

*Below: Mentee Tema Regist reads from her work.*

*Opposite: Girls Write Now founder and executive director Maya Nussbaum (left), with mentee Tina Gao, receives the President's Committee award on behalf of her organization from First Lady Michelle Obama at the White House.*



# Girls Write Now

## A New York City After-school Program Pairs Women Mentors with Underprivileged Teen Female Writers

by Suzan Sherman

Back in 1998, when Maya Nussbaum was just 21 years old, she conceived of Girls Write Now (GWN) as a program to serve underprivileged New York City high school girls with a passion for writing. The mission of Girls Write Now is a seemingly simple one and hasn't changed at all in the organization's 15-year history: empower girls by pairing them with professional women writers and editors who serve as their mentors; have the mentors and mentees meet once a week to discuss writing and anything else that bubbles to the surface; then watch what happens.

"At around the ninth or tenth grade, you're becoming developmentally awakened," Nussbaum says at the offices of Girls Write Now, in Manhattan's Garment District. The walls behind her desk are lined with books, many penned by women who serve as GWN mentors on a volunteer basis. "I was one of the lucky ones who had people all around me—supportive parents and teachers who opened up for me what was possible," Nussbaum says. Along with her devoted ten-person staff and cadre of 150 active mentors, GWN has achieved an astounding success rate in a city where just over 60 percent of students graduate from high school. By contrast, 100 percent of GWN-mentored girls graduate, and even more impressively, all of them have gone on to college. This remarkable record has not gone unnoticed: the White House has twice recognized GWN as one of the best after-school programs in the nation. To date, GWN has helped more than 4,500 girls learn that it is possible to "write their way to a better future."

Starting small, GWN was hatched in Nussbaum's living room when she was not much older than the girls her organization would come to serve. While in the throes of finishing her undergraduate studies in creative writing at Columbia University, Nussbaum experienced a paralyzing bout of writer's block, which became part of the seed for the startup. "I wanted to break

down the myth of the isolated writer—and so I harnessed my energy in another way, and proved that you can get help with the creative process," she says. For six years, while working by day as an art gallery director, she ran GWN on the side, but when GWN was awarded institutional grant funding, she felt inspired to commit to the organization full-time. The following year GWN subleased its first office space from Teachers & Writers Collaborative. One of Girls Write Now's earliest funders was the Brooklyn Community Foundation (formerly the Independence Community Foundation), which continues to provide support. The program is also currently supported by donors and foundation partners including the Digital Media Learning Fund in the New York Community Trust, the Pinkerton Foundation, Youth I.N.C. (Improving Nonprofits for Children), the National Endowment for the Arts, and the New York Women's Foundation, as well as a long list of individual donors.



Nussbaum insists that any and all of GWN's achievements result from the efforts of her highly accomplished group of volunteers. Those include the award-winning novelists Emma Straub, Alix Kates Shulman, and Alice Walker as well as editors who work for such top-tier publications as the *New York Times* and the *New Yorker*, who serve not only as mentors but also as board members, guest speakers, and supporters. The application process for becoming a mentor is rigorous. In addition to submitting a résumé and two writing samples, potential mentors must fill out an in-depth application and answer questions including "What would you like to accomplish working for Girls Write Now?" and "What are some of the challenges you anticipate encountering as a mentor, and how might you address those challenges?" Asked how she manages to get such busy, successful women involved in her organization, Nussbaum explains, "You've got to give them a stake in what they're doing—we've got a staff of ten and a million-dollar budget, but the fuel of this organization is the volunteers. This was always a team effort of bringing women together who want to give back."

Of even greater concern to Nussbaum is creating a sense of accountability for the girls, many of whom have lacked strong role models. "Excellence is a big value for the organization. GWN sets the bar high and in turn we expect the girls to do the same," Nussbaum states plainly.

Sixty-six percent of the girls GWN mentors come from families at or below the poverty level, and 20 percent are from immigrant populations. Ninety percent are identified as high-need—those who are at risk, for a variety of reasons, of failing to graduate.

