Giving Children a Voice and Venue After 9/11

BY RUS VANWESTERVELT

So there I sat, two days after September 11, and my daybook had not been cracked since the first tower crumbled to the ground. Unable to pick up a pen and feeling the guilt of being a so-called writer who, as Ralph Fletcher puts it, was frozen to the face, I had not written a single word about anything.

Surely I wasn’t alone. I took comfort in comparing my new-found approach to writing to Wordsworth’s . . . contemplating, letting the emotions settle before putting pen to paper. But then my mother called and told me that she had written 16 pages in her journal and could not stop writing. And then friends began emailing, forwarding poetry dedicated to the New York firefighters, personal accounts of being in the towers when they were hit, and, most solemnly, personal tributes to family members who were missing and presumed dead. People who confessed to never picking up a pen were turning to words to help them through the worst time in their lives to understand what was going on.

If adults were turning to writing, I wondered, wouldn’t children be doing the same? The thought reminded me of a conversation I’d had that August with Philip Gerard, my writing mentor, about the book he was writing, Secret Soldiers. Gerard spoke about the urgency of interviewing World War II soldiers before they died and took their stories with them, forever untold. Long before this, I’d begun to realize how many moments are never made permanent on the page. My own father remains a mysterious man to me because he shared so little and died before I had the wherewithal to write down the stories that mattered to him.

After September 11, it suddenly became important to me to find some way to capture such thoughts from Marylanders. I couldn’t stand the thought of adults and children alike harboring their thoughts about the attacks, never getting the chance to let others know how they experienced this tragedy. I called some friends together, pitched my idea for an anthology of Maryland residents’ reactions, and within an hour, the 9/11 Project was up and running, accepting submissions for publication.

As a writing project teacher-consultant, I had been working on a new presentation that focused on the publishing stage of the writing process. Too often, our students work diligently on their writing only to slip the finished piece into a portfolio, rarely to be seen again. For the presentation, I had been searching for publishing opportunities where students could submit their work for publication, whether on the Internet or in print. The 9/11 Project was the perfect opportunity to teach teachers the steps needed to prepare a manuscript as a submission. In hour-long workshops, we could give teachers all the tools they needed to walk into their classrooms the next day and offer their students an opportunity to share their work with a larger audience.

Our challenge was reaching every student in the state. Barbara Bass, director of the Maryland Writing Project (MWP), helped us in two ways: first, she allowed us to make a presentation at a free Saturday workshop for area teachers; second, she sent out a call for submissions to hundreds of teacher-consultants across the state through the MWP email listserve. In just seconds, teachers all over Maryland were hearing about the 9/11 Project. That evening, I started receiving queries from teachers interested in more details. With the help of the Maryland Writing Project, thousands of students now had the chance to share their reactions to the September 11 attacks.

Almost immediately after we conducted the free workshop for area teachers, we started receiving submissions from students of all ages across the state. Not only were students getting the chance

One contribution to VanWestervelt’s 9/11 Project came from 16-year-old Alex Hornbeck.

Sunday at Ground Zero

by Alex Hornbeck

There is a silence here, unlike anywhere else in the city. Somber pedestrians walk by, silent. Pigeons fly overhead, silent. The cars pass on the street; they are silent, even the taxicabs. It seems as if a soft blanket has fallen over the area known as Ground Zero, smothering the sound. I whisper something to my mother. Everyone whispers here.

I notice the windows and awnings, black—black with soot and dust from that September morning. No one has bothered to wash them. An acrid smell still lingers. It burns the nose slightly with the scent of destruction.

I am outside a church, and an empty space is in the sky behind it. It doesn’t belong. Emptiness shouldn’t be in the New York jungle of buildings. The emptiness creates an uneasiness, and everyone feels it. I walk on and reach a ramp, which I start up. I travel toward the emptiness. A wall of wood has been erected, a temporary structure that has lasted for months. A layer of signatures is slathered upon the wall, and I take my pen and sign it between a woman from Illinois and a family from Britain.

I reach the site, the epitome of silence. It is surreal. Beyond the trailers, a pit appears, ugly, with bent wire and pipes that come out of the ground and stop, pipes that never reach their destination, for it is gone. I am at a national disaster site. My mind doesn’t accept the truth, and I can’t believe it. Now that I am actually here, it becomes all the more unbelievable. And now I am walking away, and it seems like it never happened, like I never went.

But I know that I did, and that it happened, and only now, once I am away, can I realize the horror of it all. Only now, can I cry.
to publish, they were getting the chance to share their work with a larger community. Many of them knew that their words would soothe thousands of Maryland readers. They knew that their writing would be making a difference, even before it was announced that all proceeds from the book would be donated to the Maryland Survivors’ Scholarship Fund, established to ensure that the Maryland children who lost parents in the attacks would be guaranteed a college education.

In total, we received over 200 student submissions. Of those, we were able to put 115 submissions in the book. Many of the remaining 85 submissions will be featured on our website, and all submissions are being donated to the Maryland Historical Society and will be available for review upon request.

For the students, though, this opportunity does not end with the publication of the book, September Eleven: Maryland Voices. All published contributors are participating in a public reading at the launch event held mid-September at the Enoch Pratt Free Library, Maryland’s official state library in Baltimore. Students-turned-authors are experiencing the writing process from prewriting to publication in a way that matters to them; they were given the opportunity to publish, and they rose to the occasion. Given the venue, our children will continue to let their voices resonate and preserve what matters most to them.

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