

04/09/2010

Sister Writes: giving voice to the voiceless

By Tamara Baluja

There are some stories that you have to write, because its your job. And then there are stories that you want to write because they matter.

Sister Writes was one of those subjects I felt I had to [write about](#).

It is in a creative writing workshop series for marginalized women in the west end of the city run by Toronto-based author [Lauren Kirshner](#).

Although the workshop series isn't designed to be a therapeutic course, their lives often seep into their writing, Kirshner says, adding that some of the women are battling poverty, homelessness, mental health issues, or drug addictions.

After 10 hard weeks of writing, Sister Writes finally launched a magazine containing their creative work at the Bloor Gladstone library on April 8.

If it was moving to read their stories, it was even more so to hear them read aloud by the women - in particular, stories which drew from early memories.

Wanda Krzeminsk's story hit me like a ton of breaks. It's so simple, yet so poignant. The short piece is autobiographical and describes her childhood with an abusive father.

Then there was Cerima, whose story on , made me laugh - because it captures the essence of sibling rivalry. Annalise did a very dramatic reading of

Some might say that Sister Writes does not have any tangible benefits. I would disagree. When I dropped in to observe one of the earlier sessions, the group wasn't yet a perfect whole. I saw some minor tiffs, some buttons pushed the wrong way. Fast forward a couple of weeks and my reaction was literally "wow!"

They were laughing, teasing instead of provoking, and just downright happy. As one of the women, BJ, said, "You get that sense that we are all sisters here."

Lauren wrote in the magazine that her "hope was to create a space in Toronto's downtown west end for women to write about life as they know it, and have fun while sharing their words."

"That we weren't writing for the sake of becoming the next Stephen King or Danielle Steele was a central tenet of our group. Why? Because impressing each other or the world didn't matter. What mattered was showing up and putting honest words on the page."

Initially Kirshner did not know if Sister Writes would continue beyond the pilot project if funding didn't come through. But I'm very happy to say that she told me after the launch party that Sister Writes will go ahead.

The next session will launch in May 2010 with workshops at the Bloor Gladstone library. Call the Sistering shelter at 416-926-9672 if you want to join or know someone who might benefit.



Rapt attention during the readings.



From left to right, sisters-in-writing:

Salma Habibi, Mary, Cerima, Lauren Kirshner, Emily, BJ, Wanda Krzeminski and Annalise.

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