### Using Their Voices

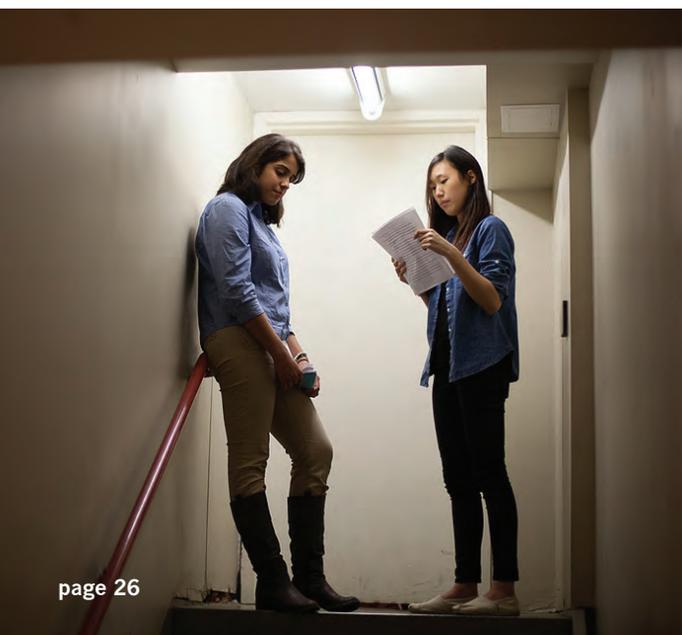
In the process of working with their mentors, girls learn that writing and editing can be marketable skills that might be used for professional careers, as well as personal tools for self-expression and empowerment. Besides the weekly one-on-one

mentor/mentee meetings that run throughout the academic year, girls are required to attend various workshops, including "dorkshops," where InDesign—a computer-design program commonly used in book and magazine publishing—is taught by industry professionals. GWN also offers free college-prep workshops, which are open to all New York City high school girls. The academic year concludes with a public reading series, in which the girls read aloud from their best work. For the majority this is their first time speaking in front of an audience—and an important milestone in using not only their words but also their voices to express themselves.

One recent GWN reading, sponsored by *Ms.* magazine, took place in the auditorium of the swank SoHo-based offices of Scholastic, the children's and young-adult publisher of notable books including the U.S. editions of J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* novels. The auditorium, which seats over 300, was packed to capacity, with people spilling into the aisles. A buzz of excitement was in the air as the reading was about to begin. Gloria Steinem, the famed feminist, was scheduled to serve as the guest speaker but had to cancel at the last minute, so Marcia Ann Gillespie—the former editor in chief of *Essence* and *Ms.* magazines—stepped up to provide a moving speech directed at the girls. "My great-grandmother," she told them, "was a slave. Writing is the thing that we take for granted—that we can speak our truths and get in people's faces, but it's a privilege that so many women in this world still don't have. I get to do what my great-grandmother didn't get to do by being able to write."

Two recent GWN graduates served as emcees for the evening; poised and confident, they said that what they learned through GWN will remain with them for the rest of their lives. Both now attend private, out-of-state liberal arts colleges. And then, one by one, the girls from the 2012–13 class walked onto the stage. Standing in front of the microphone with bright lights shining down on them, they addressed serious subjects. One girl read about walking past people drinking and taking drugs on her street corner and wanting to do better than that for herself; another read a poem about war-torn Palestine, where a mother tells her son to flee their country for a better life. A mentor and mentee read together about their shared love for their fathers—one an immigrant, the other with only an eighth-grade education. One after another, the girls moved their audience, their stories and observations sprinkled with such phrases as "Words change worlds" and "Writing is always in progress; we are always in progress."

