

Nominate an Innovation: Mighty Writers

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Summary

The number of adult Philadelphians lacking basic literacy skills is a dismal 22 percent, nearly 10 percent higher than the national average. Tim Whitaker, writer and former editor of the *Philadelphia Weekly*, is trying to combat the city's literacy woes at a neighborhood level. His South Philadelphia writing center, Mighty Writers, services the community in two ways: After-school volunteer tutors assist students in their homework and on long-term writing assignments; and professional writers from a variety of backgrounds run workshops where they teach students essential writing skills. The difference between Mighty Writers and more traditional tutoring programs is a determination to understand what students are passionate about, and a mandate to incorporate that passion into workshops that will inspire their interest in the written word.

The Problem: Illiteracy in Philadelphia

Statistics compiled by the National Center for Education Statistics show that an estimated 22 percent of Philadelphia adults, ages 16 and older, are lacking basic

literacy skills. With only 48 percent of Philadelphia's school children reading at grade-level literacy rates (Leah 2009), the future is not looking any brighter for Philadelphia's next generation of readers and writers.

The Solution: Mighty Writers

This past December cultural differences and racial bullying at South Philadelphia High School led to dozen of on- and off-campus attacks on Asian students. To protest what they saw as the school's continuing lack of action in dealing with ongoing bullying by black students toward them, Asian students carried out a week-long school boycott (Walters 2010).

Months later, numerous groups at a local and national level are continuing to investigate the troubling events. About a mile away, at the corner of 15th and Christian Streets, a smaller but just as significant group is continuing its own inquiries. Some of the students who come here to the writing center, Mighty Writers, have been deeply affected. Together with their tutors and workshop leaders they are exploring these events through words, video, and writing.

It is the center's ability to introduce such topics to their curriculum that keeps students here passionate about their writing. Many spend six hours a week at the center getting help with their homework and attending writing workshops. According to Tim Whitaker, founder of Mighty

Writers, the fact that the students are spending so much of their free time working to improve their writing skills means the program owes it to the kids to give them the kind of curriculum that inspires. Taking into consideration the plight of Philadelphia's education system, that inspiration is sorely needed.

As editor of the *Philadelphia Weekly* Whitaker was well positioned to see how literacy rates in Philadelphia affect families. "If you live in Philadelphia and spend time in Philadelphia," he says, "[you see] that a lot of people leave Philadelphia when they have children of school age, basically because of the condition of the public school system."

The nonprofit writing center opened its doors last July after securing a \$250,000 grant from the Lenfest Foundation and obtaining a rent-free base through Universal Companies, a not-for-profit community development organization (Argondizza 2009). The last piece of the puzzle fell into place when Whitaker met Rachel Loeper, a former educational software writer who joined Mighty Writers as program director.

The idea to create a writing program had been with Whitaker for years, but a more concrete vision of what the organization would look like developed after he visited 826 Valencia, a writing program for kids in San Francisco. Founded in 2002 by author Dave Eggers and educator Nínive Calegari, 826 Valencia offers a variety of free

programs and services throughout the school year and summer months.

“What I saw in San Francisco was a really dynamic program and it drew kids from all over the city. ... I went back to Philadelphia and started adapting much of what I saw in San Francisco, but also taking into consideration many of the unique qualities of Philadelphia and the neighborhood we’re in,” Whitaker explained.

How Mighty Writers Is Innovative

It is that desire to adapt writing topics and workshops to various neighborhoods around the city that makes Mighty Writers so innovative. Rather than seeing Philadelphia as a homogenous entity, Whitaker and Loeper see it as a group of small neighborhoods with different needs and interests. Tapping into that individuality in order to appeal to students is what sets them apart.

In addition to focusing on individual neighborhoods, Whitaker added, Mighty Writers workshops are unique because their topics can be modified quickly in order to cover subjects that are current and interesting to students. So, when something like the violence at South Philadelphia High School takes place, they can rework or include workshops that study it.

Nowhere is this more evident than on the Mighty Writers website, where news items that are of interest to students

are posted immediately. Events like the earthquake in Haiti, comments the President makes about education or the launch of Apple's iPad are all highlighted on the website to encourage discussion. People can also write to Mighty Writers suggesting possible workshop topics.

Unlike traditional schools that have little flexibility in their curriculum, Mighty Writers holds workshops that teach a wide variety of writing techniques: blog writing, graphic memoirs, science fiction, even love letters. The beauty of the program is that students get to choose what they want to work on. After students have perfected their end product they can publish it in books put together by the center.

So what does social innovation mean to Whitaker? He believes that it comes down to "attacking a specific problem that exists with all the expertise and tools you can muster, and [then] look[ing] for alternative solutions to challenges not typically employed by mainstream institutions." In the case of Mighty Writers it means creating "alternate routes that will get kids to the same destination—success."

The Mighty Writers program is divided into two parts. Monday through Thursday, tutors and students, aged 7 to 18, meet after school for a two-hour homework session. Students spend part of the session focused on school homework and the rest of the time working on writing projects. Most of the 20 to 35 students who attend the

homework sessions live in the neighborhood.

Writing workshops make up the second part of the program. During these two-hour sessions students delve into specific topics, led by writers from a variety of professional backgrounds who donate their time.

When the program first launched Whitaker was worried they would lack students. Nearly a year later Whitaker and Loeper's main concern is finding more space so that their current location can service their waiting list. Plans to open two more centers within the next year in West and North Philadelphia are under way and will be partially supported by the program's first fundraising efforts, which were just completed. In addition to petitioning foundations and applying for grants, the center wrote to influential Philadelphians with a history of donating to nonprofits.

According to Whitaker, the program's success in recruiting students can be attributed to two things. First, there is a lot of emphasis on listening closely to what the young writers are talking about; this in turn can lead to further discussions and possible workshop topics. Second, Mighty Writers has worked hard to create a space that reflects who the kids are and what they like. This familiarity leads to a sense of possession and belonging.

Tutor Sam Allingham, a guitar teacher and fiction writer,

has been with Mighty Writers for a month, but even in that short time he has seen how the kids feel about the space. "It's nice because the kids have a sense of accomplishment with the space...they're really excited about it and you get the sense of everyone working together." Allingham adds, "they've got a good community going on."

Advice to Social Entrepreneurs

For people interested in launching their own innovative enterprise, Whitaker emphasized the importance of initial financial support: "It's important to get financed before you're launched, to make sure you're up on your feet for just a year without having to get more money so that you have a period where you can prove yourself. Then of course you need a vision that coincides with a need out there. And a passion for it."

"The key," Whitaker believes, "is to go all out at all times. You can't rest."

References

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