice is when someone or something is treated unfairly. The most unjust thing I see on a daily basis is the justice system. First it starts with the police. They are the first level of injustice. The police profile people so they don't get the benefit of the doubt. They stack the chips against people who are minorities or come from "bad communities." That means they don't have the social status of people who are fortunate to have money. I see a lot of racial profiling from the police every day. I just dealt with profiling today from the narcotics squad. They just pulled up, no probable cause to stop us, but did it anyway because they can.

The second level of injustice is the court system. They make sure you don't have adequate representation, so they appoint you a half-assed lawyer that the government pays for. The reason for that is so they can make it easy to convict a person, because they don't have money to pay for a lawyer. They are forced to accept anything that the judge gives them.

Then the third level is the politicians. They have it set up so that when they make laws, they benefit people of the upper class. This means that if you are broke, the law does not apply to you. An example is tax cuts. They make it so that rich people who have all the money continue getting all the money. Sometimes the powers that be make an exemption for one or two people, but not a whole group of people.

Then the last level of injustice is the people behind the money. They are the main reason the world works the way it does. They have everything, so they don't need for nothing. The world revolves around them, so they don't have to make things better for others, because they don't deal with normal people.

My solution to the problem is every fortunate person should have to switch positions in life so they can feel what we feel.



A 22-PLANT MASTERPIECE

William Hence

Everyone should have a garden. It is a nice piece of mind. Once you get started you can't stop. My garden started with one plant. Every day I went to work I added on. Now it is a 22-plant masterpiece. Having a garden is something like having kids. You have to start it off small and watch it grow. My garden has mostly tomatoes and a lot of peppers. I have a lot of other things. Some I don't eat, but it is fun to watch them grow.

RUBY

Jasmine Easter



I love my little kitty cat Ruby, but I call her Grandma's Little Baby. She is so sweet. She has three sisters. I named her kittens Ruby, Diamond, Onyx, and Pearl because I love jewelry of all types. I gave Diamond and Pearl to my sister, and her children adore those two cats. I've had Ruby since she was born. I also loved her mother. She was my first Mama's Little Baby, so that's why I call Ruby Grandma's Little Baby.

I used to take her outside for walks when she was little. I don't let her outside ever now that she a big girl, because she's not spaded. She's very playful and smart. I taught her how to give nose kisses, and she likes giving me nose kisses. She also knows how to bring a string to me when she wants to play. And she don't mind when I have to bathe her. She's good company and she's always welcome to live with me. Ruby has brought so much love to my home. I will keep her until she's old and gray.

Ruby's mother was the best. I could let her outside to play for a day or two, and then I could yell out the window for her, and you could see her coming from five yards away. Sometimes she would meow on the back porch calling for me, and I could hear her from inside my apartment and I would come and let her in. I wished I could have kept all of them, even the second set of five kittens, but my apartment wasn't big enough. But my heart is. I have such compassion for animals and humans. Just as I can't save all humans, I can't save all animals. But I'll give Ruby all the love that I couldn't give her brothers and sisters.



A STORY TO TELL

Tanisha Melton

Before the writing class, the interns at Growing Home, we all got along okay, but being separated into two groups I think made our relationship as co-workers different. In each group we now know something about each other that the other group doesn't, which is good in a way. We could learn from other people's mistakes and accomplishments. Everyone in this program has a story to tell, either discouraging or encouraging, maybe both, having come from past to present. Hopefully from this Growing Home Internship 2009 experience come more open-minded, thinking individuals.

RAISING KIDS

Sheadrea Blanks

I had my first child when I was seventeen and had my last kids at 28 years old. I have six total. It just so happen that my last two were twins. Now that my first three boys are grown up I really got a chance to see the big difference between raising small kids and raising teenagers until they are grown.



I lost two of my boys to the street at the age of 15, 16 years old. They are not dead, but part of them does not belong to me anymore. I really felt like I was the best mom. I gave them a lot of love and structure as young men but not knowing the influence that the street had on them.

Tuesday morning I was sitting on my porch and my boyfriend's cousin came up. She was crying. I said, "What's wrong?" She said, "My son's friend broke into my house and stole everything we had." I paused. I really didn't know what to say, because I have those kinds of kids that break into people's house. She said, "Sheadrea, I really feel sorry for you. How do you handle it? You just got to let go!"

Mainly this story is about raising kids and how hard it can be. Even when you're done, they really can turn around and bite you in the butt.

MY LEFT AND RIGHT

Shannon Billingslea

What inspires me the most is my left and my right. Really I wouldn't call it inspiring -- more like motivation. With my left and my right no one is bigger than the other. They are equal. They're both always there for me when I need them. If I fall they help me back up. If I'm sick they help me get back my health. If it wasn't for them I wouldn't be here.

Life is short, so when you find people that love and care for you like you're their own blood, you take that to heart and try to stick with them. Life would be so much easier if you had a left and right that understood you like I do.

BEING A FATHER

Melvin Fonville

Things I think about being a father hurt a lot of times, because my father never left me out there the way I left my son. And today there's just no excuse for my acting. I have been covering my pain with drugs, always saying when I get myself back together it's going to be all right. But my young son always says, "Daddy, you don't have to have any money. I just want you to say you love me and get to know your grandkids and spend some time together." It's sad when you don't really know your grandkids because of drugs.

MY MOM

Yolanda Thomas

I admire my mom and love her very much because she worked hard to raise and take care of her own children. To this day she works hard to take care and be sure her grandchildren and great grandchildren are being raised and taken care of right. If her children call for her she's still there at their beck and call, to this day. She is a hardworking, amazing, strong, loving mother. And I love, honor, and respect her to this day and always will. God, thank you for making her my mom.

IF IT WASN'T FOR THEM

Theodis Gibbs

I have two children, a two year old (Jeron) and a one month old daughter (Jancima). My two year old, people say he has my ways as far as attitude. I can't really say much about my daughter other than putting her mother through hell during pregnancy. But if it wasn't for them, no telling where I would be. They make me think differently about a lot of things. I think of my children as motivation. They are the ones that pushed me every day. And I thank God for that.



Issue editors: Marsha Love and Janise Hurtig

Layout and Design: Janise Hurtig

Photographer: Marsha Love

Special thanks to:

Growing Home Executive Director, Harry Rhodes

**Growing Home Employment Training Staff: Beth Gunzel,
Jumaani Bates, and Orrin Williams**

**The Community Writing Project and its publication *Real
Conditions* is affiliated with the PRAIRIE Group, College of
Education, University of Illinois at Chicago**

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