After the reading the audience emptied into the reception area, where a series of blue books had been stacked and fanned into



*Mentee Karla Kim (right) shares her work with fellow mentee Emily Ramirez backstage before a Girls Write Now reading.*



*Mentee Bre'ann Newsome reads from her writing during a workshop.*

table displays. Every year GWN publishes a themed collection of writings by mentees and mentors, this year's theme being "New Worlds." In addition to the girls' original writings—among them poems, flash fictions, and short stories—the anthology contains photographs of each mentor/mentee pair, who are often shown arm in arm. With their names and words in a professionally bound book, the girls experience the feeling of accomplishment that comes with publication. The anthology also serves as a yearbook of sorts, as well as a keepsake. A charitable contribution by Amazon made this year's anthology possible, and the launch party for it was held at the venerable independent bookstore McNally Jackson, also in SoHo.

## Mentors and Mentees

Every Saturday at 11 a.m., Wendy Caster meets Rachel Candalaria at the Barnes & Noble bookstore in Union Square. In the store's cafeteria, filled with people sipping Starbucks coffee and flipping through magazines, the two sit across from each other and talk about writing. Wendy, 58, is a longtime resident of the East Village and works as a medical editor and freelance theater critic; Rachel, 17, is a junior at Brooklyn's Williamsburg Preparatory High School who lives in Ridgewood, Queens. Although mentor/mentee weekly meetings need only be an hour long, Wendy and Rachel inevitably spend much of the day together. "Oftentimes we'll go to Silver Spurs for lunch," Wendy says, "or McDonald's if we need Wi-Fi. Last week we went to see the movie *The Great Gatsby*, which was pretty good. We hang out, we chat, we recommend books to each other."

The work Wendy and Rachel do together is clearly far less formal than what takes place in a typical classroom with the teacher as the ultimate authority. "I never want to enforce writing, particularly on a teenager," Wendy says. "That takes away from the playfulness and the joy when someone tells you how to do something. What I do is encourage, support, and compliment. And I

don't do much editing—that's not the point here. But I do guide Rachel by suggesting that she add more of a plot in order to make her writings more publishable. My goal is to have her complete a formal short story that's about five pages long."

Even if Wendy is not teaching in a traditional manner, she is clearly making headway. "With Wendy, I learn to express myself and get my thoughts in order," Rachel says. "I'm better at doing things than I think—and Wendy helps me focus."

"You have a lot of ideas," Wendy interjects, as if speaking respectfully to a peer and not a girl more than 40 years her junior.

Before Rachel was paired with Wendy, she and the other mentees and mentors did a series of "speed datings," to see if there were any instant sparks of affinity or shared interest; in the end all were matched by the GWN staff based on their personalities, interests, and hobbies. "Both of us have a weird sense of humor—what other people moan and groan about makes us happy," Rachel explains. But the mentor and mentee are also quite different. Wendy says, "Rachel is a very lyrical writer and I'm, well, unlyrical."

"You're straightforward," Rachel says with confidence, following Wendy's suggestion to use the most accurate words to express herself.

Mentors and mentees often become as close as Wendy and Rachel, and as a result subjects may appear in writings—or surface in the course of conversations—that GWN regards as causes for concern. Among at-risk teens, problems such as depression, anxiety, self-mutilation, bullying, and domestic violence are not uncommon. "Usually," Nussbaum says, "it's in the most successful relationships that these issues become apparent," since the girls open themselves up to women with whom they have bonded. Mental health training sessions are held throughout the year, with mentors taught how to deal with particular issues. In 2010 a GWN Therapy Panel was formed, comprised of a group of mental health professionals who serve and advise the staff. "For girls in need we provide a team that includes a staff member, a parent, a member of our Therapy Panel, and her mentor. We offer group chats, which is basically a loose form of therapy. We also have a trained social worker on our staff," says Nussbaum.

Nussbaum recounts an emotional upheaval experienced by a mentee, Annie (whose name has been changed to protect her anonymity). When Annie's difficulty came to a head, it was successfully resolved through GWN's Therapy Panel. Annie, who hailed from Midwood, in Brooklyn, had a passion and a talent for poetry—as well as serious problems involving her parents.

