A Collaborative Book Draws Out Teacher’s Voices

In January 2001, Ann Dobic, then director of the National Writing Project of Acadiana, Louisiana, made a surprising proposal to her teacher-consultants. As the focus of their winter institute, she suggested they write a collaborative book on a topic of their own choosing. Like most of his writing project colleagues, Edward Gauthier recalled feeling something akin to electroshock therapy at the prospect of creating a book in one semester. The most immediate problem was the most daunting how to choose a topic. Help came from Evelyn Smith, a teacher, librarian, poet, and journal keeper, who had always been fascinated by her father’s stories about his World War II experiences. Listening to Smith, the group realized how each of them, through their own experiences or those of family members, had been touched by war. They recognized that these experiences offered a theme and purpose for their project.

The results was Ordinary People in Extraordinary Times: Stories of Americans at War in the 20th Century, a remarkable collection of writings from 14 teacher-consultants of the National Writing Project of Acadiana. To produce this anthology, the group met weekly over a period of almost four months. As Dobic notes in her foreword, “the group conducted field work, composed, revised, shared, and revised again. And again.” The collection reflects diverse genres, including a collaborative poem, “We Will Not Forget,” that summarizes what each writer took from the experience. Later, Dobic asked Gauthier to describe their collaborative process. Excerpted below is Gauthier’s essay, “War Brought Us Out,” followed by selections from the book. Gauthier begins by recounting the “emotional revolutions” that fostered within the group about their stories.

by Edward Gauthier

One woman pointed out that her family had emigrated from Germany and Austria. They were Jews who had suffered greatly at the hands of the Nazis. During the summers, caring for her aging grandmother, this woman had been exposed to the worst of war stories. Recalling them left her visibly shaken.

Listening to this and other accounts, I was having trouble breathing. I began to remember entering Guatemala only six days after the 1966 communist revolution there exploded into street fighting. I was studying for the Catholic priesthood and was there to do summer missionary work. On one occasion, we’d come upon the bodies of a group of men executed by firing squad, compliments of the Guatemalan federal troops. Over the next few days, we dug graves and helped the villagers bury their dead.

Would I be able to write about this? More to the point, would I even be able to get myself to sit down and remember it all, drag it up again, and relive it so others could read about it? It turns out most of my writing project colleagues were asking these same questions. It would not be easy to examine these experiences ourselves and approach our relatives and friends to tell their stories. For a time, we weren’t confident about our topic.

However, our site director, Ann Dobic, bolstered our self-assurance by inviting experts to teach us about interviewing. Some of us emerged from these sessions secure enough to go out and test our own abilities as interviewers. Others wrote from their own experiences or created fiction. Frankly, we seemed all over the map. I began to wonder if this would ever solidify into a cohesive product.

What saved us were the stories themselves. As they began to arrive at our Tuesday evening meetings, these accounts amazed us. Debbie Knatt brought in a chronicle of her father’s journals written about his Vietnam involvement and his adjustment as a black man returning to racist, deep-south Louisiana. Delores Hernandez wrote about Fred Cormier, a World War II air force flight engineer and gunner, who was shot down, captured by Nazi soldiers, and forced to make the Baltic Death March in conditions that included rain, sleet, snow, subzero temperatures, and a diet of bread fashioned partially from sawdust. Edye Mayers reminded us of the suspense of waiting to see if our loved one’s lottery draft number had been selected for probable service in Vietnam. Kay Foret delighted us with her description of how her relatives of Cow Island, Louisiana, less than two miles from the Gulf of Mexico, had hired a contractor to build an underground bomb shelter during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Kay wrote a long poem listing the shelter’s possible secondary uses, the owners having realized it was just sitting there, contributing nothing to their lives. The last item in the inventory named again the structure’s sobering, original purpose.

Our work progressed, and we managed to reach further and deeper into ourselves and into the lives of our relatives and our friends. We produced personal accounts, stories, and poems, and we unearthed photographs. As we began to read each others’ work, we soon saw the power of what we had. The project took on a life of its own, and a central committee created categories to help us make a book out of these related but diverse pieces.

