Somewhere in a doctor's waiting room this morning, a nervous teenager is picking up a peer's first-hand chronicle of a journey through anorexia. The account was written by one of the hundreds of students in Janet Swenson's Write for Your Life program. The student author wrote to her teacher, "I wanted to let you know that I let my doctor read my paper and he is now using it to show to other patients. I felt very proud of myself. In a small way I accomplished my goal, to help other people not go through what I have gone through."

Write For Your Life (WFYL) is an adolescent health and literacy project that began to take shape in the fall of 1992 when Swenson, director of the Red Cedar Writing Project (RCWP), met at the NCTE convention with Michigan State colleagues Patricia Stock and David Schaafsm a and Jay Robinson of the University of Michigan. They discussed an idea that Schaafsm a had formulated in conversations with Dixie Goswami the previous summer at Breadloaf. "We dreamed," Swenson said, "of empowering children to create healthier futures for themselves by making their health the focus of their study." Thus was born Write for Your Life.

Funded by the Bingham Trust and Michigan State University, WFYL currently has teamed with 10 NWP sites—including three new ones this year—to disseminate the WFYL model.

The program invites students to become researchers of their own and one another's lives—to invest in study that is not merely academic. WFYL teachers want students to turn their attention to what is really on their minds rather than, as Swenson puts it, "the USA Today list of youth concerns." Students begin by writing about the local and particular rather than the general and abstract. "We want to get students beyond brainstorming lists of problems others have named for them which may not be relevant in their particular communities," Swenson says.

As with the Writing Project, there is no Write For Your Life curriculum or single model for a WFYL classroom. However, WFYL projects do share some common characteristics; for example, most have the assistance of a host university which provides a faculty member who spends time in the K-12 classroom on a regular basis.

WFYL students will normally spend the first couple of months of the school year in a reading/writing workshop setting writing about important times or issues in their lives. They then return to their writing to "mine" adolescent health issues that are embedded in those pieces. For instance, in writing about the trip to school one day, a Montrose (MI) High School student in RCWP teacher consultant Bonnie Stone's classroom noted that he had passed a landfill. Other students were surprised when each noted they too had passed a landfill. After some

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preliminary research the children determined that their very small, rural community had four landfills as well as a dump. That finding began a year-long research project to uncover how landfill locations are selected, what the health risks are of living near landfills, and how teenagers might foster recycling.

Gloria Dukes, a TC with the Coastal Georgia Writing Project, works with Upward Bound students. Her students built a dramatic production around their writings about personal and shared concerns. The performance begins with a group poem that captures the spirit of Write For Your Life:

We Will Be Heard

Though we are young,
We too have stories to tell.
Don't try to keep us quiet
Don't shush us and
Tell us what we have to say isn’t important.

Our stories may not be like yours.
They may not be the
Same color,
the same religion,
the same experience.

But they are our stories . . .
Stories of pain,
of family,
of happy and sad times,
of peace, quiet and of joy.

We are living in the stories.
They are who we are and
We celebrate the telling of them.
Yes, we are young and our stories will become many.
But for now,
For this night,
We rejoice in the words we have written and
We share pieces of our soul with you.

Tonight . . . WE WILL BE HEARD

THE UB PLAYERS

programs to reduce the size and spread of landfills.

In the first years of Write For Your Life, teachers guided students through discovery and inquiry stages and helped them publish their research. Whenever possible, teachers sought a broad audience for the student writing.

The project has not been without growing pains, however. In the spring of 1994, Detroit 8th grade teacher and Red Cedar TC Kevin LaPlante said he could no longer in good conscience encourage his students to spend as much time on their WFYL inquiries. He worried that as students named the preponderance of problems they confronted in their daily lives they were becoming fatalistic. Daily, they shared research findings with one another that had staggering implications for their futures. Swenson reports that one day, a female student looked at the African American males in her class and read a statistic that projected how many of them would be dead or incarcerated before age 20. A hush fell over the room.

Swenson and LaPlante continued to discuss how the project might be framed to meet the needs of his students. La Plante wrote the WFYL Co-Directors: "No matter how much we try to shield them from the cruel realities of this world, most of our students will be forced to confront the rotting seams of society head-on. It is up to education to equip them with the skills and wisdom to be able to mend the fabric before it all unravels."

The implication of La Plante's comment seemed to be that it may not be enough for WFYL students to identify, research and write about the problems that complicate their young lives. They also needed to find ways to change the conditions that created the problems.

Drawing on work she had invited college students to undertake a decade earlier, Swenson suggested that WFYL students be invited to frame community service projects based on their research and compose grant proposals to the WFYL "Foundation" to fund their projects.

In composing grant proposals students would, Swenson felt, have an opportunity to write for an audience other than the teacher and for a clearly definable purpose. The proposal would also allow them to "try on" a genre of writing they might use again in the future and allow the teacher to raise issues of how text can be clear and persuasive to audiences beyond the classroom.

The need statements speak clearly to the diverse settings in which the project has sites. As one proposal from Detroit reads:

"Our school just blends in with the poverty of the community. We feel the reason our school looks bad is because of young gangs and thugs who write and paint all over the schools. A lot of students hate coming to school because of the way it looks. This is how we got the idea to beautify the inside and outside of the school."

That students all over the country are now
submitting WFYL grant proposals has a lot to do with Janet Swenson’s inspired idea to encourage NWP sites to become a part of Write For Your Life. Swenson says, “I realized that the NWP fosters the same sort of positive relationship between K-12 classrooms and universities, and that teachers who are engaged in classroom inquiry research projects are well equipped to facilitate that same type of research on the part of their students.” While not every Write For Your Life site is a Writing Project Site, “using the NWP network as a source for locating university and K-12 teachers who would find the Write for Your Life project model intriguing seemed a natural ‘marriage.’”

Students of teachers at all these sites are learning that writing matters: that strong writers can take steps toward changing their lives. Kevin La Plante now reflects on WFYL in terms much different than
RCWP Project Outreach Team and WFYL teachers, (l-r) back- Toby Curry, Kevin LaPlante, Diana Mitchell; front- Janet Swenson, Dorothea Fields, Jennifer Ochoa
he once did. "Many of my students come from a world surrounded by poverty, but as you read these grants you will see that there is no poverty of spirit here."

La Plante's students proposed to build a model for a "Revised Detroit." They wrote, "We plan on showing this model to the city's highest officials, at which time we can present our ideas for an improved Detroit . . . However, probably the most important goal of this project is that we, the students of Room 212, will become problem solvers. Today it is [directed toward creating] a model of Detroit in Mr. La Plante's class, tomorrow it is the actual city."

Making the model actual, that is a big part of what the National Writing Project and Write For Your Life are all about. And Janet Swenson has had the vision to see that the two projects can work together to advance this goal.

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