“Her language (‘What about the girls who was clawing for motherly?’) was a lyrically skewed vernacular, assured in its rhythms, unsparing in image and tone—accomplished for a poet of any age, and extraordinary for a high school junior,” Nussbaum says. At the end of her first year of high school, Annie—who was already in the Girls Write Now program—ran away from home and went directly to GWN, which helped place her in a shelter for teens. During the weeks she spent there, she visited GWN’s offices and communicated with its staff nearly daily by phone or e-mail. Annie worked with her mentor on a set of poems, and included in their co-written chapbook is work alluding to her jarring experience. Even though mentoring relationships are typically framed by the school year, Annie’s mentor worked with her over the summer and into the next school year. Both her mentor and GWN staff provided extremely important support during that time. Once Annie returned home, GWN helped her obtain the services of a therapist. Through scholarships, she is currently attending college, where she is flourishing.

Another example of how GWN can significantly affect the life of a high school girl is 26-year-old Samantha Carlin, who nine years ago was a mentee. Now a graduate of Barnard College, she has served as a GWN mentor for the past two years. “One of the most important experiences that I remember doing as a mentee,” Carlin recalls, “was taking part in a travel-writing workshop where we had to go somewhere in New York City we’d never been before. I’m Jewish, and had never been inside of a church, and so that was what I did, I went to church, and afterward I went back to the GWN workshop and wrote about it. It was such a quintessential moment of how GWN can

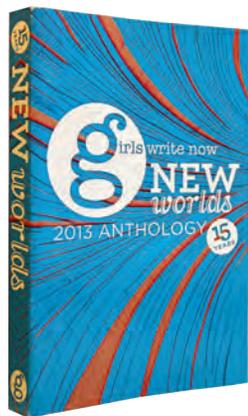
*As if he  
Himself  
Had melted the gold in his own pot  
And dipped the very paintbrush inside  
As if he, himself  
Brushed over everything  
She loved.*

*And it was only to make him stop, she  
gently  
Touched the tips of her fingers  
To his shoulder  
So lightly, even she  
Could not feel his warmth under her  
But instead of him stopping, she was*

*Running across a river of  
Golden syrup, engulfing her,  
Everything slowing down,*

*And suddenly, she was  
Stopping.*

By Kiara Kerina-Rendina, Girls Write Now mentee, published in *Girls Write Now New Worlds 2013 Anthology*



*Mentors and mentees peer critique during a Girls Write Now workshop.*

open up your mind and heart to new experiences. The GWN theme this year is ‘new worlds,’ which is a perfect one, I think.”

For the past two years, Carlin has mentored 17-year-old Amanda Day McCullough, who attends Hunter College High School and was preparing this past summer for her senior year. Carlin says, “Amanda is varsity captain of the basketball and swim team and is co-president of the women’s issues club. When I met her, I knew right away that I wanted to be her mentor; she has such a go-getter attitude about life. Now she’s at a two-week writing program at Brown University—we worked forever on the essay for that application, and next year we’ll be knee-deep in college applications.” With detectable pride, Carlin says that smaller, elite liberal arts colleges will be Amanda’s focus. Per GWN’s standards, she and Carlin are setting the bar high. “As inspiration, I’ve given her lots of books to read with strong women narrators—novels by Jennifer Egan, Julia Alvarez, Barbara Kingsolver.”

Back when Carlin was a mentee, her public reading was at the SoHo-based Housing Works bookstore, a smaller and more modest venue than the Scholastic auditorium. She spoke with enthusiasm about the way GWN has grown over the years: “It’s like when your favorite cozy family restaurant expands successfully—the charm doesn’t go away, you just have more capacity and can serve more meals. The heart and the mission remains the same.”

“Serving meals” may be the perfect metaphor for what GWN is doing all around New York, with mentees and mentors seated across from each other at tables in the Bronx, Brooklyn, Queens, Manhattan, and Staten Island. And while what is being consumed is far less tangible than, say, a plate of fried chicken or a steaming pork bun, by the end of an academic year, these “meals” have become lasting nourishment for the girls’ hearts and minds. ■