It was months, however, before our labors became a book. Finally, Ann Dobic invited us to a party at her house where we were able to pick up our copies. At last, it was real. Opening the book, I read my poem and my Guatemala story. At the party, Ann asked me to write something about how we’d produced the collection, something that other writing project sites might be able to use. As I thought about it, I recognized we had developed a kind of system, though one that emerged less as a full-blown conception than as an evolving process. Here are some “rules of the road” to guide groups that wish to embark on a similar adventure:

- You’ll need a fearless leader. We had Ann Dobic. Preferably it should be someone who’s driven yet so cheerful she can kill you with kindness. The person will also need foresight, good organizational planning, and lots of experience—a sense of humor.
- Your topic must be small enough to hold the group to one central idea, yet broad enough to allow diverse philosophical viewpoints.
- Tolerance needs to be an unspoken principle. Though we didn’t agree on all points, we allowed ourselves to disagree, remain friends, and express ourselves truthfully. Expect diversity, distinct perspectives—as well as tactful disagreement—about the chosen topic should be welcome.
- You will need some kind of organizational plan. Ours was quite simple: We went out to get what we could. Then, like kids dragging their favorite toy back to a show-and-tell group, we looked over what we had and how these pieces could fit the categories we had developed. When needed, Ann created a category that would accommodate someone’s contribution.
- The topic should be relevant. Although no one in our group could have predicted, the book was written and in production when the terrorists attacked on September 11. Suddenly, our work took on new meaning.
- You’ll need to decide in advance on a process for selection. One option is to establish an acceptance committee that sets standards everyone must meet.
Excerpts from Ordinary People in Extraordinary Times

from “One Man’s Story” by Dolores Marie Hernandez

Based on the experience of Technical Sergeant Fred E. Cornier, Flight Engineer/Gunner, U.S. Air Force 1942-1945

The POW Camp

STALAG LUFT IV German Prison Camp Grossstochow, Germany
July 2, 1944 – February 6, 1945

The camp was located in a forest clearing in the Pomeranian sector of Germany. About fifteen miles from the Baltic Sea. Surrounding the camp were two barbed-wire fences.

Between the outer electrically charged fence and the inner fence was another of rolled barbed wire. Any prisoner attempting to cross this fence would be shot.

Towers with searchlights and machine guns were posted at intervals around the camp. Four compounds had ten barracks of ten rooms each.

With a kitchen, outside hand pump, and a building used for a toilet. Each had a shed for storing food, such as potatoes, barley, carrots, and cabbage, and steam boilers to cook in.

The prisoners tried to keep busy doing KP, cleaning and helping other prisoners. Playing cards, writing, reading, playing ball, walking or jogging around the compound.

The Baltic March

February 6, 1945 – May 2, 1945

When the Germans heard that the Russians were advancing on the camp, they marched the prisoners of STALAG LUFT IV for three months in northern Germany.
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From the camp they were marched by guards lined on both sides of the road. Carrying bayonets and aided by dogs. If the prisoners lagged behind, a guard would stick them. With a bayonet or have the dogs bite them on their hands, heels or legs. For each hour of marching the prisoners were given a five-minute rest break. This march was known as the Baltic March or the Black Death March.

The Conditions

At night they sometimes slept in barns or Out in the snow or mud in the fields. Some prisoners had blankets and Huddling together beneath them to keep from freezing. They marched in rain, sleet, and snow in bitter sub-zero weather. Many collapsed from hunger, weakness, fear, malnutrition, exhaustion, disease, or pain And perished on the march. They were left on the side of the road. Some were left along the way at camp hospitals. Many were never seen again.

Those who remained had blisters, infections, Frostbite and gangrene, Pneumonia and tuberculosis, Fleas, lice and dysentery.

Food was short, Steamed potatoes, sometimes barley. Brown bread (part sawdust), carrots and some oats.

Sometimes they had Red Cross packages, Powdered milk, biscuit, cheese, instant cocoa, Or a chocolate bar, sardines, margarine, corned beef, cigarettes, Prunes or raisins, coffee and sugar.

Meant for one person for one day, but shared By several for a week.